

Tips for Conducting Online Meetings

Budget and Choice of Video Meeting Platforms

[Zoom](#) is the most popular choice with online Toastmasters clubs, several of which started with another tool, then switched. Corporate clubs might also consider using Microsoft Teams, which includes a good video meeting tool. There are many other options, and your choice might be driven by whether a club member has an account they can share for club use.

Do you have money in your budget to pay for one of these services? Zoom does have free accounts that support up to 100 simultaneous users, but in the free version meetings are limited to 40 minutes. You might hold shorter meetings or structure a longer meeting as a series of < 40-minute meetings, maybe taking a 5 minute break in between segments.

The basic paid Zoom plan that eliminates the time limit costs just under \$AU 210 per year (or \$21.00 per month, which might make sense if you consider it to be a temporary expenditure).

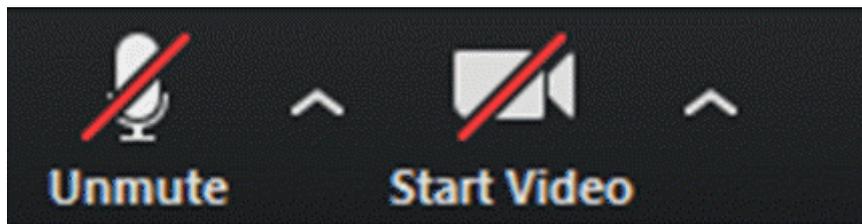
Challenges About Meeting Online

Watch out for these issues:

Audio Problems

When you have a lot of people in an online meeting and they all have their mics turned on, you run into feedback and other distortions as well as distractions like barking dogs, crying babies, and the sirens of passing ambulances.

For that reason, we typically recommend that everyone mute themselves when they are not speaking. In Zoom, the buttons to turn your mic and camera off and on are in the lower left corner.



Zoom's mute controls

The absence of sound creates its own challenges for the speaker — when you say something funny, you don't hear the laughter and may have no idea whether anyone other than you thought it was funny. (Sometimes you can see people laughing, though).

Also, once muted, meeting participants often start speaking without turning their mic back on. If they have a hardware mute/un-mute switch on their computer or headset, they may get confused about why no one can hear them and take a minute to get it straightened out.

One Zoom-specific tip I just learned recently is that when your mic is muted, you can **un-mute temporarily by holding down the space bar** on your computer. As soon as you release the key, you will be muted again. Perfect for delivering a timer's report or making a quick comment! As a meeting host, you will also have to deal with people who forget to turn off their mics before walking away from their computer and doing something noisy. Zoom provides meeting hosts and co-hosts with a "mute all" button (mute everyone but yourself) and the ability to mute participants selectively, as needed.

Do You Need a Headset?

You can use a wireless headset that plugs into the USB port of your laptop, a Bluetooth ear piece, or simply use the microphone and speaker built into your computer. You can also use cheap earbuds as a simple way of getting better sound and avoiding audio feedback.

You may have to experiment to find out what works for you. Do you get better sound with the headset? Or would you rather not enter the meeting looking like an air traffic controller?

If you go without a headset, try to find a quiet place for your participation in the meeting.

Timing

The role of Timer takes on some added complexity in an online meeting. The timer can show green/yellow/red timing signals by holding timing cards up to the screen, but tricks of lighting can make green and yellow look the same. A bigger problem is that the speaker may lose sight of the video feed from the timer. For example, when a speaker is screen sharing or showing slides, the timer's image may be bumped off screen.

At online club meetings the experienced Timers tend to use a virtual background images that are green, yellow, and red. We also offer the speaker the option of getting an audible signal at each timing milestone.

You can also "pin" the timers video thumbnail, so they don't get lost in The Gallery.

Video and Visuals

Most laptops come with a built-in camera and mic. Your smartphone probably has a great camera built in. External webcams are available for desktop computers and may give you better quality on a laptop. An external webcam that can be mounted on a tripod may be helpful if you're trying to set up a camera in a meeting room where those physically present will be interacting with remote participants.

Inadequate lighting tends to be a bigger issue than the quality of your camera when it comes to what people see on screen. You may find yourself investing in additional lights for whatever space you use to join an online meeting.

Pay attention to how your face will be framed by the camera and what other participants will see in the background.

People often angle the camera so it's looking up their nose or cutting off the top or bottom of their face. One tip for laptop users is to place a couple of thick books under your computer so that you raise it to closer to eye level.

Frequent online meeting participants may use virtual background software (a basic version of which is built into Zoom) to replace a messy office with a photograph of some more attractive or fanciful scene. There are tutorials on the Zoom site about how to do that, but if you're new at this I'd recommend trying to position yourself in front of a plain white wall, if you have one, or some other scene that's not too distracting.

Eye Contact

Maintaining eye contact with your audience is difficult because your camera is not where the images of the people you're speaking to are. Most laptops have the camera peering through a pinhole lens above the screen. That means if you try to look into the eyes of my onscreen image, you will appear to be looking a few degrees down.

There are various techniques for trying to compensate, but my simplest recommendation is to periodically try to look directly into the camera to create the illusion of eye contact for your audience. Warning: it will feel unnatural, and you probably won't be able to do it the whole time.

Group Chat and Voting

Most online meeting platforms include a text chat function, along with the video. This can be useful for back channel communications, or to share links to online resources.

At Online Presenters, we appoint a Chat Monitor as an additional meeting role so someone is watching what is going on in the chat and can alert the meeting organizer to any problems being highlighted there. The Chat Monitor gives a report at the end of the meeting to tell people what they might have missed.

Some members value a lively chat going on parallel to the meeting, while others find it distracting and think it should be discouraged when a speaker is speaking. You'll have to find your own balance.

For voting in regular meetings, we use private chat messages to the vote counter. For contests, we use an online voting tool (see below).

Mobile Access

Most online meeting platforms, including Zoom, allow you to participate in an online meeting using a mobile phone app, rather than a computer. Given a choice, I would recommend you use a computer as the better experience.

