

Self-Tape Advice from Top Hollywood Acting Teachers

Excerpted from the upcoming book
Top Hollywood Acting Teachers
By Bonnie J. Wallace
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Zak Barnett

Founder, Zack Barnett Studios

Zak Barnett: Regarding self-tapes, I think some of the standard stuff, of course, is like make sure the lighting's good, etc.

Bonnie Wallace: No cluttered background.

Zak Barnett: Right. Self-tapes, ultimately, are where acting comes alive between two people. It's not me, it's not you. I always say to my young students, it's like, imagine I had blue rays coming out of my eyes, and you had red rays coming out of your eyes. Acting is purple.

What happens is we keep investing in one another, and then we forget about the outside world. We create a world together. So if you're working with another actor, even if they're not in the scene with you, they're just there to be of service to you, they understand that they are feeding you things in the moment, that you're having a connection, versus my line, your line, my line, your line. Which will never get you the role.

But I also think, work with a coach, don't read with your parents if you're a kid. Your parent might be the best actor in the world, but... when parents want to come in and watch the coaching, or I see the tension that sometimes exists between a parent and a kid, the kid needs to be able to let go, and that can be difficult. Also, if you wanted your kid to be a tennis pro, you wouldn't decide to give them tennis lessons.

You would make sure they get with the tennis pro so they have the best shot of doing it.

Marnie Cooper

Founder, Marnie Cooper School of Acting

Marnie Cooper: I mean, there's the basic stuff. Put just one color behind you, only one person. It's just the actor. I like a blue curtain because it really makes their eyes pop. Make sure the [lighting](#) is good, no shadows, just because that's distracting. Have somebody read off-camera.

You don't want your mom to do it if it's a boyfriend-girlfriend scene. It's just not going to fly. I think a lot of people do that. Seek out some other actors. What a great experience to have another actor read for you so that you really get the essence of what's going on in the scene, or an acting coach.

Be off-book, please. Every time you look down, it's a moment that you're not present. If you're at an audition, it's a little bit different. Certainly, you want to be off-book, but it's still different when you're in the audition versus when the camera's just on you. Every time you look down, it's a nightmare. It really looks horrible. If you need to sneak a peek, I get it, but let's not be doing that up-and-down thing, because you might as well not send it in. It'll be a disservice if you send in a tape like that.

Diane Christiansen

Founder, Christiansen Acting Academy

D. Christiansen: First of all, try not to tape against a white wall. That's probably the least appealing. A beige wall is much better. A blue wall. Film yourself against a colored wall [or curtain](#). Wear your best colors, wear something complementary to the background, no black, white or gray. You should find the best reader you can, because that's the one place the reader can be good, that will help the self-tape, whereas in the room, the reader will generally read pretty quickly, and without any emotion. But on tape, it's very good to have a good reader, and make sure the reader stands away from the camera, because the camera has a microphone in it, so we don't want to hear more of the reader than we do the actor. So those are a couple of technical things.

B. Wallace: The loud reader and the quiet actor is one that I think a lot of people stumble on.

D. Christiansen: Casting directors now try to confuse you in the way that you title each clip and they say that the reason they do that is because if people can't follow instructions, they don't want to work with them. So self-tapes are becoming a whole universe of their own. And when I heard that, I asked

a casting director about it and they said, "Well, there's so many people in self-tapes now that if we see that they don't title each clip correctly, then we're not going to watch it."

Bonnie Wallace: It has a little test built into it.

D. Christiansen: They say it's a test, that's the quote from Casting Frontier, "we're testing you to make sure you can follow instructions."

I get it, I do. They have to weed through those who can take the time to follow instructions. Follow the instructions to the letter. And the nice thing about collaborating with a coach: the coach does it for you.

I mean we're the ones that title those clips when we get them all together in one link. We do that for you. And I remind them: you have to learn how to do this if you're going to do this without us.

So that's also the value of collaborating with someone who's got their finger on the pulse of the industry as opposed to just doing it yourself.

Patrick Day

Director, Young Actors Space

Patrick Day: For those of you out there that are looking to set up your own rig, I would strongly suggest investing in a decent microphone before I would suggest investing in a really high end camera.

