



# iMovie

on the

# CHEAP

by *Chris  
Seibold*

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Author: Chris Seibold

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## ***Introduction***

iMovie is the kind of program that fulfills the early promise of computers, in that it is a program that empowers the average person. It's hard to believe but every time you fire up iMovie you are launching a production studio that until a few years ago would have cost you tens of thousands of dollars. Yet it seems as though iMovie is underutilized, people complain that it takes too much time and costs too much money to make even the simplest of movies. The complaints are seemingly valid, reading most iMovie tutorials is an invitation to spend money and waste time. You're often presented with information about topics as where to find cheap actors and rent sets. Sure the information is great but it leaves the reader with the idea that making a movie is a lot more work and a lot more expensive than it needs to be. The goal of this book is to help you get the project done with a minimal amount of investment of time and cash. The ancillary goal is to help people realize that they can make absolutely stunning movies while keeping the process fun.



# Chapter 1

## The Necessary Equipment

iMovie doesn't do very much straight out of the box so instead of jumping straight to using iMovie a more logical place to begin is with the equipment. Some things you need are obvious, a digital video camera but other items you should have are probably less intuitive. Still there is no more obvious need than a Macintosh Computer so let's start there.

### ***Gotta Have a Mac***

You're not going to run iMovie without a Mac so resign yourself to getting one. The temptation may be to run out and get a top of the line Mac because video production requires a lot of horsepower. That's true if you're running Final Cut Pro but the requirements for iMovie 4 (the version this book deals with though most of the information is backwards compatible) are surprisingly minimal. To wit:

- G3, G4 or G5 based Macintosh
- Version 10.2.6 or better (System 9 supports up to iMovie 2.X.X)
- QuickTime (the latest version possible)
- 250 MB free disk space

Those are the stated requirements but they're a little less than what you need to have a usable production studio on your Mac. Go with a Mac with at least a 600 MHz G3 (733MHz G4 if you want to use iDVD) and a minimum of 512 MB of RAM. As far as the size of the hard drive is concerned this is one case where bigger is definitely better. Imported video clips eat your hard drive up at roughly 200MB per minute so think in terms of extra

gigabytes instead of excess megabytes.

### ***Getting your Production Studio on the cheap***

Your Mac is your studio and when it comes to getting one you have many options:

- Find a nice used system that meets iMovie's requirements. The ubiquitous eBay is an excellent source but be sure to do a little homework on the seller.
- Upgrade an older Mac. A good upgrade can breathe life into a dog slow Mac and make the machine more than capable of handling all the video editing you need it to. The problem is that you'll generally have to upgrade the hard drive and CPU. If you want to use iDVD you'll have to also mix in a SuperDrive. By the time you've done all that you could have purchased a new Mac. Really the upgrade path is not financially sound unless you're upgrading a computer you already own or can score a free Mac.
- The safest option is getting a refurbished Mac from Apple or an Apple dealer like Small Dog. eMacs (sans the SuperDrive) sell for as little as \$550 as of this writing (though you'll have to add memory) and feature a one-year warranty.

If you decided to take the plunge and buy a new Mac all your fears are gone, any one of the current models are more than capable of handling iMovie. One thing to note is while all the current models will run iMovie with aplomb only the models that feature a SuperDrive will be capable of using iDVD.

#### **Related Links:**

[Apple Computer Inc.](#)

[MacSales](#): Source for upgrades

[SmallDog Electronics](#): Authorized Reseller

[ebay](#): The king of online Auctions

### ***Selecting or Obtaining a Digital Video Camcorder***

The cheapest way to get a camera is to borrow one. This method is surprisingly simple, most people only use their camera for special events (Hey, Eunice is getting married! Fire up the minicam!). Hence they are usually fairly happy to lend it to a trusted friend for a day or two. This method, while very cheap, has some drawbacks. The most notable of which is that sooner or later you will run out of friends. Consider this method viable if you just want to give iMovie a try or if you only have one project you want to shoot.

Once you've decided to buy a camera things get a little more complicated. Video cameras range in price from a few hundred dollars to a few hundred thousand dollars. We'll skip the George Lucas level cameras and stick to the cheaper consumer oriented cams. I should also note that iMovie 4 works with Apple's iSight camera. In general this is too limiting for quality video making but if you're making video blogs this functionality can be exactly what you need.

