



Producing for Pennies

An activist's guide to producing effective events on the cheap

by Geoff Trapp

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To Lizzie

for Neda,

and all the Others like her

*~ Geoff Trapp
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THE OBJECTIVE OF YOUR EVENT

You don't need lots of money or fame to make a difference in the world. All you ever need is the passion to do what is right in the face of adversity, and the courage to believe you can make a difference ... that, and the wisdom not to defeat your own efforts! Much of this guide has been written with the idea of producing a traditional speaking event with a central focal point (like a stage), but the fundamentals discussed herein -- like how to plan your event and produce for the camera -- can be applied to any kind of event. A creative event that unexpectedly breaks the mold can grab the public's attention, so don't ever let your creativity and passion get stifled by a format, or by obstacles in your way!

Why produce an event?

Effective activists produce events for one reason: in order to influence wider public opinion, in their community and the world, amongst people who are not aware of, or are not active supporters of, the issues they care about. They don't expend precious time and resources to produce events so that they can get together with a crowd of people who already care about their issue and agree with their views, and talk about their aspirations or grievances together in public. Unless your event is specifically an internal fundraiser or celebration, the purpose of your event is always to influence the general public outside your core base of support with your message, and win support for your issue.

So how do you do this? How do you get the public to pay attention to your message?

What is your message?

[United 4 Iran users: please also see the United 4 Iran media toolkits.]

Individuals pay attention to things that capture their personal or intellectual interest. But **large groups of people pay attention to things that capture broad *emotional* interest.** If you want attention for your issue, this is your first threshold. There are almost infinite ways to capture someone's emotional interest. If you want a crash course in the variety of ways to do this, just pay attention to the psychological emotional overtones of every successful commercial on Western television. Excitement, laughter, hope, desire ... advertising executives and political message strategists make entire careers of figuring out how to redefine and couch their messages inside of emotional overtones.

Fortunately, if you're motivated enough to be an activist about a particular issue, the odds are that it probably already has a lot of great emotional power to it.

Lesson #1: Don't ever move away from the core emotional power of your cause. Just keep finding new and relevant ways to re-package and market your message about it to the public. *Don't get stuck in your interpretation of what you think that message is.*

If all you do is talk about what you're against, most people are going to lose interest very quickly. But if you tell people what you stand *for*, and give them an inspiring vision of a future for them to dedicate their efforts to, they will stay engaged a lot longer.

Anger has a very limited lifespan in the human memory. It is an emotion based on basic animal survival instincts. If you base your movement on anger or outrage over a particular injustice, then the breadth of your support will only be as wide as the number

of people who are motivated or willing to share your anger, and the life of your movement will only last as long as people's outrage remains fresh.

But if you base your movement on aspirations, hopes, dreams, and love that all people can universally understand and aspire to, then your movement will grow in strength far beyond your base of core constituents, and it will live far beyond the outrages or indignities of the moment. It can be built up in scope, momentum, and power.

Lesson #2: *Effective activists build their messages around themes and ideals that lift people up.* It is up to you to be creative and smart enough to figure out what that inspiring angle to your message is. For example, you don't just say "the government of X has to stop doing Z". You say "the people of the world stand for Y. No matter what the government of X does, the world is committed to the people of X having Y, and no Z shall ever stop them." That is a statement that has real power behind it, and rallies people into action around an inspiring vision of the future.

Once you have people's attention, people can be influenced by information they deem to be credible. Being a leader of an organization, or having a reputation or advanced degrees in a certain field, is one (but not the only) way to establish a background that what you say is credible. But your perception of actually being credible hinges on every aspect of your presentation. The reality is that anyone can be perceived as credible -- or, conversely, lose their air of credibility -- depending both on how they present themselves, and how they are presented by their production environment. As your credibility grows, so will your effectiveness in influencing public opinion.

Ultimately, the real-world effectiveness of your efforts are defined by how many people you can influence with your message. The reach of your live event itself will always be limited to the number of people who attend it, and will last only as long as your event does. But if you know how to properly produce recordings of your event, your message can reach an audience of thousands or millions, either through professional media or effective online outlets.

Getting media exposure

Whether the media outlet is traditional media or websites like YouTube, the content in a particular media outlet is nothing more than a mirror of what the consumers of that outlet find interesting. Getting traditional media coverage is an important part of establishing the legitimate credibility of your issue in the eyes of the general public, but a highly effective internet video or blog can make more of a long-term impact than a 3-minute piece on a traditional news outlet.

Unless your issue is currently a compelling front-page story, the first barrier to getting traditional media coverage is convincing your local assignment editor to assign a reporter to cover your event. Presenting a compelling pitch to assignment editors – one that communicates the core emotional power of your message – is a good start. Diversifying the scope of your event is another way to help sell assignment editors on the need to send reporters to an event: if you can find a way to broaden the scope of your issue (perhaps partner with other groups in producing the event), you broaden the scope of not just your

audience and production resources, but the chorus of voices asking the media to send reporters to it. You also increase the odds of actually making it into the reported news.

Working with traditional news media is a two-way relationship: you want to get your message out there, and the media wants good, interesting content to fill up their TV airtime or print space – content that is going to keep viewers/readers engaged. Controversy is the classically interesting story of humanity, and reporters will look for it. But things that inspire us, make us laugh, or make us cry in joy are much more engaging.

Forget about choosing the people who appear at your event on the merits of their titles or background. Unless you're a big star, no one cares about or pays attention to titles; they pay attention to stories that grab their emotional attention. The kind of people who you want to appear at your event are the ones who can deliver a powerful emotional story for the media to report, while still having an aura of strong credibility about the things they say. Emotional images are especially important for visual media: a speaker who can deliver powerful lines and amazing sound bytes that make people feel inspired, laugh, cry, or just wildly cheer is always going to get on TV (or have their YouTube video go viral) before someone who is an “expert”, but whose speech has no gripping emotional power. Written media is usually more in-depth and intellectual, but emotion is still key!

Managing your media message

It is important to understand that the news media are a little like parrots: the very nature of reporting is to report about what happened by repeating who said and did what. Good reporters are trained to look for “sides” to a story, and one of the ways they seek to do this (and make their reports more interesting) is to report about controversies. Because you want the story to focus on your message and not on a controversy, you want to avoid saying or doing anything from which the reporter can develop a storyline about a “controversy”. This is where the skill of “staying on message” comes into play.

For example: let's say that you are doing an event about protecting farm laborers from pesticides, and promoting clean food. The reporter who interviews you asks a question about how pesticides are necessary to protect the world's food supply from spreading insect swarms. If you try to argue the facts about insects, your response shifts the message off farm worker's rights and onto insects. Your job is to keep the story on your message. One response might be something like: “That's a great question. Fortunately, we don't need to choose between protecting our food supply and protecting the lives of people. In fact, thousands of farmers have already learned that controlling insects without pesticides – using natural methods – is not only effective and safe for workers, but increases the value of their crop yields.” The reporter has no choice to but to either air the interview with you talking about *your* message, or not air any interview at all.

Conversely, some activists get so caught up in their passion for their issue that they forget the objective is to reach the wider audience of people who are *not* as passionate. Not everything in an event has to be focused specifically on the message you want to send. A reporter only has a small amount of air time or newspaper column space to tell the story of your event, so they tend to pick up on and repeat the big themes. So long as your event is successful at drawing a lot of people, has nothing majorly controversial or

contradictory in it, and is billed under the core theme of your message, the 60-second story on the evening news will be “thousands came out in [city/location] today to support [insert your cause]”. The same rule applies to self-produced media: as long as there are no blaring contradictions, whatever you *report* about the event is what becomes the truth.

PLANNING FOR YOUR EVENT

When to start planning

Unless there is compelling, ongoing wall-to-wall TV news coverage about a crisis regarding your particular issue to propel widespread public support and passion, you will have a difficult time producing effective events on short notice. Some small speaking events can be organized in a few weeks, but big events need a minimum of six months of lead time. You should have your eye at least nine months ahead on the calendar, and as soon as a potential date pops up, start talking with other people about what to do. Come up with your overall concept, and get your date and venue locked in very early.

Evaluating ideas for events

What the occasion of the event is (if any), what kind of an event you want to do, and the feasibility of doing the event with the time and resources available are just some of the factors to consider in evaluating event ideas. But just like a movie studio deciding whether to “greenlight” production of a film, the formula you ultimately use to determine whether or not to produce a particular event is simple: investment versus return.

