Gear + Tech Setup Guide (No-Cost to Affordable Options)

This guide helps you capture interviews and stories that look and sound clear, cinematic, and natural — even if all you have is your phone.

1. Phone/Camera Settings

Best practice from pros: Always start with the highest quality settings your device allows. You can't fix bad footage later.

- Resolution:
  - iPhone/Android: Set to 4K if available (1080p if storage is tight).
- Frame Rate:
  - Choose 24 fps for a "cinematic" look (what movies are shot in).
  - If you want super smooth motion (less "film-like"), use 30 fps.
- Orientation:
  - Always shoot horizontal (landscape) for archival and sharing.
- Stability:
  - Turn on stabilization if available.
- Focus/Exposure Lock:
  - Tap and hold on your subject's face until you see "AE/AF LOCK" — this stops the camera from constantly adjusting mid-shot.

2. Camera Placement

Golden Rule: Camera at eye-level, about 2–4 feet away.

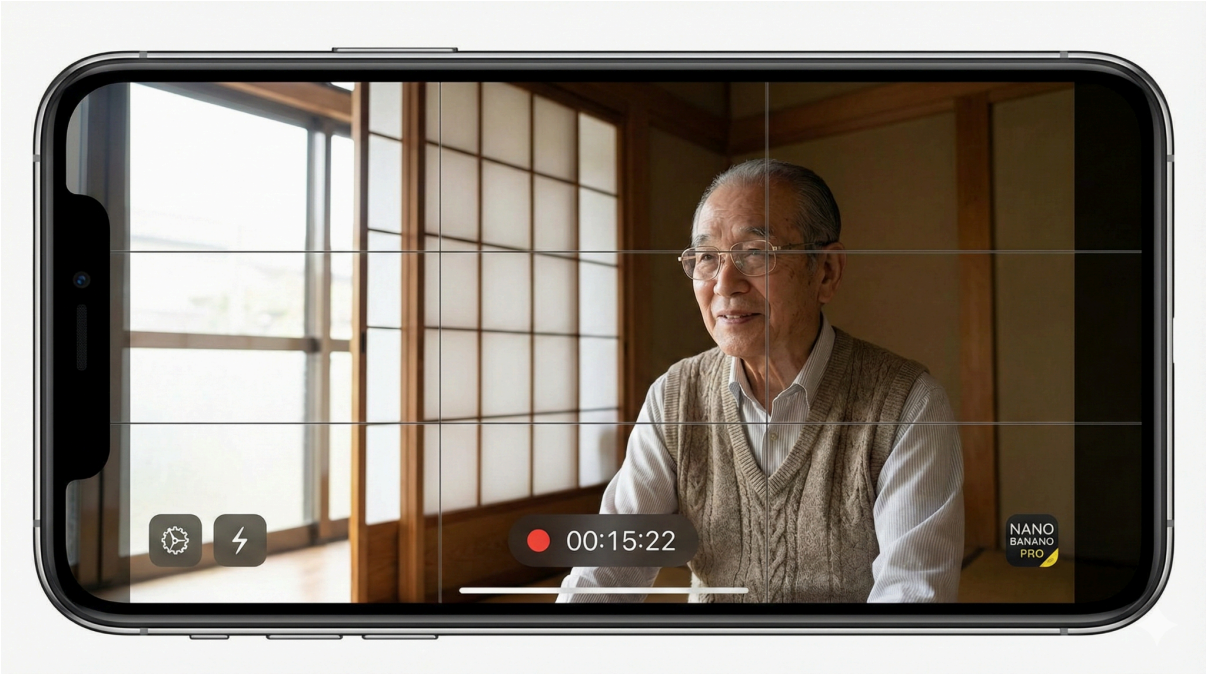
- Framing:
  - Use the "rule of thirds": place eyes about one-third from the top of the frame.
  - Leave a little space above the head ("headroom"), but not too much.

- Angle:
  - Slightly off to one side of the interviewer (not staring straight into camera unless intentional).

- Stability:
  - No-Cost: Stack books, use a shelf, lean the phone against a mug.
  - Low-Cost: Small tripod with phone clamp ($15–$30).
  - Higher-Cost: Tripod with fluid head for DSLR.

Pro Tip:

Keep the background simple, uncluttered, and meaningful (family photos, books, cultural items).