Low-end cameras all feature a single CCD chip (charge coupled diode, it's what captures the image in digital cameras and digital camcorders) but that is where the similarity ends. Output on some models is positively woeful and others it nearly rivals some prosumer digital camcorders. Price is not necessarily the best indicator of image quality so careful shopping and plenty of research are your best friends when it comes to buying a digital camcorder. If you're used to old style camcorders, ones that use bulky VHS tapes or 8mm, you'll be pleasantly surprised by the jump in quality and the reduction in size. Digital camcorders easily surpass all previous formats of video recording.

### ***A note on formats***

There are two formats for digital camcorders: MiniDV and Digital8. MiniDV is far and away much more popular but there are a few Digital8 camcorders floating around. There isn't any inherent image quality difference between the two formats (both can support around 500 lines of resolution) but owing to the popularity of MiniDV, I'd recommend that format. However Digital8 does have one very cool feature that MiniDV lacks: you can use a Digital8 camcorder to import your old analog 8mm tapes into iMovie (or use it just to watch them). So if you've got a bunch of 8mm tapes stacked in piles around it is probably worth the effort to track down a Digital8 camera.

What you absolutely need out of your Digital Camcorder is a FireWire port, called iLink by Sony and IEEE-1394 by practically everybody else, is the top priority. This is the conduit for the video to get into your Mac, be aware that some cameras only offer USB 2.0 ports which renders the camcorder fairly useless if you want to use it with iMovie. (There are workarounds but, trust me, it is much better to find a digital camcorder with a FireWire port.)



### **Manual focus**

All digital camcorders come with auto focus and it usually works fairly well. Still there are times when manual focus is simply a must have option. Imagine you are shooting a scene with several people at various distances from the camera. The camera has no clue which person you want to focus on (generally it will choose the person closest to you or closest to the middle of the frame) so an option to manually focus the camera becomes very necessary. Don't worry about finding a camera with this ability, nearly every digital camcorder features this option.

## **Decent image quality**

Most of the low-end cameras should offer images that surpass the quality of VHS tapes and Hi 8 media. Actually they all do if you go by lines of resolution. MiniDV and Digital8 can get up to roughly 500 lines of resolution (a VHS tape runs at 240 lines of resolution) but some are limited by circuitry and optics this is more than acceptable for output to an analog TV, the Web, Videocassette, etc. But just because they have 500+ lines of resolution doesn't necessarily mean that the video will be accurate or pleasing to the eye and that's why it is very important to evaluate the camera before you buy. The best way to judge the digital cameras image quality is to look at the video image the camera produces. This method of measurement is subjective but if you're pleased with the quality you have pleased the only person that matters. The big thing to avoid when evaluating image quality is relying on the built in LCD screen. The LCD screens aren't usually an accurate representation of the images produced by the camcorder (the screens usually feature separate controls for brightness and contrast). Instead try to find a camera plugged into a decent quality monitor or, if at that is not possible, bring a laptop from home. You'll end up with a much better idea of image quality. If you're not able to personally examine the image quality before you buy, the web is full of reviews about most cameras. A particularly complete source is: [www.camcorderinfo.com](http://www.camcorderinfo.com)

## **A jack for an external microphone**

The microphones on camcorders are generally worthless because they pick up the noise from the camcorders internal motor. If the camcorder you're considering doesn't have a jack for adding an external microphone (a hot shoe will also do the trick), stop considering that model unless you are planning on only filming silent movies or loud sporting events.

## **Optical zoom ability (non-digital)**



While it's best to avoid using the zoom while filming a scene it can be very useful when setting up shots. Most camcorders feature at least 10x zoom although there is a wide disparity even on the low priced camcorders. For example, the bottom end of JVC's camcorder line offers a 16x optical zoom but any zoom equal to 10 or greater is more than enough.

**Note:** Do not confuse optical zoom with digital zoom. Digital zoom is a meaningless number.

### **Remote Control**

These are fairly common and an absolute must if you plan on filming without a dedicated camera operator. The remote will allow you to start and stop filming without jostling the camera or moving out of the scene.