In this case, the investment is the time, money, and most importantly human resources your organization will have to invest to make the event work properly. The return is the media exposure (and/or financial profit) you anticipate you will pick up. This is literally a resource budget accounting game: events which will yield major media exposure (or fundraising payoff) are worthy of receiving major resource investments. Events which will yield less media exposure cannot justify as large of an investment.

More than money or time, the most precious resource that any group has is their human resources. The people in a non-profit volunteer group are there because they believe in the cause, and they want to make a difference. Morale is therefore key. As a leader, if you want to keep your group strong and moving forward, you need to make sure you are always giving your people an experience of winning, and having made a difference.

Do not burn out your resource base by throwing your organization into the production of big events which do not promise to deliver a big “win”. As much as you want to “do something”, you need to use your resources wisely in a way that delivers results.

Organizing your production team

Many activist groups practice a lot of plural democracy in how they are organized and run. For example, it’s common to have committees for different areas of responsibility.

Structures like this are great for coming up with ideas, sharing the labor, getting people to work together to produce results, and ensuring that everyone gets to participate.

However, this is not how you produce an event. Unless people see someone in charge, both progress and great ideas will stagnate. Unless you clearly task people with responsibilities, they can't take ownership for producing results. The larger your event gets, the more you need a clearly defined, effectively organized production team. Trying to produce an event by using groups or committees to make decisions is a guaranteed recipe for inaction, chaos, miscommunication, bruised egos, infighting, upsets, paralysis, and ultimately, amateur results and missed opportunities.

Once your group commits to the idea of putting on an event, you need to establish a clearly understood collaborative decision-making structure for that event. In such a structure, there is a clear chain-of-command of individuals with authority. At the top sits an appointed executive producer with the overall responsibility to get the event produced. The most important job the executive producer is finding organizing the *other* producers and key staff. They also deal with fundamental issues like the date, venue, and budget.

Working under the overall leadership of the executive producer are individual producers and key collaborators, who are tasked with making decisions regarding specific areas of responsibilities, while constantly collaborating with each other to make sure all of the decisions and areas of responsibility work together. Since the purpose of activist events is to widely influence public opinion using media recordings, **one of the key early players is your Director, who is in charge of making sure the event is planned for the camera.** Technical production is overseen by your technical producer or production manager. Everyone knows who is in charge of what, so things can happen faster, and efforts are not duplicated. An effective executive producer provides overall leadership, coordinates and inspires the collaborative efforts of the production team, and guides all the energies towards the “big picture” goal of the event. In turn, each of the key collaborators has to be great at coordinating and inspiring the collaborative efforts of the people who work under them.

This is the way to organize the production of your event.

The key is getting leaders who have enough experience to know what will work and what won't, are good at inspiring and bringing out the creativity and commitment in others, and know how to *collaborate* with others. You don't want people who see their position and title as being a mark of importance, or of being “in charge” over others. You need leaders who can effectively organize all the great ideas of the people on their team, and champion the ideas that work the best for their area of responsibility while collaborating with the other areas of responsibility. Your leaders also have to know how to say “no” to great ideas that just can't work or fit given the constraints, limitations and focus of the event, while still leaving everyone feeling good about the contributions they are making.

Producers can still use committees to accomplish tasks, but you need a core decision-making leadership team who have a clear authority structure, and can provide clear leadership to make all the various small pieces of the big picture come together smoothly.

Budgeting

You don't have to look at budgeting as a scary obstacle. There are many ways to make money off of your event, get sponsorships, find sources of funds, or just fundraise. But things don't happen unless you have a way to pay for them, so budgeting is the most fundamental reality of doing any event. If you are not planning a responsible budget for your event, then **you are not dealing with reality**. People who don't deal with reality step into the road of life without looking, and SPLAT ... get run over by a bus!

This guide is mostly focused on the technical production of the event itself, but there are a whole set of established standard ways and means of how events make money, and how the budgeting and accounting for events work. You can find lots of information readily available online by Googling "event budgeting".

Planning events that make financial sense

Not every event is going to make financial sense. For some events, you are going to spend money and not make any in return. Fundraising and donations obviously figure into the budgets of such events, as does figuring out how to produce for pennies!

However, other event formats provide a natural opportunity to produce income to offset the costs of the event, and possibly produce revenues to finance your non-income event activities. Fun, family-oriented fairs, festivals, concerts, and entertainment shows (dance troupe performances, variety shows, comedy shows, etc) can be a great way to get people to come out for the day under the broad banner of your issue's message. This is also a great way to engage people into your cause who wouldn't otherwise come out.

Charging admission is one way to make money. Raffle prizes, and auctions of donated items, are another revenue source. Yet another common tactic is to sell things under a concession system. For large events like fairs and festivals, it is common for producers to sell booth space to a wide variety of vendors, either for a fixed rate or for a fixed rate plus a percentage of gross profits. The vendors then do whatever it is they do on their own. This revenue model also applies to carnival-style amusements, like dunk tanks. You take care of providing the booth space, electricity, overall permits, and other things to make the event a success. Event producers often have an exclusive logistical infrastructure reservation system that vendors must use for things like tents, tables, electricity, etc. Vendors reserve equipment they need in advance for a flat fee per item (which includes a small profit markup), then the producer has a large party or event rental company come in and set everything up before vendors arrive.

The reason all of this must be considered in the early planning is that the venue you select has to have the policies, infrastructure, and the physical space to allow your vendors to do their vending. Where will your electricity and water come from? All vendors need easy access to bring in supplies for their booth. Vendors also need a few hours to load in – you can't have a thousand people trying to wield their stuff around in a small space at once: you will have a traffic jamb. If you put your event indoors, you've probably chopped off a big revenue source, since most food vendors have to cook on-site.

A final word about tying your activism together with basic economics. Some activists feel that this is betraying the serious nature of their cause, or that it is "taking advantage"

of the situation. The author humbly suggests that exactly the opposite is true: **being financially responsible** to make sure that you can keep putting on events is the height of honoring your cause. If you can't pay your bills, you can't produce events, so making money off of your event is not about "taking advantage" of anything: it is about allowing you to put on HUGE events that get a LOT of media attention for your issue.

Remember that the objective is to get lots and lots of people engaged in your cause. By making your event fun and exciting, you make your issue more appealing to more people, and more people will come. There is an old adage that medicine is easier to swallow if it is mixed with a little sugar ... so every now and then, do an event that has a lot of sugar in it! A good measure of whether or not *you* are doing a good job of making your event fun and exciting is if *they* are happy to come and spend some money on it!

Permits, fire marshals, and other regulatory officials

Keep in mind that nothing will damage the public's opinion about your cause more than a news story about an accident, fire, riot, or death at your event. Permits, fire marshals, and other regulatory officials can sometimes appear to be a pain to the producers of an event, but they are actually your best friends. They keep the public safe from dangerous situations, and the rules they enforce help to keep you as a producer safe from lawsuits.

When choosing your event's location, always ask about and consider the official venue capacity rating. **Never choose a venue – no matter how "cheap", "perfect" or "easy to get" – that does not have a rated occupancy capacity large enough to handle your event's anticipated audience size.** If you choose a venue that is unable to accommodate all the people who show up, you can count on the fire marshal turning people away, or even worse, shutting your event down if you are overcrowded.

There are a whole variety of things that officially need permits from different authorities, and you should always ask if a particular task needs one. Obviously, the event itself must be permitted. Food vending is another thing that must be permitted and inspected. Suspending anything into the air – especially over the heads of your audience -- usually requires a permit. So does operating a rented professional generator. Do you want to use a smoke machine, or open flames, as part of your show? You might need a permit!

The purpose of all these permits is to keep people safe, not make your life difficult, so get them. It takes time – sometimes a month or more – to get permits approved, so start this process early. You don't want some part of your event shut down by an angry official.

Audience accommodations

How are people going to get to and from your event? If you live in a city where everyone uses public transit, or if your venue has good access to a public transit system, then you can plan your audience access/egress around that system. Otherwise, you need to consider parking when choosing your venue, and coordinate parking arrangements (or shuttle accommodations) for your event participants. **Don't pick a venue if you can't come up with an adequate parking solution!** If 5,000 people want to come to your event, but your venue only has parking for 500 cars, then you are going to have a very big problem (or, more accurately, a very small audience, and a lot of unhappy supporters).

An audience of human beings will also have basic human bodily functions which you need to offer provisions for. Unless your event has suitable toilet facilities on site to handle the volume of attendees, you may need to rent portable toilets.

People also need water and food. Obviously, this is an opportunity to make some money to help cover the costs of your event, but it may also require permits for food vending.

