Assignment: Write an essay that would instruct a reader on how to do something you have done, and done well. In the past I have had students write excellent papers on how to buy a used car and avoid buying a lemon (something the author learned the hard way), how to make an excellent pizza, how to lay down a bunt, how to bet on professional football without losing your shirt. Students have used this assignment to address letters to their old high school instructing students on how to choose a college or university, or, having arrived at a university, how to adjust to the rigors of college life. Be clear and comprehensive in your instructions, and be sure to draw upon your own experiences as you write.

Since I was a little kid, I've always loved television. I would sit around and fantasize about how great it would be to be able to make television on my own. With the development of MTV my focus changed from t.v. shows to music videos. They combine my two favorite forms of entertainment: television and music. So obviously, when I had the opportunity to take a filmmaking class in high school, I jumped at the chance to fulfill, at least on a minor scale, my lifelong dream of making my own music video. It is the knowledge that I gained in that experience that I'm writing about today. It is my sincere hope that by using my first experience as a filmmaker as a frame of reference for the process, I will be able to help you create your own music video.

The first step in any video project is to develop an idea. In a music video project, that idea would be in the form of a song to do. I chose a song entitled "Youth Gone Wild" by the heavy metal band Skid Row. Once I had chosen a song, the next step was to decide what style of video would best accompany the music. Possible styles include those videos that tell a story outright, make a statement of a more symbolic and abstract nature, or show a live performance of the song thus showcasing the performing talents of the artist(s) who recorded the song. "Youth Gone Wild" lent itself very well to the story format as images of scenes would pop into my head whenever I heard the song. Whatever you choose, make sure you feel comfortable with the decision and that you have a pretty good idea of how the video will progress though the song. When you have a tentative outline you're ready to go on to the next phase: the storyboard.

Now that you are prepared with a general idea of what the video concept will be, it's time to put some of these creative ideas down on paper in the form of a storyboard. A storyboard is a collection of scenes, sketched by hand, with the lyrics or corresponding part of the song written underneath it. You can make your storyboard as general as you like or you can draft every possible shot; the choice is yours. I chose to document every shot from at least three possible angles. This may seem like a lot of work, but remember, this isn't a drawing project. You can use stick figures and basic shapes as much as you want, so long as you have enough down on paper so that you won't be stuck with the problem of getting part of the way through the video and not knowing what to do next.
Since I jotted down everything, I didn't have that problem, but that doesn't mean that making only a general storyboard wouldn't do just as well for you. It all depends on how much flexibility you want in the story throughout the filming, because you certainly don't have to follow your storyboard exactly. I should have left a little bit more flexibility in my storyboard. My video should have been shot entirely at night but I had to change that when I realized that I couldn't have access to certain areas of my school at night that were essential for filming. Those changes would have been a lot easier had I left that possibility open to begin with. However, as a general rule, the filming tends to run a bit smoother when you know what you next sequence of shots will be.

When all of the pre-production work is complete, it's time to start filming; but you can't just go out with a camera and film your scenes. You have to imagine yourself as the audience. Who are you? What do you want to see? Which way will this scene look the best on tape? Ask yourself all these questions. Without a sense of who the audience is a director is as good as finished.

To use my video of "Youth Gone Wild" as an example, obviously my audience did not include most parents, grandparents, teachers, nor anyone else with authority over kids. My audience consisted of mainly teen-agers who wanted to shrug off authority and be rebellious. So, with this in mind, I catered to this need by directing a story about three rambunctious teens who skip detention and vandalize the school. As you can see, this format is not going to appeal to certain individuals, but I have given my particular audience what they want. Not everyone likes a love story and Rambo isn't appreciated by all. The bottom line is not to try to please everyone because you will most surely fail.

Another tip in filming is not to attempt to "overstep" your limits as an amateur filmmaker. Unless you are extremely rich and well connected in Hollywood, you're not going to have access to a lot of things that would make your video better. We would all like to blow cars up, but without several million dollars worth of professional equipment and personnel, you can't do it. It will only look cheap and cheesy if you try to do elaborate special effects that require more than you have. It was for these reasons that I avoided any real destruction and stuck with little examples of vandalism like throwing books and disrupting classes. Sure, it would have been really cool if I could have had my characters blow up the whole school, but that idea wasn't practical so I didn't even try it.