Bonnie Wallace: Good advice. Any particular mic you like while we're at it or are we getting too technical?

Patrick Day: We use a Rode mic here because they're relatively inexpensive and they adapt pretty well to anything. But I'm sure there are others.

Judy Kain

Founder, Keep It Real Acting Studios

Judy Kain: There's a lot of guerilla, and you see now in the instructions from casting that they are not liking it. They don't want guerilla anymore. They want well done.

I remember I was on location in Atlanta and had made friends with a dad of one of the child actors on the show, and I asked him, "Would you

mind reading?" Because I had a last minute audition. He said, "Oh, I'll not only read it. I brought my camera."

I went out and got one of those [kits](#). I got a little mini tripod. Obviously, you can use the iPad. I got the iPad clamp. I got a little light to attach to it with a mic, and I bring that with me wherever I go now.

Bonnie Wallace:

That's a really good side note for everybody. Actors who are working, and parents of young actors who are working, if you're on location, make it part of your pack up lists to make a little kit, because it's like a law of the universe: if you're on location, you're going to get a really important self-tape you've got to do in your hotel room after filming all day. So be ready.

Judy Kain:

I think the main thing that actors somehow don't realize is that you have to be off book. You have to be at least 90% off book, and we can't see the script. Don't show the script. Hide the script. Filter it into the scene, but do not come in and read and tape someone reading. That's not going to work.

You have to prepare. That to me is how the industry has changed tremendously. Everything is shortened. They have less time to cast, they've left less time to produce. They have less time, so everybody's got to be prepared.

You've got to show the performance with choices and levels, and if you can't be off book, where's that? How are you going to possibly do a choice?

Anthony Meindl

Founder, Anthony Meindl's Actor Workshop

Anthony Meindl:

When I coach somebody, I say ... Let's do it again in your own words. Let's do it again and Improv it. Let's do it again ... It's the lines, the lines really mess with people's heads because they get scared if they deviate. Listen, I'm not saying you should do a full on Improv as your self-tape, but it's okay if you put a couple of words as filler words in there to help you reduce the amount of times you try to say something perfectly.

You're not going to get, or not get the job because you say the words "I think you should leave my home," and the line is, "I want you to get out of my house." If it's coming from the moment, and you say, "I think you should leave my home," that's fine. Nobody is going to notice that.

Nobody is going to notice because you're so authentic, in the moment. What actors do is they stop. "My god. I'm so sorry. Let me repeat."

My thing about self-tapes is, again, you've just got to listen. You've got to listen.

I talk to agents and managers and they see the self-tapes of their clients. They always tell me the same thing. "Why are they acting? Why don't they just say it?" That's what I teach. Why can't you just speak it the way you speak in real life?

Bonnie Wallace: Right. Without some sort of layer of pretense on top of that.

Anthony Meindl: Yes, acting it. Stop acting it. See, even agents and managers know. Just say it.

Eric Morris

Founder, Eric Morris Actors Workshop

Eric Morris: Well, first of all it should be technically good. You should have somebody who shoots you who really knows what they're doing. The lighting has to be good. There's nothing worse than turning in a tape that is substandard because it colors the person's response immediately. Number two, don't self-tape until you're ready to do it. Don't rush to judgment. Don't get so anxious you just want to get it out tonight, Friday, so they get it by Monday. Take your time. It's better to take the time and to be a little late, maybe, hopefully not, and to do a good self-tape because you're prepared to do it. Rehearse it, use your process, repeat it, and don't do it until you're happy with it. Don't put it on tape until you're happy with it because it's not going to do you any good, and these people have long memories.

Bonnie Wallace: I talk about that a lot with casting directors, and all the ones I've ever met and spoken with, they have incredibly long memories. And generally there's a positive spin on that. For example, they may have loved you and maybe you weren't right for the role but they'll never forget you. But it does go the other way too. So if you really do a terrible job, they will probably also remember that as well. And maybe not call you in next time or give you an invitation for a self-tape.