Insurance and liabilities

Most events carry event liability insurance. If you rent a facility for your event, the facility may require you to carry insurance. If you are renting equipment for your event, you may find that the rental company requires you to carry some form of insurance.

It is typical to require a \$1 million policy. Don't freak out over this number. You can find insurance companies that specialize in insurance for live events and festivals online, and they can provide you with such a policy relatively cheaply. The key is to plan fully and get your permits early, so that you know about and can include everyone who needs to be named as "additionally insured" in the insurance policy you buy.

For most small activist events, insurance will not be an issue, but it is something to be considered. If something in your setup breaks, or an accident happens, you and any other person or entity involved in the event could face a lawsuit for any injuries (or deaths). The question of whether or not to get insurance is a judgment call that varies by each unique situation, and only you can make it. Basically, the larger and more complicated an event gets, the greater the probability you need insurance. When in doubt, buy it.

Whether or not you get insurance, there are some things you should always be doing to prevent injuries. The greatest of these is to use good judgment and common sense when planning your event, and think about potential pitfalls in advance. If you can foresee that something could be dangerous, or someone could get hurt, then don't do it.

One of the most common causes of injuries at events are "trip and fall" situations, so don't create situations where people can trip and fall! Always route cables away from where people will be walking, and cover them up whenever you can't. Don't have objects at ground level where people can inadvertently trip on them. Always use grounded electrical extension cords outside. Don't mix electricity and water.

Another good general rule of thumb is that if you see something unsafe at your event when there are people around who might get hurt, and you see a safe, common-sense way to mitigate the immediate danger, take action on your own initiative to address the immediate risk. Then work with supervisors to create a permanent solution.

TECHNICALLY PRODUCING YOUR EVENT

Producing for the camera

Remember that effective activists hold events in order to influence wider public opinion in their community and the world. Obviously, the way that you reach this wider audience in the modern era is by distributing video or audio recordings of your event through either professional or self-produced online media. Therefore, **your event is not being produced for the live audience that attends it, but for the cameras that record it.**

Always think about how your event is going to look on camera. If you want your communications message to be effective, it is a good idea to make sure your cameras are properly set up, in the right locations to capture a compelling and interesting visual image, and that your recorded audio track is good. Cameras are devices for recording light, so *lighting is the most important technical factor to consider when thinking about cameras* (more about this in the “Lighting” section below).

Crafting your event’s visual image

Your event’s visual image includes the design of your staging setup, how your speakers look and dress, what items you put on the stage, and the background image.

Think about the interviews you see on local TV news. Who looks more credible, the average-dressed person off the street, or the person in the suit and tie? If you had to pass judgment on which of those two figures you were going to trust more based on looking at a picture for one second, which would you choose? That is exactly what the wider audience for your event is going to do: make a judgment about the credibility of your event -- and whether or not to listen to your message -- based on the first few seconds of what they see. In many cases, the visual presentation of your speakers is going to play a role in this snap judgment. You have to be reasonable, and always allow for people’s self-expression. But in general, as the producer, you are responsible for making sure your speakers present themselves in a professional, camera-appealing manner. This includes **bringing in a makeup artist for your event** whenever possible to apply TV camera makeup to both women AND men. You may find artists willing to volunteer in exchange for credit and/or photos, but expect to pay a **kit fee** for expendable supplies.

You also want to think about how you set your stage up. Pay attention to details, like how the skirting around the front edges of your stage will look in a wide shot on camera. Unless you are producing a music or comedy event, try to not have people hold a microphone on stage: it can make the event look/feel amateur, especially on video.

Spend some time on YouTube looking at how professional politicians and public leaders use podiums, and notice how the physical presence of the podium confers a sense of credibility and authority. Consider using a podium, lectern, or similar object to confer credibility and authority for your speakers. Placing a banner or board with a logo or key word in front of your podium can make your speakers look even more credible. Even a simple professional music stand, if dressed with a banner, can look better than nothing.

The downside to putting people behind a podium is that it can make them appear walled off from the public and the camera. You will notice that podiums are usually sized to

come up no higher than just above the waist, and they are often slender. Don't use something that looks much bigger than your speaker when viewed on camera.

Crafting your background image

You want to plan out all your stage and camera locations so that the camera's field of view is always filled with a powerful or visually appealing background image. Think about the psychological difference between a video of someone speaking in front of a good background image, versus someone on a stage with an empty or boring background (or a small background image that does not fill up the camera's field of view). Both speakers might be saying the exact same words, but the person speaking with a great background image looks and feels more powerful, exciting and credible, while the person without a good background image looks and feels weaker, smaller, and alone.

Here are some possibilities that can be used by themselves or in combinations to easily produce great background images for your cameras. If possible, go out to your event location with your event's camera, and visualize how your background idea will work:

- A large backdrop or banner¹ that fills up the camera's field of view with your event's logo, or that features the key message/phrase of your event (ex: "Human Rights for All").
- Positioning your stage and camera positions so that famous images or landmarks are beautifully framed in the background when viewed through the camera.
- Flags can be another simple yet great background image, but this may not be a good idea for outdoor events with wind. You generally don't want a lot of motion in your background image, since this distracts attention from your speaker.
- For evening events on a lit stage, using floor plates (as described in the Lighting section below) to place lights on the ground pointing upwards at the base of trees, walls or architectural features behind the stage. This produces a beautiful effect of illuminating little highlights in the background, creating a sense of depth and life to the image.
- One of the simplest yet most psychologically powerful backgrounds is a diverse crowd of sympathetic people behind your speaker who **agree with** and **support** what the speaker is saying. This can be done by using a single row of people, or if steps (or portable choir risers) are available, arranging several rows of people.

People as a background has some serious power to it, but it also carries the potential to turn a great speech into a comedy bit on a late night talk show. If you choose to go this route, you need to manage everything about the people behind your speaker. They have to understand that the camera is watching their every move, and they can't do anything that distracts the home audience's attention from the speaker. They can't be wearing bright colors or sexy outfits, chewing gum, holding/searching through purses or bags, silencing/checking/answering cell phones, talking to each other, looking anywhere other than at the speaker, looking bored, or (LORD forbid) sleeping!

¹ You can get a large vinyl banner printed at many locations. However, a shop that makes theatrical backdrops for use on stages might be able to create a large cloth-based banner for your event at a cheaper price. If your local educational institution has a theatre scenery shop with a frame for painting backdrops, you might even be able to get a backdrop for your event made there ... by students! One word of caution: Fire Marshals may require such cloth backdrops to be treated with a fireproofing liquid before use on stage.

Producing great camera images

Getting a steady camera image

You want your end video product to have a solid, steady image that is easy to watch. You don't want an image that bounces or moves around, and using a camera tripod is the best way to avoid this. Also, avoid doing a lot of zooming in and back out, or panning from side to side. We are all students of our modern media culture; take some time on YouTube to observe the technical elements of how the producers of professional political events use and move their cameras, and you'll get the basic idea.

Use a camera platform

For events with a central focal point (usually a stage), it's a good idea to have a **camera platform** set up in the audience, where photographers and camera operators can set up tripods or stand, and have a clear view over the heads of the audience to the stage in the front. Camera platforms for large events are usually long and narrow so that many photographers can stand next to each other, and set up on center with the stage.

The question of how far back from the stage in the audience to set up your camera platform is determined by balancing a number of factors. The primary factor is an artistic judgment about what the finished image will look like once the cameras have zoomed in close enough to capture the speaker. Camera shake² is also a consideration; a competing "trade off" factor is the desire to have a large amount of the audience directly in front of the stage.

White balance your cameras

If you want your images to look correct, you must manually [white balance](#) each of your cameras under the final lighting conditions of your event using a pure white card held up on stage. **Do not use auto white balance.** For outdoor events, plan music interludes to re-white balance when needed. [Here is a web site](#) that explains white balance in detail.

Recording with multiple cameras

If you have more than one camera available, GREAT! With some post-production video editing on a home computer, you can create a compellingly engaging multiple camera video of your event to put on the internet. But unless you have a live video feedback system and audio intercom setup, you won't be able to see or direct what each camera is filming.

The way to manage this is to have a production meeting with your camera operators in advance of your event, and give them very clear operating instructions on what you want

² Try turning off the image stabilization feature on your own camera, and zoom in on something far away. Notice how the tiny shaking of your hand translates into a big shake in the camera's image as the zoom increases over distance. Similarly, shaking in your camera platform caused by people walking (or even shifting their weight) on it will make even cameras on tripods shake. The further away your event's camera platform is from the stage, the more photographers will have to zoom in, and the worse the camera shake problem will become. Unless you're using large professional tripods and cameras, on a rock-solid camera platform, you want to keep your camera platform reasonably close to the stage.

the images from their camera to look like. This way, when it comes time to edit the cameras together, you can always count on having such-and-such type of image available from so-and-so's camera.

