

Who's Zoomin' Who?

By Evan Glover



Within a matter of weeks, much of the way we live our lives has been upended. And so it is with the way we work at Harvard. Gone are regular routines we have had for years: looking over the selection of coffee choices before settling on the same Flavia coffee packet we always get from the machine or checking out the kitchen to see if there is any leftover food from a meeting that just let out. Some of the routines we are happy to dispense with for now: the often-grueling commutes to work or running between meetings on the HMS campus (or, even worse, between Longwood and Cambridge). Others are deeply missed: having a quick chat with Silva or catching up face to face with a co-worker. But the new normal means one central work preoccupation: how to Zoom. Indeed, instead of waking up and deciding what to wear, we now wake up and think about where and how to Zoom into a meeting.

With this has brought new fears and concerns we haven't previously thought of and were not fully prepared for. Participating in Zoom video meetings is like hosting a dinner party at your house without notice or preparation. Is your home presentable? What will others think when they get a glimpse into your home office or workspace? Besides tidying up, should you order some books by Dostoevsky and Joyce to replace the Dan Brown that lines the bookshelves of your home now visible onscreen? Luckily, Zoom offers you the opportunity to sidestep these issues by imposing faux backgrounds and an opportunity to present an aspirational life to your colleagues without doing the hard work of a home makeover.

Here are some of my early choices that might make Zooming at home less stressful or more interesting. The question of whether meetings can still begin on "Harvard Time"—i.e. 7 minutes late traditionally attributed to the time it takes to walk from one end to the campus to the other—I will leave for others to decide.

The Talking Head

Nothing makes you feel more like a talking head on CNN than participating in a Zoom conference. So, you might as well provide your expertise on video with a backdrop that highlights and promotes our department—one of the few, and certainly the best, academic departments located in a medical school specializing in health policy. Thus, below has been my go-to. Do I normally wear a tie when at home? Prove me wrong!



The Gordon Hall

Nothing says Harvard prestige more than using an iconic HMS backdrop, perhaps the Waterhouse room in Gordon Hall or a picture of the Quad. It is a nice reminder of what a wonderful environment HMS is to work in, and particularly great to showcase if you have Yale colleagues on the call to make jealous.



The Aspirational Home

Perhaps you don't live in something out of Architectural Digest or maybe the room you are using to videoconference is so desolate as to present as something too close to a hostage video. Why not live in the home of your dreams if only for a call?

Maybe now is your chance to be in a stately Beacon Hill townhouse.



Or perhaps you have always wanted to remote in from a home by Frank Lloyd Wright or Philip Johnson.



Pop Culture

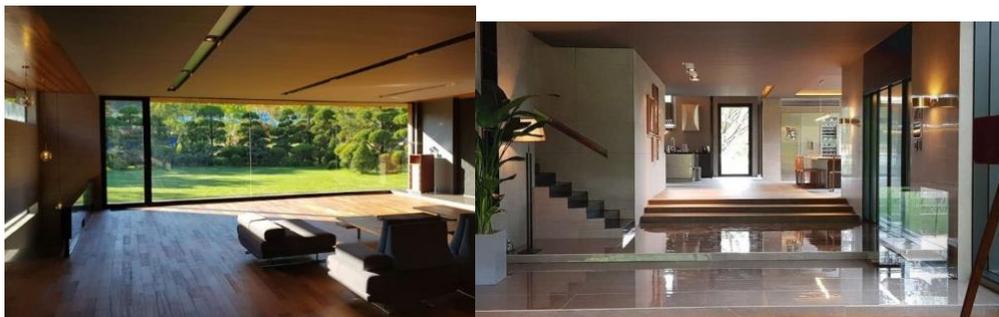
Maybe you get your inspiration from movies and TV. You can take the meeting from the same balcony with Monterey, CA ocean views as the characters from HBO's *Big Little Lies*.



When great isn't enough and you feel like a spectacular home still could be renovated into something nicer, look no further than a Nancy Meyers film to get your inspiration (plenty of kitchens to choose from!).



If you are feeling cheeky, you can reference a recent movie such as the home from *Parasite*. You can leave the mystery as to what's in the basement to the other participants' imaginations.



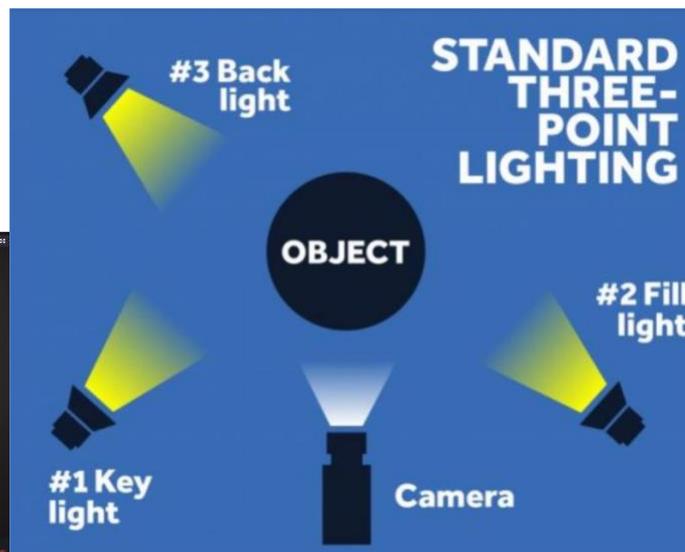
The House Hunters International

If you have ever seen *House Hunters International*, you are familiar with the TV show's trope of folks who somehow are easily able to uproot their lives and families from living in a large Houston home to work remotely from a tiny apartment in France all to experience the joys of going to the bakery daily. Though, unfortunately, we cannot travel right now, we also don't have to make the sacrifice between space and living in a small Parisian apartment or Swedish villa, at least on Zoom.



Lighting is Everything!

Now that you have settled on a backdrop, don't forget what my grandmother said was the key to life: good lighting. Indeed, the only renovation she made to her home was putting dimmers on all the light switches. Paying attention to lighting not only makes you look better but avoids the all too common shadow problem in Zoom calls.



The Celebrity Secret is Now Yours!

No one looks as perfect as a celebrity on a magazine or in an Instagram post. Is it all good genes? No, it's airbrushing! With Zoom, you can now do the same. Under video settings, don't forget to enable "touch up my appearance." Maybe you're born with it, maybe it's Zoom's touch-up technology!

Camera: 

16:9 (Widescreen) Original Ratio

My Video: Enable HD

Mirror my video

Touch up my appearance

Don't Overthink It

Of course, the choices laid out here for Zooming might be too overwhelming or distracting. And yes, dear reader, this article might make apparent that I have already been cooped up too long. Either way, the important thing is to focus on work, family, and friends—not pretense—during this difficult time. Perhaps the best we can do is comb our hair a little before we jump into a video meeting. Any setup is likely fine, [except perhaps this one](#). We are all in the same boat and keeping up appearances isn't the most important thing right now. After all, I was wearing sweatpants with that shirt and tie.