Mae Ross

Founder, 321 Acting Studios

- Mae Ross: Well I think there is the basic advice: [good lighting](#) like we have here today, just a [plain background](#). You know the thing about self-tapes is that you can get your performance really great. Another thing, follow the instructions to a T. If they want to see your hands, put the hands up. Follow it to a T, because they are just going to flip to the next one if you did not follow the directions.
- Bonnie Wallace: Thank you for saying that. It blows my mind, but truly there are so many people auditioning for any given role that the people who are looking through the first round, they're looking for reasons to discard, they need to narrow the field so if you do anything silly, like not follow the directions, that's it. They are not going to pay attention to how brilliant you might be.
- Mae Ross: That's right! Follow the directions, that will help you right off the bat. Wear something bright, I am all about bright colors. Not stripes and polka-dots, the eye goes to that, you don't want to wear that. Just make sure you have somebody who is working with you off camera and that their voice is not so loud. I have a great blog on how to get a good self-taped audition. I'm a Backstage Expert, which is where I have a column and I have around 43 articles, so you can search Mae Ross and Google me online, and you can find all kinds of information.

Scott Sedita

Founder, Scott Sedita Acting Studios

- Scott Sedita: Last pilot season I added self-tapes to my courses, and to be perfectly honest, I really didn't know what I was doing. "Here's your audition, I'm giving you three or four days ahead of time, work on it, self-tape it and then bring it in." I have the capability in the studio to put it on the computer and to flash it up on the television. I'm giving all my secrets away, I don't know if I should.
- What I learned... first of all, I said to myself, "This is going to be interesting to watch 20 people in my class bring these back. But I'm sure the look will be great. I'll still have to work on the acting portion." Well I was surprised with what was coming down. People weren't necessarily on top of what the piece needs to look like, and also the sound of it. So I was able to help people and correct them and lead them into ways that was helping them. You can buy a light kit for 100 bucks. [They're on Amazon.](#)

Bonnie Wallace: Yes, you don't need a fancy studio.

Scott Sedita: Exactly. You don't. There are just certain angles that the camera needs to be that are important for self-tapes.

But this is ever the flow. It's going to change as we go along. Unfortunately, actors are going to need to be able to self-produce. We've got to self-produce which is really a good thing for actors in general to do, create their own material.

Self-taping is self-producing, which means you've got to get a reader who's good, who's not too loud, who is hopefully the right sex, even though that doesn't and shouldn't matter. It will start to matter. If you were doing a love scene in the old days, if you're a guy and the casting director's a male, you'd have to read it with him. That's the way it goes.

Because things have become so much more sophisticated, or you have more opportunities, I fear that the casting world or the world of who's accepting these self-tapes is going to want much better quality as it goes down.

So the best thing that you could do on a self-tape is make sure the sound isn't tinny, that you have a backdrop that brings the best out of you, and most importantly, that it's chest up to give you a little head room, and the lighting's good. And then it's all about the acting. It's the first 15 seconds as I teach my actors. What happens in that first 15 seconds? Because now watching the self-tapes, there's a button just like when I was a casting director that you can fast forward.

Bonnie Wallace: Right. Or not even fast forward, just delete, and next.

And that's part of why they're becoming so popular, because casting can blow through a hundred auditions in an hour on tape.

Scott Sedita: I'm so happy you said, "delete, next" because that's what I say, but I don't want to sound mean.

Bonnie Wallace: Unfortunately, it's a fact.

Scott Sedita: It's true. It's the first 15 seconds.

Bonnie Wallace: If you have a thousand people whose tapes you need to see in a day, I think it's human nature to want to eliminate as many as possible quickly, so you can focus down on the ones that seem promising. So anytime you see something that's like, "no, no, no..." you're buying yourself time to focus down on the ones who look interesting.

Scott Sedita: Right. You know what you're talking about. It's a phenomenon that's happening.

So it's really important for an actor to make sure they understand their sight lines, and that they're not looking in the camera when they're trying to look at something, that it's not directly into camera. And that they make contact with the reader and have a reader that brings out the best in them.

Unfortunately now it's going to be up to them. My prediction, and it is not necessarily one I want to see, but if the scene is outside and I'm walking and talking at the same time, somebody is going to go outside and do a self-tape with someone filming them, walking and talking. And some casting director or some producer is going to say, "I like that. That's good. Wow, this is what I want it to look like."