If you can, get a copy of the speeches from your most powerful speakers in advance. Plan out in your production meeting when to add specific shots to capture the emotional power of their words, and the electric energy of the crowd cheering in response.

Assign your main camera out in the audience to stay on a nice medium close-up shot of your speaker, zooming out only slightly for entrances and exits. Always use a camera tripod for this camera.

A good place to setup your second camera is on the right or left front corner of your stage, depending on lighting and the background image. Task this camera's operator with getting great close-up side shots of the speakers and/or audience reaction shots³.

If you have a third camera, consider also setting it up on the front corner of your stage and dedicating it to take audience reaction shots, or using it as a hand-held "floater". If you are using scaffolding platforms in the audience to support your speakers or lights, putting a camera up high can give you some dramatic crowd shots.

At the beginning of the event when you start running tape, film a Hollywood-style marker board (or clap two boards together) somewhere all cameras can see it at the same time. This common event allows your editor to easily time synchronize the video from all cameras when editing them together later. Make sure the sound of the marker board "snapping" gets recorded via one of your event's microphones, so that your editor can synchronize the audio recording to the camera video.

Planning your tape and camera power use

If you have to stop recording to change tapes in one of your cameras during your event, you will lose the synchronization that you established with the marker board, so always start the event with a fresh tape in each camera. If you know your event is going to last longer than your tapes will, plan a coordinated fast tape change at a common "pause" point, and discretely universally re-film the marker board clap before cuing your MC to continue (a musical interlude is a great way to mask a fast tape change).

You always want to keep the battery in your camera, but if you can, plug your camera into an electrical outlet while recording. This way, you are not draining the battery, and if the power from the outlet goes out, your camera will continue to run.

³ An "audience reaction shot" is footage of audience members reacting to what is happening on stage. Remember that since you can't see the speaker on stage, and since you can delete the audio track from the video of a reaction shot, your editor can use audience reaction shots creatively (especially close-ups). A great shot of someone listening or cheering from one particular point in time can be edited into the final video at any other point in time, and editors sometimes do this on professional live event videos. Therefore, a camera operator dedicated to taking audience reaction shots should spend their time between zooming in and waiting to capture shots of great reactions from individuals listening or cheering, and group shots of people listening and cheering (but try to get the major group reactions live).

Stages & Platforms

If your event location can provide you with an elevated stage or camera platform, then you probably don't need to worry about this. But what if you need to create a platform for a stage or a camera? Here are some progressively cheaper solutions to get your speakers and cameras standing above the crowd:

Rent a professional stage or platform

Stages and platforms can be rented from many local entertainment scenic and staging equipment providers, or from party rental companies. In most cases, the rental price includes stairs, and having it delivered and set it up by a crew of workers.

At some locations, the venue may be able to provide a stage for a fee. If your venue will permit you to bring in your own stage, compare the cost, quality, and other values of using the venue's stage versus renting (or building) a stage of your own.

Rent an improvised stage

You can create an improvised stage by renting a single section of scaffolding platform on steel base plates. You can get this equipment from your local home improvement warehouse, painting supply store, or other equipment rental location. In the United States, Home Depot tool rental locations can provide you with a 5' tall, 5' x 7' scaffolding platform on steel base plates (not casters) for \$22 a week. ^(2009 prices) You can get three (3) 5' tall sections for \$54 a week (these scaffolding units are very popular, so start trying to get yours 7 days before it's needed).

If you can get a portable stair unit to put next to your scaffold platform, great! Otherwise, secure the top of a small ladder or step stool to the scaffolding using rope or long plastic zip ties (bring a pair of diagonal cutters to cut the zip ties off with later).

Read the important safety notes regarding this method below.⁴

Build your own stage or platform

You can build your own stage or platform, and there are many ways to do it. The most important priority when building and using your own platform or stage is to always think about and put the safety of the people who will use it first. **Never compromise on basic structural integrity or safety when building or using your own platforms.**

Build long-lasting platforms

It is pretty easy to build sturdy, durable platforms out of 4' x 8' sheets of 3/4" thick plywood and 2x4, and if you plan on doing a lot of events with a stage, this might be the way to go. For as little as \$250 ^(2009 prices), your group can own a basic 8' x 16' stage, plus

⁴ **Treat this setup carefully.** You should never put more weight on a scaffolding platform than it is rated for, and always remember that the more weight you put on such platforms, the easier it becomes for them to tip, especially if loaded too heavily in the front or back. You must set scaffolding platforms up on a smooth, level surface that is strong enough to evenly support the weight above. If you are using a ladder to get people up and down from the platform, always assign a full-time, strong volunteer to help speakers keep their balance.

a 4' x 8' camera platform. If you want directions on how to do this, Google "building 4x8 platform", or check out a good theatrical scenery production book from a library.

A basic 4' x 8' platform will cost you around \$50^(2009 prices) to build. The author highly recommends spending an extra \$100 per platform to install a set of six (6) Rose Brand [Leg-a-Matic](#) hardware brackets (so you can easily remove your platform's legs for transport and adjusting the height), and eight (8) [coffin locks](#) (2 per side, set 1' in from each corner) so your stage can easily be locked together (otherwise, you have to crawl underneath and install carpentry [c-clamps](#) along each joint).

The resulting units will be somewhat large (4' x 8' x 4" tall), heavy (about 100 pounds), require space to store, and a large van or pickup truck to transport. However, if you do many events, compare the costs and issues involved in building and owning your own platforms with the costs and issues of renting stages, and you may find it is a good investment of your time and money.

When setting up platform staging, legs must be diagonally cross braced. Also, platform stages must be evenly supported, so any discrepancies in the level of the ground underneath must be compensated for during installation by placing small pieces of plywood under the legs. You will need to bring along both a level and a stock supply of small squares of plywood of various thicknesses for this purpose.

Build a cheap 4' x 4' platform

You can build a small, easy to transport and assemble 4' x 4' platform relatively cheaply. Here's how:

Get five (5) or more plastic milk crates (or 5-gallon paint buckets) **of the same height**, a 4' x 4' sheet of 3/4" (or 23/32") thick plywood, four (4) 6" x 6" pieces of scrap plywood, four (4) 1/2" thick, 3" long carriage bolts with matching nuts, four (4) 5/8" cut washers, and four (4) 1/2" cut washers.⁵ Pre-drill a small hole, just large enough for your 1/2" bolts, through the center of all the 6" x 6" plywood scraps. You'll also need to pre-drill holes near all four corners of the 4' x 4' sheet of plywood.

Start your stage setup by inserting a carriage bolt with a 5/8" cut washer through all four corners of the 4' x 4' sheet, from the top side down. Hammer the carriage bolts into the plywood.

Next, turn the plywood on it's back, and position a milk crate at all four corners of your plywood. The protruding bolt should pass through the holes in the milk crate's grating (alternatively, drill a hole for the bolt in the bottom of your paint buckets, and place them over the bolts). Place a 6" x 6" plywood scrap over the protruding bolt, place a 1/2" cut washer over the bolt, and tighten the nut.

Flip the completed stage into position over the fifth milk crate, which gets positioned directly underneath the center of the platform, to form a checkerboard pattern underneath.

⁵ **Tip:** Keep your small hardware parts together as units: put one of each washer type on each bolt, and secure them on there with a nut. Since loosing one of these hardware assemblies could mean big trouble for your event, buy and keep on hand one or two spare bolt, washer and nut assemblies.

If you want your platform to look great, you can paint the top with FLAT black (not glossy) high-traffic area floor paint, and get some dark-colored fabric to skirt around the edge. Attach the fabric to the stage using adhesive Velcro; put the hook side on the edge of the platform, and attach/sew the fabric side onto the skirt material.

Read the important safety footnote regarding this method below.⁶

Build a highly transportable cheap 4' x 4' platform

You can build the same kind of milk-crate stage by using two (2) 2' x 4' planks of 3/4" thick plywood, instead of a single 4' x 4' sheet, so that the parts of the platform can easily be transported in the front seat of an ordinary passenger car. The methodology is almost identical to that described above, only you need seven (7) milk crates (or paint buckets), and eight (8) pairs of carriage bolts with washers and nuts.