*Things that would be nice  
but are not strictly necessary*

### **Low light ability**

Filming in low light is a bad idea. You usually end up with all kinds of visual artifacts and a host of other image problems but it's nice to have if you're filming scenes where you can't control the lighting. For example, if you're planning on filming Jr's soccer matches a camera that performs well in low light is probably a must have. If you're going to film carefully contrived scripted scenes, you can spend your time thinking about other things.

**Note:** Evaluating low light ability is tricky, the best way is to shoot a bit of footage in a dimly lit part of the store and evaluate the results. Since most stores strap their camcorders down one way or another this can prove to be difficult. Fortunately most camera reviews go into great detail when covering low light ability.

### **A hot shoe**

A hot shoe allows you to hook accessories into the camcorder with a minimum of fuss. For example, lights and boom mikes can be powered via the hot shoe without the hassle of extra batteries and cabling. Of course self-powered options are usually available or preferable so a hot shoe is matter of convenience rather necessity.



***Hot Shoe Adapter***

### **RCA Jacks**

These are nice if you want to import your older tapes from either another camcorder or VCR, want to transfer your footage to a VCR or watch your movie on the television directly from the camera. Be forewarned that the older footage you import will look substantially worse than new footage and the process of importing the video may cause some problems with quality.

If the camcorder features them you'll see it listed on the box or you'll see the largish connectors on the camera. In any event these aren't strictly necessary for use with iMovie, so think of them as optional.



***RCA Jack to Mini-Jack***

### **Extra Batteries**

The battery that comes with your camera is nice but provides a limited amount of power. If you plan on filming anywhere away from a socket extra batteries are a necessity. One thing to take

note of: some manufacturers will void your warranty if they realize you used a non-recommended battery.

## **Manual Controls**

This is a case of the more the better. White balance, shutter speed, manual audio levels are all useful things to have. Manual controls allow for fine-tuning of your shots and allow you more control over the images that end up on the tape. There are a few caveats with this one. If you're not interested in manually controlling things, these controls will be wasted so there is no reason to spend the extra money to get them. Also, if the manual controls are invoked through the LCD screen, the process will be so tedious that you will tend to ignore the features. In short: Nice for the flexibility but not a must-have feature.

### ***Things to ignore***

## **LCD viewfinder size**

Almost every camera comes with one of those flip out screens (except the extremely cheap and the very expensive). Manufacturers are constantly touting LCD screen size, in fact the difference between models often boils down to little more than this spec. The truth is the size of the LCD (or pixel count) doesn't matter. This is not to say that the LCD screen is completely irrelevant. There are times when you'll be forced to rely on the flip out screen so make sure your camcorder of choice has one and ignore all the hype.



***LCD Viewfinder***

## **On-camera effects**

Camcorder makers love to tell you about all the effects you can apply using only the camera. Aged film, sepia, shake, etc. These all work by digitally adding (or removing) information from the tape and would be supremely useful if you didn't have iMovie, a



computer, or a lick of sense. Remember you're after the image quality, iMovie can take care of the rest.

## **Digital Zoom**

Ignore this specification as if it were a car alarm. Digital zoom only makes the pixels bigger and the image worse. Much like cosmetic company claims this is something dreamt up solely to sell cameras without adding anything of actual value.

## **Still Camera Abilities**

Looking at the box of almost any digital camcorder you'll see information about the still camera capabilities of the camcorder. While it may be a useful gimmick for the camera makers the truth is that if you want to take still photos you should get a still camera. Most digital camcorders cannot rival a decent Digital still camera, or even a sub par still camera. (Digital still cameras also make fairly horrendous video cameras).

## **Megapixels**

Megapixels don't matter when it comes to digital camcorders; this is another bit of marketing dreck. When evaluating a digital camcorder the more interesting numbers are effective pixels and lines of resolution. And honestly those numbers don't tell the entire story. Go with a camera that presents a pleasing image.

### ***Cameras you should definitely NOT buy***

- Cameras that record onto a DVD disc
- Cameras that record onto a Microdrive or flash memory
- Cameras that aren't digital

I wouldn't hesitate to recommend the lower cost Canon or Sony models, at least the models with an external microphone input or hot shoe (very important). They are excellent cameras. I should mention that Apple maintains a [list of compatible camcorders](#).