Internet technology is now reliable enough that many professors and businesses frequently incorporate videoconferencing and other web-based software to connect dispersed individuals. Like any method of communicating, using webcams for professional interaction requires a significant amount of forethought. This guide sheet will help prepare you for this unique communication context.

Technology
A large number of videoconferencing software are now available for purchase and for freeware. Two reliable and high quality freeware programs are provided through gmail.com and skype.com. Regardless of the software you use, there are a few issues to consider:

- **Software:** Videoconferencing requires both parties to use the same software. Do you and your videoconferencing partners have the same software?

- **Hardware I:** Do you have a webcam? Many new laptops come with a webcam while others require that you purchase an external camera. Especially for professional purposes, conscientious speakers will invest in a quality camera that will produce a crisp and clear picture. Older cameras may produce a distorted video that can easily distract your listeners.

- **Hardware II:** Do you need a microphone or speakers? Most new webcams and computers will have microphones and speakers factory installed. However, proactive speakers will ensure these components are functioning properly.

- **Computer ability:** How old is your computer? Videoconferencing is a relatively new ability of the internet. Your computer may be outdated or run too slowly to accommodate the demand videoconferencing requires.

- **Preparation:** It is wise to test your computer set up with another person well in advance of your online appointment. If possible, recruit a volunteer to chat with you online and give you some feedback on the webcam set up, as well as your ability to communicate in this context. This is a good way to work with the Speaking Center. If you are preparing for an online presentation or interview, consider scheduling an online appointment in the Speaking Center.

On-screen presence
When communicating through videoconferencing technology, speakers must remember that audiences will focus on all images the camera produces. Thus, as a web-based speaker, you must consider both how you present yourself and what is visible in your background.

- **Attire:** In a 2007 article from TechRepublic, Debrah Shinder suggests wearing light solid-color clothing (e.g., a pale-blue suit). White clothing may produce a glare and red clothing may bleed. Regardless of color, you should always dress professionally, even though you are only on camera.

- **Movement:** As videoconferencing technology improves, its ability becomes increasingly expansive. However, bandwidth limitations of videoconferencing participants can still negatively affect the streaming video. To prevent audiences from viewing a choppy or distorted image you should avoid jerky and quick movements. If you must move around, be natural, but move slowly.
• **Background:** Select a background with colors that contrast with your clothing (e.g., a navy-blue suit would contrast well with a cream-colored wall, but would blend in with a dark blue colored wall). Try not to mix outdoor light with florescent light, as it may cause distortions in your projected image (see “Videoconferencing Tips for Success” at http://www.it.northwestern.edu/videoconferencing/tips.html).

**Voice**
Speaking through videoconferencing technology is made possible with many integrated components. While most of these components are out of our control, properly using the microphone can prevent many audio problems and distractions.

• **Self-tests:** Most videoconferencing software will clearly display self-test functions to ensure that your microphone is working properly. As with the other components pre-testing the microphone is critical for successful web-based communication.

• **Microphone etiquette:** After the equipment has been tested, speakers should start talking as you would in a normal face-to-face discussion (“Videoconferencing Tips for Success”). Assume that everything is working fine. An audience member will interrupt if something is wrong.

• **Microphone management:** If you must use an external microphone, keep it a consistent distance from your mouth. Turning your head from side to side while talking will cause an irregular volume for your listeners, and thus prevent your message from being heard clearly.

• **Speaking:** Speak at a normal volume. If you feel you must shout, something is wrong with the equipment and/or settings. As previously stated, these issues should be fixed during the self-tests.

**Environment**
Effective communicators will constantly assess their environment and, when possible, reduce all potential distractions. When videoconferencing, speakers must think about all the potential distractions and eliminate them. Some preventative measures include:

• Turn your cell phone off. It is rude to reference your phone while speaking with others in a business setting.

• Turn off all possible noise-making devices (e.g., silence your cell phone, TV, email notification, the microwave, the dryer, etc.).

• Remove pets, children, unnecessary coworkers, etc. from the room.

• Post a sign on the outside of your door stating, “Important meeting in progress. Please do not knock or ring doorbell. The meeting will finish at ______.”

Although online communication may seem to come with its own set of rules, it’s important to remember that good oral communication rules still apply to this setting. As you gain more experience with this setting, you will find that you feel more comfortable.