Arrange the milk crates in an "H" formation instead of a checkerboard pattern. Drill holes in all four corners of each plank, and place the seam between the two boards along the cross of the "H" arrangement of milk crates, so that there is support underneath the seam.

Bolt the milk crates to the two plywood planks in the same manner as described above, using the three milk crates underneath the center seam to help hold the two halves together.

To ensure that the two halves don't come apart, put two short pieces of 2x4 lumber between the milk crates underneath the stage running perpendicular to the seam, and sink screws (or lighter weight carriage bolts with washers and nuts) from the plywood above down through the 2x4 below.

Read the important safety footnote regarding this method below.⁶

⁶ **Do not use a milk-crate stage setup to support more than 250 pounds in a 4' square area.** Do not use plywood less than 3/4" thick for the platform surface; **never use particle board!** Only set this platform up on a strong, smooth, level surface that can support it evenly; if setting up on a grass surface, place plywood underneath each milk crate to make sure the platform is evenly supported, and/or that the crates do not sink into the ground (if using paint buckets, simply put lids on each bucket). Add more milk crates if you increase the size of the platform. If you join small platforms together, you must securely join them together somehow, and you must always put milk crates underneath seams between the platforms.

Electricity

Your cameras might be able to run on batteries, but unless you're using battery-powered audio, lighting, and musical instrument systems, you need electricity. If you are indoors, you can probably use the building's power, although some venues may require you to pay a fee to have one of their in-house electricians install and run out a box that will serve as your source of electricity. If you are outdoors, you will probably need a generator.

Don't overlook planning your electrical usage! Those of us in developed countries tend not to think about how much power things need, because we're accustomed to just plugging things in, and having them work. But in the case of events, if you don't figure out how much power you need (and then check to see if the venue or generator has enough circuits to supply it), you can end up with a BIG problem the day of your event: you can't draw 20.1 amps out of a 20 amp circuit without tripping the circuit breaker.

If you have a large event, you need a **Master Electrician** (ME) to oversee the overall electrical load planning for your event. Anyone who wants to plug in anything electrical at your event needs to let your Master Electrician know. If you hire the services of a professional lighting company, ask if their Master Electrician can help oversee this process for your event. Otherwise, you should recruit someone who understands electrical basics to be the Master Electrician for your event.

Calculating how much power you need

You can find out the power draw of electrical devices like audio amplifiers and cameras by reading the fine print information that is usually located somewhere on the back of the device. The official mathematical formula for calculating precisely how much power you need is **Watts / Volts = Amps**. If you remember basic high school algebra, you can plug different variables in, and solve this equation to figure out your precise electrical needs (and you thought you would never use high school algebra in real life).

For countries that operate on a 110V AC system, a good rule of thumb is that 100 watts equals roughly 1 amp (it's actually .909 amps, but using the rule of thumb leaves you a safety margin to ensure you don't trip a circuit breaker). So for example, ten (10) 150 watt 110 volt PAR38 bulbs = 1,500 watts, which = 15 amps.

Generators

The factors to consider when choosing a generator for your event are (1) how much power you need versus how much the generator creates, (2) the cost to rent and operate the generator, (3) where you need to place the generator to maximize distribution efficiency and safe cable routing, and (4) the noise the generator makes.

Professional silent generators

For larger events and those where generator noise is a real problem, consider renting a professional portable generator specifically designed to run silently for entertainment applications. These are commonly called "movie set" generators. These generators are self-contained trailer-like units that are towed with a truck. The biggest companies offering silent portable generators are [CAT Power](#) and [Aggreko Event Services](#), but

several other companies also offer silent movie set generators. You don't want a general commercial use generator. Also, keep in mind that if you rent a professional generator, you often need to get an operating permit from the local government authority.

Consumer market generators

You are probably familiar with small gas-powered generators. These generators have relatively small electrical outputs, and they make a lot of noise. You can buy or rent them from a local home improvement store. If you are putting on a small event and don't have a big budget, you may be able to get away with using one of these generators. However, you'll need to test out measures for reducing the noise they make.

Step one is putting the generator in a remote location from your event, such as around the corner of a building⁷. You can also build a frame to suspend sound-deadening blankets, plywood, and more blankets around them -- but you have to be **very** careful not to cut off the generator's fresh air supply, block the engine exhaust, let heat build up, or cause a fire! If you do a lot of events with the same generator, it might be a good investment to build an effective portable sound-deadening box that can be assembled in the field around your generator, while still allowing it to breathe and exhaust (and not cause a fire!)

Power Distribution

This is pretty self-explanatory, so this guide is only going to go over five basic points:

- Plan your circuit loads. Don't try to pull 20.1 amps from that 20 amp circuit.
- Water and electricity don't mix. Always use grounded extension cords outside.
- Cable safety

Always route cables away from where people walk. If you must run cables across where people will be walking, try to plan your run so that all cables (including audio) cross at the same area. Always cover cables with mats or [gaffers tape](#) (don't use duct tape unless you want a mess later). Doormats are a cheap solution for covering short cable hops.

- Secure your connections

Prevent event disasters by using tape at every plug connection point along your cable route. There's nothing worse than having your sound system go out because someone accidentally kicked a cable loose somewhere. Also, this can discourage people who don't agree with your event from "accidentally" unplugging your event's power source.

- Line drop

Electricity drops in voltage as it is transmitted over distance. The further away from your power source that you get, the more the voltage in your lines will drop. If you must make long runs, compensate for line drop by using cords with heavier 12-gauge wires.

⁷ The disadvantage of locating a small generator in a remote location, especially if your activist event involves a controversial topic, is that it is out of sight ... where anything could happen to it. In such cases, consider getting a chair and a pair of hearing protection earmuffs, and assigning security personnel on a rotating 15-30 minute shift basis to sit with your generator.

Audio

Audio is one of those things in life where if you can get an expert, you should, especially if your event is large or complicated. People don't notice audio unless it is bad; it can't be seen or touched, and few people understand the complicated acoustical physics and technology that goes into designing and operating a good audio setup. What is important is making sure that your audio has the clarity and power to ensure that everyone attending the event can clearly hear what is going on. If people can't hear, they won't cheer.

You also want to make sure the background environment of your venue will be quiet. You don't want elevator music playing in the background of an inspiring speech.

There are four basic parts to any audio system:

- (1) Input devices. Microphones / direct boxes, Mp3 players, etc. If you don't assign a device to capture a sound, it will not end up in your audio mix.
- (2) Mixing device & signal processing. This is your sound board and any signal processing devices used to make things sound better.
- (3) Amplifiers. Your amps take the faint electrical output signal of your mixing device, and amplify it to power the speakers.
- (4) Speakers. The trend in many speaker systems is to combine amplification and speakers into one unit (called a self-powered speaker), but many big professional systems still use separate amplifiers and speakers.

Depending on the size of your event, there are audio options that can fit many budgets. Here are some progressively cheaper suggestions to make your event rock:

Large events

If your event is BIG, don't mess around with something as complicated, precise and absolutely critical as your audio system. Do not try using that DJ friend of yours,⁸ unless they understand the calculations on [this web page](#). Call in a professional company (like [PRG](#) or [Clair](#)), and leave it to them. Many audio equipment rental companies offer audio system rental "packages" that include the labor of qualified audio personnel for the day.

Medium events

Many audio equipment rental companies can offer packages of equipment for medium-sized events. If your event will have a few thousand people or less, and not too complicated of a sound mixing situation, consider getting someone on your production team who knows professional audio, and renting your audio gear yourself. Your venue may be able to provide an audio system for a fee. Musicians in your community may also have or know where to get some good PA equipment cheaply. Another route might be to engage the services of a DJ⁸ who does large events.

⁸ A word of professional caution: Most DJ's are *not* audio engineers. If you are having a music event with a variety of different live instruments, microphones and monitors, you're best off getting a competent audio engineer. Just because your DJ friend owns mics and speakers, or provides great music for parties, does not mean they are the right choice for your live event. Setting up and mixing live sound is a complicated technical art form that takes years of experience to learn. Some DJ's have the skill to do this; most do not.

Small events

Some audio equipment rental companies offer packages of equipment for small events at very reasonable rates. For very simple, small events, the services of a local DJ may suit your needs. Also see if your venue can provide something, and check with your musician friends. Many rock musical instruments are loud enough that they don't need additional amplification in small locations. Just remember that only sources of sound that are assigned a microphone will end up on the sound board's audio recording from the event.