Instead of relying on fancy gimmicks to make your video good, try to concentrate on getting good sound shots without any mistakes. There is nothing that brings down the quality of a video more than the appearance of a "hanging" limb or the reflection of the camera on something in your shot. Trust me, these things make your video look sloppy and not very professional. I made both of these mistakes in shooting my video, and it was very difficult, not to mention time consuming, to go back and shoot the shots over again--all because I hadn't taken the time to set things up properly to begin with. When shooting something with a reflective or semi-reflective surface, try filming from a different angle such as from above or below the subject. Also, as an extra precaution, if it is at all possible, seal off each shooting site. By that I mean make sure that no one
or nothing is going to appear in the shooting zone at the last minute while the camera is rolling. This will prevent anything from showing up on camera that shouldn't be there. I had to do a great deal of my filming during school hours and I can't remember how many times I had to film a shot over and over because someone or something would always get in the line of filming that shouldn't have been there. Following these tips on how to film your scenes will make your finished product look much better.

I've always been a dedicated person when it comes to completing projects and I wasn't in any hurry to get my video done, but there is a problem that I've noticed with other filmmakers that deserves mention. One thing that tends to happen when amateur filmmakers set out on a project is that they don't stop and think about just how much work is involved with making a good video. I have seen a lot of filmmakers lose interest when they discover how much work it is and then the video never gets finished. Don't underestimate the amount of time and effort that you will have to put into your video because if you do the enthusiasm will eventually fizzle out and die. Don't expect to finish your video in a week because that won't happen. If you are even ready to start filming in a week you've gotten off to a great start! In the case of my Skid Row video, that project took a full year to complete. However, this length of time is unusually long and was due to special circumstances. I wanted to film part of my video at the city juvenile detention center. This is a government-run institution and has the same regulations that a normal jail has. I had to have signatures from two city councilmen, the head of the facility, and the local justice of the juvenile court before I could even walk in the place. But the effect I got was well worth the wait. I was trying to show how terrible it would be to have to go to such a place because one misbehaved, like the characters in my video were doing when they vandalized the school. The place was an absolute pit and I was frightened just being there even though I didn't have to stay! This transferred onto the tape because you can just see how terrible a place it must be. Such minor sacrifices like the red tape I had to put up with to obtain permission to shoot inside the facility can make the difference between your video being good or it being great. (Incidentally, my filming was the first time this particular detention facility had ever been filmed from the inside!)

One last factor that you should consider when filming your video is the budget. Things such as video tapes and gas to get to shooting locations all cost money, not to mention any other special props or such materials you might need. All of my funding came from the school because I was doing this particular video for my filmmaking class, but if you are doing the project on your own you should certainly consider the cost of things when you draw up the plan of how you're going to film your video.

Once your filming is complete, the final stage of production can begin. You have all your shots, so now it's time to put them all together in the editing process. The editing process is my favorite part of filmmaking because I can see the finished product unfold bit by bit each day. However, others find this part quite tedious and boring, as it is long hours spent staring at a little T.V. screen pushing buttons and turning dials. It's all a matter of personal preference, I suppose. It is during this final stage that your true creativity comes out as you decide which of your shots to use,
for how long, and in what order. This is what gives your video its real character. You need to decide whether you will use long clips or if your video will be fast paced. My song, "Youth Gone Wild," is very fast paced so I had quick clips with as much going on as possible. Whatever choice you make, again, it all depends on who your audience is and what looks best on film. Be very careful during the editing stage that you take your time and do it right. I have seen many potentially good videos destroyed because the person editing didn't take the time to make everything just right. Believe me, if a video isn't edited well it isn't worth much. After all, who would want to watch something where the music and the video don't match. Make each cut in time with its corresponding beat in the song and you will be fine.

Filmmaking is a beautiful art, one that can combine visual as well as audio techniques to communicate with an audience. The moment when that last edit is made is one of the best feelings a filmmaker can have. I can still remember sitting in that old leather swivel chair with the cigarette burn in it, leaning back, reflecting on all the hard work and dedication it took to finish the job. Hopefully, if all goes well you will have a finished product that you can be proud of and show off to your family and friends. Perhaps you'll even get a little money back like I did. I entered my video in a contest sponsored by the local cable access station and I won the first prize of $100! Who knows--you might be doing videos for MTV someday. But before you get your hopes up there is one more tip I have to give you before you start filming and this is very important: Make sure you take the lens cap off first! Don't laugh. I shot three hours worth of blackness the first time I went out to film!