

ONE MICROPHONE EVERY VIDEOGRAPHER SHOULD OWN

----- - - - googleplus -- reddit - blogger - - -



There are many types of microphones out there: shotguns, lavaliers, hand-held stick mics, even parabolics. Some are specialty tools that are only used occasionally, others travel to every shoot but rarely leave the camera bag. Some [microphones](#), however, are the go-to, grab-it-every-time, couldn't-live-without-it kind of tool that everyone who makes media ought to own.

In order to make great video you need to record great audio. Audio is an incredibly powerful part of your productions. It has the power to make or break a program. No matter how great your footage looks, it will be thought of as a poor production if you have weak, hissy, hollow audio.



11 Essential Tips to Make a Viral Video

Learn 11 ideas to help you make a video that could spread like wildfire across the Internet. Look at what makes a viral video "viral" and why people want to share certain videos. [Read more...](#)

The flip side is also true. Imperfect video will be remembered as better than it really is if the soundtrack is stellar. I don't know why this is true, but it is. Because of this, one of the best ways to improve the perceived quality of your edits is to improve your audio. That means choosing and using the right microphone. If you can afford a whole host of them, fill your gear bag to the brim and use whichever mic makes the most sense on the set. But what if you could only have one? You can think about this as a "desert island" game, or as a practical purchasing plan, but think about it nonetheless. Which mic makes the best all-around, multi-purpose utility tool for producers? Here's a quick overview of your options along with my ratings and recommendations:

Last Place: Your Camcorder's Built-in Mic

Pros: The microphone that is built into your camcorder is always present, it cannot be lost or

left behind, it doesn't require extra batteries, and the element itself is generally of a pretty good quality.

Cons: The secret to recording good audio with any type of microphone is getting the mic as close to the subject as possible, usually within a couple inches of the sound source you want to record. Because the built-in mic is stuck on your camera, you can't get it close enough to record good sound and still frame a usable shot. The on-board mic also has the terrible tendency to pick up operator noise. So every move you make or button you push is amplified and embedded into your soundtrack.

Summary: While the microphones that are built into camcorders are generally pretty high quality mics, they are not very good as production tools. Use the [audio captured from this microphone](#) only for ambient sounds (never for dialogue) or as a reference track.

Third Place: The Hand-Held "Stick" Mic

Pros: Handheld microphones are excellent tools that record audio very well. Their [cardioid pickup pattern](#) rejects most ambient environmental noise and captures clean clear vocals when held close to the mouth. For these reasons they are a favorite choice of news reporters working in the field, narrators in vocal booths and singers on stage.

Cons: The biggest bummer about hand-held mics is that they are completely conspicuous. Because they are so big and must be held in the hand or mounted on a stand, they are the microphones that are most likely to be seen on screen. They are also subject to the thumping of wind noise, so a windsock is a good idea. Almost all hand-held mics are wired, so they require a length of microphone cable to tether them to your camera.

Summary: While seeing the mic is acceptable for reporters and singers, you don't want to conduct an interview, shoot a promo or direct a drama where the main subject is holding a stick mic. It's just not done. For this reason alone, the hand-held microphone is not the best choice as an all around utility mic.

First Runner Up: The Shotgun

Pros: Shotgun microphones are very versatile tools. Because of their long, narrow pickup pattern they can record quality dialogue at a distance while suppressing unwanted sound from the sides. This allows them to record excellent audio even when positioned several feet away from the subject. Their highly directional pickup pattern lets you record usable sound even with your shotgun microphone mounted on a camera shoe. Shotgun mics are arguably at their best when they are mounted on [boom poles](#) that are held over the subject's head just

outside the frame. This allows all the benefits of proximity, while still concealing the microphone from view.

Cons: The highly directional aspect of a shotgun microphone requires that it be aimed fairly accurately at the subject you want to record, so you need to monitor your audio carefully. An inattentive boom operator can easily let the mike drift or turn in a way that causes the talent's voice to fall out of the mike's sweet spot. The mic needs to move with the subject to maintain the best possible signal. Did I mention you will need a long XLR cable, a boom pole and someone you really trust to hold the pole?

Summary: Shotgun mics are outstanding tools for production, but they are cumbersome and require an extra set of qualified hands to operate. While they can be mounted to a hotshoe to function as sort of a "super" camera-mounted mic, they are not an ideal "only" microphone if you could have just one.



The Winner: The Lavalier

Pros: Lav microphones record good quality sound, are inconspicuous, can be clipped to an actor or hidden on a set, suppress unwanted ambient noise and can be cabled or wireless. They are small enough to tuck into even the smallest of camera bags, and require no additional operator.

Cons: Because lavs are small, they make use of a small pickup element. As a result, the overall quality of the audio captured from a lavalier does not have the same richness or dynamic range as that of a shotgun or handheld mic. Even so, lavalieres are more than adequate for recording the human voice, and are the standard for miking on-screen talent.

Summary: Lavalier mics are excellent [multi-purpose microphones](#). They record good audio, can easily be hidden from the view of the camera, and are available in both wired and wireless varieties.

Which mic is the best choice if you could only have one? The answer is, *it depends*. Each mic type has its own strengths and weaknesses and the value they have is determined completely by your individual needs. The choice is yours. Evaluate these pros and cons, and choose the mic that's best for the type of videos you produce.

Chuck Peters is a 3-time Emmy award winning writer and producer.