Improvised audio systems

For small events on a budget, you may be able to get away with creating an improvised audio system using a home stereo. You'll still need a basic microphone of some sort that is compatible with an improvised "mixing device". You have a couple of options to improvise a mixing device. A common option is to interface a microphone with a laptop computer, then pass the signal out the headphone jack. Another option is to use an old tape recording deck that has a mic input, and can output the sound of the mic from the jacks in the back as it "records". Yet another option is to get a small audio mixing device from a local electronics store (or off the internet) that can power and mix your microphones; many of these small mixing devices can run off batteries.

Once you have your microphone and improvised "mixing device" set up, haul out a home stereo system receiver/amplifier, and hook an output from your mixing device up to an available input jack on the stereo; you may need special cables or a **line transformer**⁹. Hook up the best speakers you can find to your receiver/amplifier, making sure to observe proper **polarity**; speaker wire usually has a white stripe or ridges running down one side to assist in hooking up positive to positive (commonly red to red).

Place your speakers up high (NOT on the ground) so that people can hear them, and remember to aim them so that you cover your audience area. If the speakers are small enough, two small stepladders can serve as an improvised speaker platform (although the author recommends covering the ladders with black cloth so people won't stare at them).

Remember to **always** route and cover up cables and wires in a manner so that people can't trip on them and/or pull things over accidentally.

Battery powered audio solutions

If you can't get electricity, there are some entirely battery powered audio options out there that can work for small events. For example, some companies make podiums that have a battery-powered microphone and speaker system built into them.

If you can't get your hands on one of those, then you're back to needing a basic microphone and a compatible small battery-powered mixing device.

Once you have an audio signal, you need a speaker system to amplify it. Ask around to see who is willing to loan you a battery-powered portable sound system for an iPod (the author's personal favorite for size versus performance is the [Bose Portable SoundDock](#)

⁹ A line transformer is a small tube-shaped device with jacks on both ends; it is used to adapt audio signals of different electrical strengths or standards to work with each other. You can buy them cheaply online.

system). If you connect the output from your battery-powered mixing device to the auxiliary input of your portable iPod sound system, you have an instant PA system that is suitable for small crowds. If you put a “Y” adapter on your mixing device’s audio output (so that you can run two cables out from it), you can even use two of these iPod speaker systems. Be sure not to turn the sound up so high you damage the speakers, or your next activist event will be to raise money for the friend who loaned their stereo system to you.

If you can’t find a good battery-powered iPod stereo, try finding some good-quality (i.e. loud) portable computer speakers that are powered by USB. There are many ways to get power to a USB powered computer speaker, but the easiest is off of a laptop with an excellent battery. You can use the mixer setup mentioned earlier to provide an audio input, or a USB microphone plugged into the computer itself (or, in an emergency, the computer’s built-in mic). This setup is not going to work well for a crowd of more than a few dozen people, but it should let you record audio on your computer as you speak!

Planning your stage audio system

This guide does not cover this subject because every setup is unique, but the basics are easy to understand: you need an input device for each sound source. If you are having musical performances, you also need stage monitor speakers. If you have a complicated setup, you should be using an audio engineer, and they’ll know what to do.

Planning out and setting up audio speakers

All of your planning about microphones and mixing boards will fall flat on its face if you don’t properly plan out the speakers that project the finished sound to your audience. This is an important area that amateurs don’t understand, and usually overlook. If you’ve got a professional audio company handling your setup, they should take care of this for you. If you’re on your own, here is a crash-course primer on the basics:

- Put your speakers somewhere just in front of the stage, or at the front corners of your stage -- usually in a stereo configuration on the right and left side.
- Get your speakers standing up above the heads of your audience.
- Don’t position, aim or point speakers where microphones on stage can hear them; this will produce that feedback whine we have all heard and hate.

As you probably know, different tones in sound are caused by different frequencies. The human voice falls within the mid frequency ranges. If you want everyone to clearly hear what the people speaking at your event are saying, your audio speaker setup has to provide mid-range frequency coverage across all areas of your audience. It also has to have enough **throw** to reach the people standing in the back.

What do the terms “coverage” and “throw” mean?

All speakers have a **coverage pattern**. High and mid-range frequency sound waves travel through the air in a manner similar to how a flashlight projects light: in a straight, focused line. Think of a coverage pattern as being like an invisible “V”-shaped wedge of sound that spreads out from the front of your speakers. Everyone standing inside the “V”-shaped wedge will properly hear the high and mid-range frequencies of your event.

Anyone outside the “V” will not. So you may need several speakers next to each other, aimed in a fan-like array, to get proper **coverage** of your audience from left to right.

High and mid-range frequency sounds can get muffled by objects in their way, like trees, banners, walls, and crowds of people (low-end sound, or bass, spreads out and travels easier). Getting your speakers up above the crowd is part of ensuring proper coverage.

The term “**throw**” refers to the distance that an audio speaker is optimized to project sound over. Generally, “short throw” speakers are used to reach audience members that are close to the stage; they have a wider coverage pattern (home stereo speakers, and DJ speakers that sit on stands, are short throw speakers). “Long throw” speakers are used to reach audience members far away from the stage; they have a tighter coverage pattern. Professional audio setups often employ a combination of short throw speakers aimed at the up-close audience, and long-throw speakers aimed at the audience further away.

The lesson is to make sure that (a) your speakers are placed tall enough so that the high and mid-range frequencies can spread out over the top of the audience, (b) your speakers are properly aimed from left to right according to the width of their coverage pattern, and (c) your speakers have enough power and “throw” to reach people standing in the back.

Making an audio recording of your event

To ensure that you have good audio from your event, you should record the sound from your event directly off of the sound board that mixes it.

The first rule of recording the audio of your live event is that unless you dedicate microphones to record a sound, the sound is not going to end up on your recording. This includes the psychologically critical sounds of wild applause and cheers of support from your live audience! Sometimes you can get away with using the microphones on the camera in the audience to capture the sounds of the crowd cheering, but this can sound weird when mixed together in editing: most camera’s built-in microphones are not of great quality, and the camera’s mic will pick up the echoes from the live sound bouncing around your venue, while the sound board recording will not have as many echoes.

Which brings us to the second rule of recording your live event: what sounds perfect to your ear live almost never sounds perfect on a recording. The recording machine is not hearing all the things your ear is; it only hears what the microphone levels are feeding into it. This is why the sound output for your sound recording should be mixed differently than the sound output for your speakers. Professionals use a second audio board. Don’t have a second audio board? Mix your recording feed using an auxiliary channel on the board you do have (your audio engineer will know what this is, and must **monitor** the aux feed to ensure the recording is good). Don’t have a spare aux channel? Record with what you do have, and try to clean it up in post editing.

For recording devices, nothing beats the rock-solid reliability of a dedicated recording device. You can also record directly off of many modern laptop computers, but be aware the quality may not be as good as a dedicated recording device. This method may also subject your recording to glitches if your computer’s processor gets tasked on something else, if it crashes, or if the battery dies.

Lighting

Lighting is the most important thing as far as the cameras which record your event are concerned. Without proper lighting, your videos and pictures won't look good, they might be unusable, and they certainly won't be of good enough quality for broadcast on TV. If you are producing a major event, consider calling in a professional lighting equipment rental house (like [Production Resource Group](#)) to help with the design and installation of your event's lighting. You can also rent professional lights and set them up yourself, or you can get by using improvised lights out of your garage!

Your objective is to have light bounce off people on the stage, and reflect back into your audience's eyes and camera's lens, so always think about the position of your light source in relationship to your cameras and audience. Never allow your stage to be positioned (or event timed) so that your audience or cameras are facing into the Sun, or bright lights behind or next to your stage. Remember that bright lights which are off when you visit your event location during the day might come on automatically at night.

You want your lights to illuminate only what you want the audience to look at. Conversely, you do not want to distract your audience's eye by lighting up things that don't need to be lit. However, cameras are never as sensitive to light as the eyes of your live audience, so you need to provide enough light for your cameras to see.

When planning an outdoor event, always consider the sunrise and sunset times. The [U.S. Naval Observatory's Sun & Moon data website](#) can give you this information for the day and location of your event. Whenever possible, you should use your lights during your entire event, especially if your event is taking place in the shadow of trees or buildings. You should always have your stage lights turned on at least one hour before sunset.

Remember that once the sun goes down, you may need to provide light for your outdoor audience area too, especially if you want your cameras to be able to record the reactions of your audience.

