

SPRING PARK FILM MAKERS

TECH TALK No.4

Archive Camcorder Videos



Camcorders have not only got lighter in weight, but thanks to hard drives and higher capacity flash memory, they can store a lot more video too. The happy upside to these two trends is that it's easier to record more video footage than ever before. The downside, of course, is the nagging question of what to do with this video once you're finished shooting it. How do you ensure the footage you've shot with your camcorder will last for generations?

Archiving Your Video

There are a few steps involved in archiving your camcorder video, so here are some tips to guide you. For those of us who use miniDV tapes these should be kept and labeled.

Step 1: Transfer video to a computer hard drive.

Step 2: Create a back-up on DVD and/or transfer video to an external hard drive.

Step 3: Track camcorder memory formats as they evolve over the years. Migrate your videos as your formats become obsolete.

Step 4: Track camcorder video codecs as they evolve. Ensure your software and devices can replay your video codec. If it sounds a bit daunting, don't worry. It's not difficult. It just requires a bit of patience and a willingness to keep your eye on the prize: preserving your digital memories so your great, great grand children can enjoy them.

Step 1: Transfer Video

No matter what kind of memory your camcorder records to, you will be transferring that video to your computer hard drive for editing - provided you have enough room on the disk. Typically, the easiest way to transfer video from a camcorder to a computer is to connect them via a firewire or USB cable. Your computer should not be the final resting place for your video files. Instead, putting your video onto your computer will also enable you to transfer the video to another storage format.

Step 2: Create a Back-Up Burn a DVD:

The most common storage media for archiving your video is a DVD disk - they're inexpensive and can be bought just about anywhere and hopefully will work on all new players.

Some camcorder manufacturers sell standalone DVD burners that connect to a camcorder to save footage to a disk without even using a computer. But you don't need to purchase a standalone burner if you already have a DVD burner on your computer.

When you've burned a disk, be sure you place it in a jewel case that's clearly labeled with some indication of what the disk contains. For storage it is preferable that you do not write on the disk itself. Store it in a cool, dry and dark spot - perhaps even a fireproof safe along with your other valuable documents.

If you already own a DVD camcorder, there's no sense in burning a second DVD of the same video. Instead, see below.

Save to an external hard drive: External hard drives are far more expensive than blank DVD disks, but unlike DVDs, they can store potentially hundreds of hours of video footage. Transfer data to an external hard drive is as simple as connected the drive to your computer via USB and dragging and dropping files or folders.

Some people like to make a second copy of files on their computer. Buy the highest capacity hard drive you can possibly afford. It is far better to have too much storage than too little. No matter how large a drive you buy, you'll eventually fill it, especially if you own an HD camcorder. To truly secure your video, your best bet is to buy an external drive and burn DVD disks. Think of it as an insurance policy.

Step 3: Keep Track of Formats

Anyone familiar with the old 8.5-inch computer floppy disks can tell you that digital memory formats, like dinosaurs, become extinct. Eventually, DVD disks will as well. Hard drives are likely to last longer.

As you begin to notice storage media evolving - fewer computers sold with DVD drives, new technology emerging, etc. - you will have to transfer your video from the older formats to newer ones. This will almost certainly entail bringing those videos back into your computer and exporting them onto the storage media of the future.

If that sounds too daunting, there will almost certainly be services available where a third party will perform this task for you - just as there are services available today for transferring tape-based video formats onto DVDs.

Step 4: Keep Track of Codecs

You not only have to worry about the physical storage media, you also need to keep track of how video codecs evolve. All digital video is encoded into a special file format, such as AVCHD, H.264 or MPEG-2. Think of these formats as the language of digital video. When you view your video on a computer or TV, there is a translator working on those devices to translate these codecs into the video you see.

As with storage formats, video codecs change with time. That also means that the translators - either the media playing software (iTunes, Windows Media Player, etc.) on your computer and other viewing devices - change as well. The good news is that it will take many years before a codec, and all means of translating it, disappears completely. You will, however, need to keep track of your codecs and be sure that it is supported by any new software or device you purchase.

How Do You Know What Video Codec You Have?

First, consult your owner's manual. It will tell you. If you no longer have the manual open up a folder on your computer with your digital video files and look at the file name. It will end with a ".something" - such as .mov, .avi, .mpg. Those three digits, or file extension, will indicate the type of codec you have. Plug that data into a file extension search website to find the information you require. As long as you keep aware of evolving storage formats and codecs, you should be able to maintain your digital video for generations.