Bonnie Wallace: It's almost like you're talking about production values at this point-

Scott Sedita: Yes. Yes.

Bonnie Wallace: Which is interesting because at a certain level it's not fair.

Scott Sedita: It's not.

Bonnie Wallace: It shouldn't be right that things other than the straight up talent and look or the appropriateness of an actor for a role are being considered. But they are, because we're all human beings and we're affected by these things.

Scott Sedita: Yes, absolutely. And that's where I was when I looked at the self-tapes last year the first time I did it in class, and now we do them all the time. It was an education for me because I said, "this is annoying to listen to because it's so tinny. No one wants to listen to this sound. Even though your acting may be good and it might possibly project from the terrible production of it, but your job is to do the best. And you don't need a lot technically to be the best."

In New York City, in the old days there were theater people who got together. We helped each other. Somebody who has a really good setup for a tape should say, "Hey listen, you can use my self-tape setup, if you will be my reader. Let's do it together. Let's form a group so we can help each other."

It would be much easier for people, and people just have to be willing to put themselves out to help others so they can receive help when they need it.

Marcie Smolin

Co-Founder, The Actors Circle

Marcie Smolin: There are things that people think are important that are not, and there are things that are really important that people will let go of. We do a lot of audition taping at the studio just because I was so sick of seeing people's bad audition tapes. You don't have to spend a lot of money on an audition tape. As a matter of fact, sometimes that will be annoying. If directors and producers are looking through a bunch of tapes, they don't need to see fancy titles. "This is," with flashes of your headshot, and musical effects, and all of this.

Again, I'm going to go back to my theme, *be good*. It has to be well lit. It has to have good sound. You can do it in your bedroom if you have good lighting, but you have to have good lighting, good sound, and a plain background. And the person reading with you should speak in a whisper. That's all.

Bonnie Wallace: Just enough for you to hear, because they're not auditioning.

Marcie Smolin: I'm sorry to all the self-tape studios around here, which I think are great. And I would definitely call one in an emergency, if I had no one to tape me. But I always encourage actors to get a group of friends that you can get each other's backs. Because you're going to have to do so many of them, and you're going to go broke.

But there are also great self-tape places that, in case of emergency, you don't want to send in a tape that you've done in your car. With traffic and while you're driving on the freeway.

Parents will send tapes to me. "Can you look at this?" And I ask, "Why do I see you filming in the mirror behind them?" And sometimes people will build an elaborate set in their house, and it's too much. Or it's a sheet that's rippling. A plain wall is fine. If you're going to invest in anything, invest in some [good lighting](#). Cheaply on Amazon, you can do it for under a hundred dollars. You really can. You can set up your self-taping studio. And a tripod, not a wobbly hand. Tripod, lighting, sound.

Bonnie Wallace: Tripods are so important because not only does that save you from being the next accidental *Blair Witch Project* and making everybody ill if they watch your video, but it frees up the hands of the person that you're reading with, so they can then turn the pages of the sides. It's just a good idea. And you can get little [adapters for cell phones](#), and that will allow them to fit onto a standard tripod. Or you can get a little [desktop tripod](#).

Marcie Smolin: Or, I love the ones that bend. The [gorilla tripods](#), they're great.

Bonnie Wallace: And they can wrap around things too. They're just fantastic.

Marcie Smolin: When I tape people, I have cameras. If they're in a hurry, I'll use their phone. So they can just upload it to Eco Cast right there and then, we go over it, and I'll edit it for them. Have iMovie on your phone, if you have an iPhone. Have iMovie so you can put everything together nicely.

Another thing though, is if you can't find anyone to self-tape with you, there's a remote control that you can buy for your phone.

I make all my students buy them. It's about [\\$10 on Amazon](#). It's a little remote control that works with an iPhone or an Android. You put your camera on a tripod, tape yourself, have a friend call you, and have them read with you over the phone or set up a computer. If you need to see their face, you can Skype in with them, put them under the camera. And I actually like it, personally... It's like selfies. And they look fine.

Was this helpful?

Look for my new book, *Top Hollywood Acting Teachers* on Amazon September 2020!