Types of lights to use

For most events, what you need to do is project light over a distance in a focused beam, from the source of the light in front of the stage, to where it is needed. Here are options:

Professional lights

If you rent [professional lights](#), your local stage lighting equipment rental house can point you in the right direction for your needs. Here are two types of lights to consider:

- HMI Fresnels

[HMI Fresnels](#) were developed for use in film and TV. They are extremely bright, they can accurately mimic daylight, and they'll make your event look great on camera. The mere presence of these professional lighting fixtures in your event's setup can also subtly influence professional news crews to look at your event more seriously.

A single 1,200 watt HMI fresnel typically costs over \$100 per day to rent, but they normally include a tripod-style stand and accessories, and small events can get by using just two of them. **You MUST weigh down the legs of tripod stands with sandbags.**

- PAR Cans

PAR is an acronym for Parabolic Aluminized Reflector, which is a type of light bulb (the common home floodlight is a small member of the PAR family, called a PAR 38¹⁰). A [PAR can](#) is basically just that: a small metal can with a PAR lamp inside, and a handle/bar (called a yolk) for attaching the light to a mounting surface. For an activist producing on the cheap, your budget might be better suited to using these instruments.

The most common stage PAR can is a PAR 64; this is a light housing an 8” wide PAR lamp that comes in 250, 500 and 1,000 watt varieties. A couple of 1,000 watt PAR 64’s can take care of the lighting needs for most basic events. DJ’s often have a smaller version of PAR can called a PAR 56 which comes in 200W, 300W or 500W varieties.

In addition to being made in different physical sizes and wattages, all PAR lamps are manufactured with different types of **beam spread**,¹¹ which for household PAR 38 lamps is usually simplified as “Spot” or “Flood”.

The size, wattage, and beam spread of the PAR lamp you need depends on how far it is between where your lights are and where you need to get the light, and how large the area is that you need to light.

Improvising your own lights

- Clamp-style floodlights

The common clamp-style floodlight with a metal reflector and a PAR 38 inside is one of the best stage lighting solutions you can find in your garage or local hardware store. Get the brightest PAR lamps you can find¹² (150 watts is the high end of a PAR 38), and choose either a spot or flood beam spread bulb according to the specific conditions of your event setup.

- Flood work lights

Another light source that you can use are the common, boxy-looking work floodlights that you probably have in your garage. These blast light everywhere. Since they do not project the light they output, they’re not effective over distances like a PAR lamp is. Still, they can be used to light a stage from close range, and they’re a great solution for lighting an audience. Just remember to put them somewhere they won’t blind your cameras or audience.

Battery-powered lighting

If you can’t get electricity for your event, you can get by on a system powered by a car battery, so long as your event is relatively short and your battery strong. Securing an

¹⁰ The number in the name of a PAR bulb refers to the distance across the front of the bulb, which is measured in 1/8 of an inch increments; a common household PAR 38 bulb is 4 3/4” wide across the front.

¹¹ Common PAR beam spreads are WFL (wide flood), MFL (medium flood), SP (spot), NSP (narrow spot), and VNSP (very narrow spot). PAR bulbs often have a beam designation printed on the back.

¹² Do not confuse a PAR light with an R-style light. R-lights, like the R40, are a cousin of the PAR, but cannot project light over a distance like a PAR. Unknowledgeable store employees may hand you an R when you ask for a PAR floodlight or spotlight. Check the box to make sure you’re getting a PAR light.

appropriate older style round automobile headlight (which is a form of PAR lamp) inside a clamp light, and rigging it to operate off of a car battery will give you a portable, no-generator-required lighting system¹³. If you have a friend with a car and a set of jumper cables, you can even drive your own car to the event, take the battery out, and light your event off of that. Here's how to make it work:

First, you need two automobile headlights¹³. Headlights are designed to project light in a tight beam, so usually you can only light a small area with them. You'll need to look around to determine what kind of available round headlights offer the brightest and widest beam spread. This would be a good time to call that friend who loves cars.

Next, you'll need two clamp lights with metal reflectors large enough for your headlights to fit inside of. You'll also need four (4) small 1" long machine screws (the author recommends 8/32 size) with two (2) washers and one (1) nut each. Finally, you'll need some 14-gauge lamp cord, spade connectors that can plug into the connectors on the back of the headlight bulb, and a method for hooking the lamp cord up to the battery.

Start by carefully and precisely placing the headlight evenly inside the metal reflector of the clamp light. Then use a permanent felt-tip marker pen to pinpoint four evenly-spaced dots around the circumference of where the headlight meets the inside of the reflector. Drill out a small hole the size of your screws through the reflector at each of the dots.

Get your spade connectors onto your lamp cord. It is a good idea to use a "jumper" to come back out of one of the spade connectors, so that you can add a second spade connector for powering the high beam circuit in your headlight. Feed the spade-connector end of the lamp cord through the ventilation holes commonly found around the base of the clamp light's reflector. If your clamp light does not have a ventilation hole around the base of the reflector, now is an excellent time to drill one.

Tie the lamp cord in a single knot once it is inside the reflector so it can't be pulled out, leaving a few inches hanging loose. Hook the cord up to the back of your headlight. Choosing to hook up the high beam circuit gives more light, but will drain power faster.

Place the headlight back into the reflector, and insert a screw with a washer in each hole from the outside pointing in. Finish with a washer and a nut from the inside. The excess length of the four screws is now retaining the headlight in the clamp light's reflector.

Now you need a way to hook the lamp cord up to the battery. The author's preferred method is to put an automotive cigarette-lighter-style male plug on the zip cord. Then get a female cigarette lighter receptacle with wires leading to loose jumper-cable-style clamps. This way, you clamp your power outlet onto your battery, and then plug your light in when needed. You can even put an in-line switch on your lamp cord.

When focusing these lights, you will likely need to **spin** the headlight inside of the clamp light's reflector in order to orient the beam correctly. Rather than try to explain this, just turn the light on the night before the event, and study the shape of the light it projects.

¹³ **You can also use** lighting fixtures and bulbs from residential 12V low-voltage outdoor lighting systems.

Where to put your lights

Front light

Your lights must be placed in front of the stage, out where the audience is. The ideal location for your lights is at a 45° angle above where your speaker/stage is, offset 45° to the left and 45° to the right of center. This means putting your lights in two locations on the left and right, and getting them up high. You don't have to get them exactly at 45° angles, but your videos and photographs will look better if you do.

Back light

Backlighting is the process of putting a light up high behind your stage, pointing down at your stage from the rear. The purpose of backlighting is to help a figure stand out from their background (especially on camera) by creating a glowing edge around the back of their head, shoulders, and body. It also makes your side-of-stage camera shots look good (otherwise, they would be totally dark on the back half, and brightly lit on the front).

Backlighting is optional. But if your event is of major size, if you have major talent coming, or if your event is high-profile and likely to attract members of the TV news media, you should strongly consider adding backlight to your stage-area lighting design.

Adding backlight is relatively simple. The key is that backlighting must be controlled so that it does not blind either your cameras or audience. This means two things: backlight must come from a high-up position, and it must use a type of light that can be controlled and kept mostly on the stage. If you are using a banner for a background, you can get away with a single tower raised up in the center over the top of your banner. For activists on the cheap, PAR 38 Spotlights can make a great backlight for your podium position.

Where **NOT** to put your lights

Do not put your lights anywhere they can blind the audience or the cameras, or at the side of the stage. Don't put them on the ground pointing up at people. Do not evaluate whether or not the lighting "looks good" while standing at the side or back of the stage; get out into the audience, look through the camera lens, and evaluate lighting from there.

How to hang your lights

The process of putting your lights up into position for your event is called "hanging". Here are some different methods for hanging your lights:

Using professional equipment

Professional lighting equipment rental houses can provide you with a wide range of solutions for professionally hanging your lights. These solutions run the range from vertical pipe in a base, to short towers of truss that stand vertically on the ground, to professional lift systems that can raise an entire spans of lights into the air. The rental company can explain the advantages and disadvantages of each of these solutions.

One relatively cheap rental solution commonly used by DJ's is a series of four (4) PAR 56 lights on a pre-fabricated horizontal bar, attached to a pole-like tower that can easily

be raised with a crank. Use two of these towers out in front of your stage – one on the right, and one on the left – and you have a basic solution to your lighting needs.

Improvising a lighting tower

For medium to large events, the same type of scaffolding platform system that you can rent as an improvised stage can also be used for towers to support both audio and lighting systems. In the U.S., Home Depot will rent you three (3) 5' tall sections of scaffold platform for \$54 per week. Put each of these on steel base plates, and these could be used as your stage and two speaker/lighting platforms. If necessary, you can attach vertical pipes or lumber to a scaffold in order to get your lights up to a 45° angle above the stage.