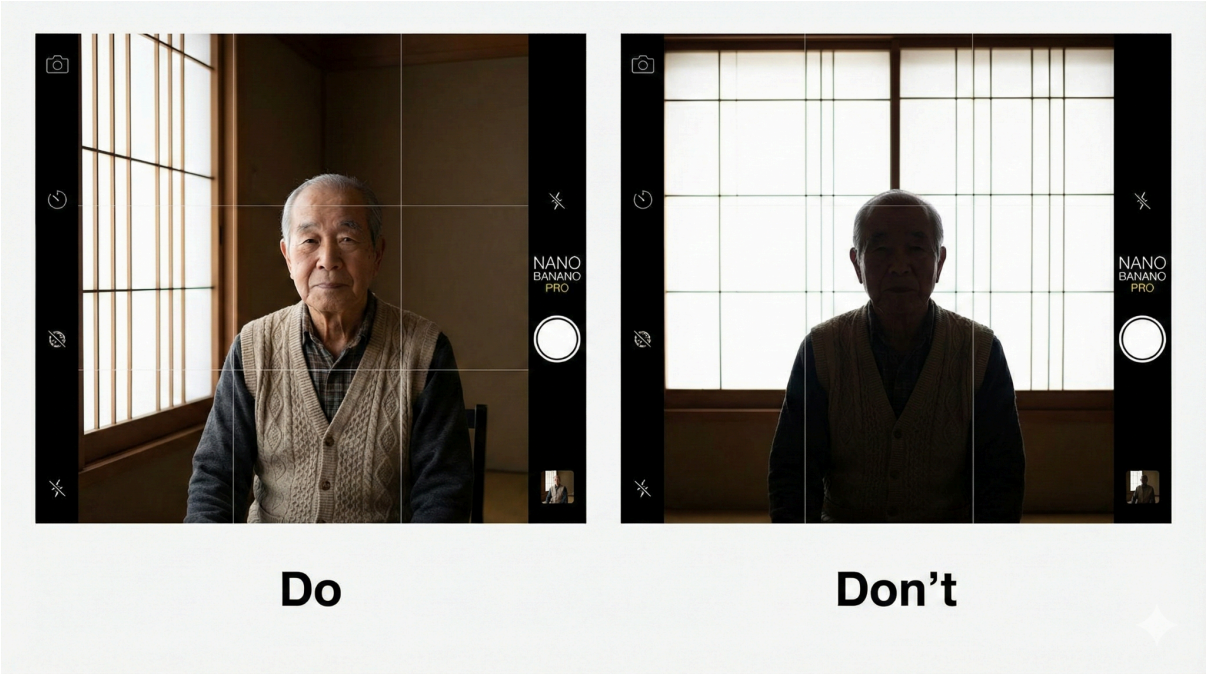
3. Lighting

Golden Rule: Light the face, not the background. Natural light > cheap gear > expensive gear.

- No-Cost (just your phone):
    - Place storyteller near a **window** with light on their face (not behind them).
    - Use sheer curtains or a white sheet to soften harsh sunlight.
- Low-Cost:
    - Ring light ($20–$40) placed just above eye level.
    - Clip-on LED light for phone ($15–$30).
- Higher-Cost:
    - Softbox lighting kit ($70–$150).
    - LED panel with dimmer for fine-tuning.

Pro Tip:

Avoid overhead lights (they cause dark shadows under eyes). Place main light about **45° to the side** of the storyteller.



4. Sound

Golden Rule: Sound is MORE important than video. Bad sound = unwatchable.

- No-Cost:
    - Move closer. Best sound comes from 3–4 feet max away.
    - Use a quiet room (turn off fridge, A/C, phones).
- Low-Cost:
    - Clip-on lav mic that plugs into phone ($20–$40).
    - Position mic about 6–8 inches below chin, hidden under collar if possible.
- Higher-Cost:
    - Wireless lav mic kit ($150–$300).
    - External recorder (Zoom H1n, ~$100) + lav mic.

Pro Tip:

Do a 10-second test recording and play it back with headphones before starting.

5. Troubleshooting

- Shaky footage? Use a tripod or prop the phone on stable surface.
- Background too busy? Shift subject or move camera closer.
- Harsh shadows? Use a sheet, white wall, or even a lampshade as a diffuser.
- Echoey sound? Add soft items (pillows, rugs, curtains).
- Mic not working? Check phone's mic input settings — some adapters (esp. iPhone Lightning dongles) need the right TRRS plug.

6. Quick Setup Recipes

No-Cost Setup

- iPhone/Android, locked focus/exposure.
- Phone propped up at eye level, ~3 feet away.
- Subject near a window with light on their face.
- Quiet room, no extra mic.

Low-Cost Setup

- iPhone/Android on small tripod.
- Clip-on lav mic into phone.
- Ring light at 45° angle.

Higher-Cost Setup

- DSLR or mirrorless on tripod.
- Wireless lav mic or external recorder.
- Softbox lighting for key light + LED panel for fill.

7. Cinematic Interview Tips (from the pros)

- Connection first: Chat before hitting record to relax them.
- Keep rolling: Don't stop after each question. Often the best gems come after a pause.
- Framing for story: Wide enough to capture body language, close enough for intimacy.
- Listen deeply: Don't interrupt. Nod, smile, and use short prompts ("uh-huh," "tell me more").
- Ask again, differently: If answer was short, repeat the question in another way.