You can also rent a cheap improvised lift-up style lighting tower from a local home improvement store or tool rental location. What you want in this case is a tool called a drywall lifter. This is designed to easily lift panels of drywall up to ceiling heights for installation, but you can easily use it to lift either professional or improvised lights up into position as well. To do a correct lighting job, you'll need to rent a minimum of two (2) of these tools, each placed to the right and left sides in front of the stage.

Read the important safety footnote regarding this method below¹⁴.

Using audio speakers on stands as lighting positions

Since the speakers for your event will already be in front of both sides of the stage, this method involves placing lights on top of the speakers. This is not ideal, as it will not get your lights up high at a 45° angle. But it will at least get your light coming in from the front at roughly a 45° angle from both sides, especially if your audio provider is able to make the audio work correctly while also positioning their speakers in an ideal location¹⁵.

The simplest incarnation of this method is to clamp a common clamp-style work light on the top handle of a stand-mounted speaker. If the top of the speaker is flat, then attach your light to a floor plate, and place it on top of the speaker.

Floor plates

A floor plate is a simple piece of hardware for mounting a light on the ground. If you want to point lights upwards at trees and other objects (or put them on top of speakers), you need floor plates. If you're renting professional lights, you can specify them to come with floor plates. Here's how to make a floor plate for an improvised clamp light system:

Get an 18" x 12" piece of 3/4" or thicker plywood, and an 18" long piece of 2x4. Place the 2x4 on edge down the center of the plywood. Sink screws through the plywood into the

¹⁴ **NEVER attempt to use a drywall lifter on an uneven surface.** If the lifter is on wheels that do not have locks, you should place blocks of wood underneath each leg to barely raise the wheels. Always use a bubble leveling tool to ensure the lifter is level before attempting to lift loads up. **Never exceed the stated lifting load limit.** Drywall lifters have a minimal safety brake that keeps the lifter extended up. This is not a reliable system; you need to determine a way to positively lock the lifting tower in the up position! You must always rope off the area underneath a drywall lifter; **NEVER allow people to stand underneath it!**

¹⁵ Placing 120V AC electrical cables and systems next to audio cables and systems can cause "AC hum", a buzzing noise in the sound system. Your audio engineer may not want to mix your lighting equipment with their sound equipment for this reason.

2x4. Finish with a coat of flat black paint (optional). Your 18” long plate gives you the flexibility to put at least two clamp lights on each plate.

Methods of securing your lights

Professional lights normally come with a hardware attachment called a [C-clamp](#) for securing the light to a pipe above a stage. Lights designed for movie and TV use may come with hardware for attaching them to the tripod stand (usually included with the rental). Improvised lights can be secured into place using a variety of methods; spring-loaded clamps and plastic ZIP ties are two common possibilities.

There are two basic rules of thumb when securing lights in place.

The first is **safety**. Don't *ever* put a light up in the air in a way that it might be able to fall. This means securely mounting lights tightly – you don't want a light that can wiggle on it's own. Professional lights have a **safety cable** or chain that gets wrapped around something to catch the light if it falls. You can easily use some metal rebar tie wire to create a safety cable for improvised lights.

The second rule of thumb is to remember that your light has to be aimed (“focused”) later, so don't secure your light in such a way that it can't be aimed properly.

Focusing your lights

Once your lights are hung in position for your event, they need to be properly aimed in order to be effective. The process of aiming your lights is called **focusing**. Usually, one person stands on stage, and directs an assistant who focuses the lights. The person touching the lights needs to always wear thick gloves.

You will need a tall ladder to reach your lights; ladders that fold up several times for compact transportation can be useful in this situation. If you are using well-secured improvised clamp lights, grabber-arm extensions can sometimes help too. If your lights are well secured in place, another method you can use is to put your lights up into position, figure out where they need to move, then bring them back down and do a tiny adjustment, repeating until correct. **Don't ever compromise safety!**

The idea is to create an even wash of light that covers people as they move around or speak. Your primary speaking position is the most important. Stand where the people in your event will stand, turn your back to the light, and look at the shadow you are casting. When a speaker stands at the podium, will they be covered from head to toe? When people walk around, will they be covered? Are you blending the edges of various beams of light together, so that the light is smooth and even as you move across the stage?

Cameras will easily see imperfections in your lighting that an untrained eye watching live will not notice. Work with the person focusing your lights until they are correct. Don't forget to white balance your cameras once you are done focusing!

If you are focusing lights outside in daylight, then get a piece of extremely dark blue or purple [theatrical gel](#), and look through it into the light to tell where it is aiming. You will learn how to see the central focus point, as well as the edges of where the light is.

SHOW TIME!

So, you planned your event, your stage is set, your cameras, audio and lights are ready ... now it's show time!

Your show is run by your producer and/or director in concert with your stage manager, based on the carefully well-crafted-out plan from your production meetings. You want to have an ebb and flow to the power of your event's emotional pitch. Move your audience's emotions. Use those planned musical interludes to change video/audio recording tapes, and for outdoor events, to quickly re-white balance cameras as the sun sets. Always end big.

Invariably, there will be things that don't happen as planned, so your show running team has to be able to think on their feet and improvise. Tricks like knowing how to have both backup talent and musical interludes "cued up" in order to flawlessly cover hiccups in the schedule will ensure that your show runs smoothly. As long as things look smooth, the audience (and the media) will never know if something did not go as planned.

Your event is not over until the last piece of trash has been cleaned up, the venue is empty again, and the last item of equipment has been unloaded and put away at its final destination. Make sure that your production team has a large pool of workers who have all been recruited and trained from this viewpoint, and do not view their commitment to "the event" as ending when the audience leaves.

Of course, the biggest let down is an event that does not go off as planned, and you will have events that do not go the way you wanted them to. When that happens, everyone involved will need to ask tough questions of themselves about what led to the disappointing result. Often, you will see that something got missed, went wrong, or just did not work in the pre-production process. Sometimes it will be a circumstance beyond your control (say, a famous celebrity died, and the world temporarily lost all sense of reality). Sometimes, the way the message is presented just won't strike a chord with the public or the media. Sometimes you won't have the faintest clue what happened.

Don't ever think that just because your event failed that *you* are a failure, or just because your event didn't make a difference that *you* can't make a difference.

Everyone in Hollywood has had huge projects that did not work out. Every politician has had things they wanted to accomplish and couldn't. You ask tough questions, learn what you can, and move on.

POST PRODUCTION

Post production is where you put your self-produced still photo, video, and audio recordings of your event together into polished media products, and get them distributed. Post production is where the rubber of your message meets the road of reality: all of your efforts in producing your event were to get you to this moment!

Timeliness is everything

The media from your event – media which carries your message in it – is in an instant competition for attention and **relevance** in the information marketplace before it is even released. The floodwaters of new information flooding the marketplace never slows down, and things which are not **timely** are not **relevant**. Therefore, in post production, you are fighting to get your message out wide and FAST – *especially* if the “professional” news media gave your event coverage, and people might be looking online for more information!

Editing

Because speed is so key, your entire post-production editing process needs to be planned out in advance, and ready to execute the moment your event ends. Your director and editors should be a part of the production team from early in the planning process, so that they can start developing a picture of what they want the video to look like. On the day of your event, they want to be well rested so they have plenty of energy to stay up and crank edited product out, and show up just to watch the event itself, so that they know what moments to look for in the editing process.

The very moment your event ends, the tapes should come out of your cameras and audio recording devices and get turned over to your editing team, who should immediately leave the event site to go begin editing. You want editing underway by the time you finish taking down your event’s staging setup. The goal is to get edited clips of highlight speakers/moments up on the internet within a few hours, and full edited video up within 48 hours (if your event is on the evening local news, you ideally want highlighted clips up on the internet by the time the local news airs the story, so that you can fully capitalize on any internet searching the story produces).

Distribution

How widely can you distribute your message? Here is where your online networking you have built comes into play. If you produced a broad-spectrum event involving various different groups, a “unified” edited video featuring all of those groups integrated around the core message of your event is not only powerful, but instantly has an online distribution network of all the members of all the groups!

A word of caution about distribution: this is also where your prior restraint and **infrequent** use of your online communication channels pays off. If you have bombarded your online base with lots of messages, what are the odds they will pay attention to your finished media message? This is why you tightly control use of mailing lists, Facebook accounts, Twitter, Google group emails, etc: so people are interested in hearing what you have to say when you release polished media messages.