



Getting Ready to Zoom?



Welcome to the new normal. In-person meetings and conferences? Gone. Not coming back this year. Most of the training events I attended in-person in previous years are gone. Good riddance. The popular destinations are near airports, for the convenience of the presenters, and even before Covid-19, I was saying, “No, I’m not going to a hotel at Dulles again. It’s just not worth the time on that big parking lot, what’s it called? 495?”

Bonus: Regional conferences are going away. We now have virtual access to national conferences, with top speakers, and the ability to wander off to the kitchen if they start moving from useful to sales pitches.

And small business meetings have been replaced by online Zoom conferences, because it works easily. For those, we can be seen and heard, so it’s best to get ready for those in advance. You need to look your best, and your computer can’t be beeping and blipping at you during a meeting. Or worse, it has decided to install updates right now. Here’s how to get ready to Zoom. And also how to make your computer less annoying.

Reminder: Zoom accounts have a free level, which allows for one-to-one meetings. It's worth signing up to see what it can do, and learn the settings. The paid accounts are needed for setting up group meetings.

Do you need a camera?

If you have a notebook or laptop PC, most have webcams. Test them in advance; some are very good, and some are poor, or inaudible. If you want to use the automatic backgrounds feature, like a green-screen weather map, test it; it won't work on a low-resolution camera, which is what you will find on a laptop from before 2015. If you need a better camera than your laptop has, you can add an external webcam on a laptop, and Zoom will ask which camera to use.

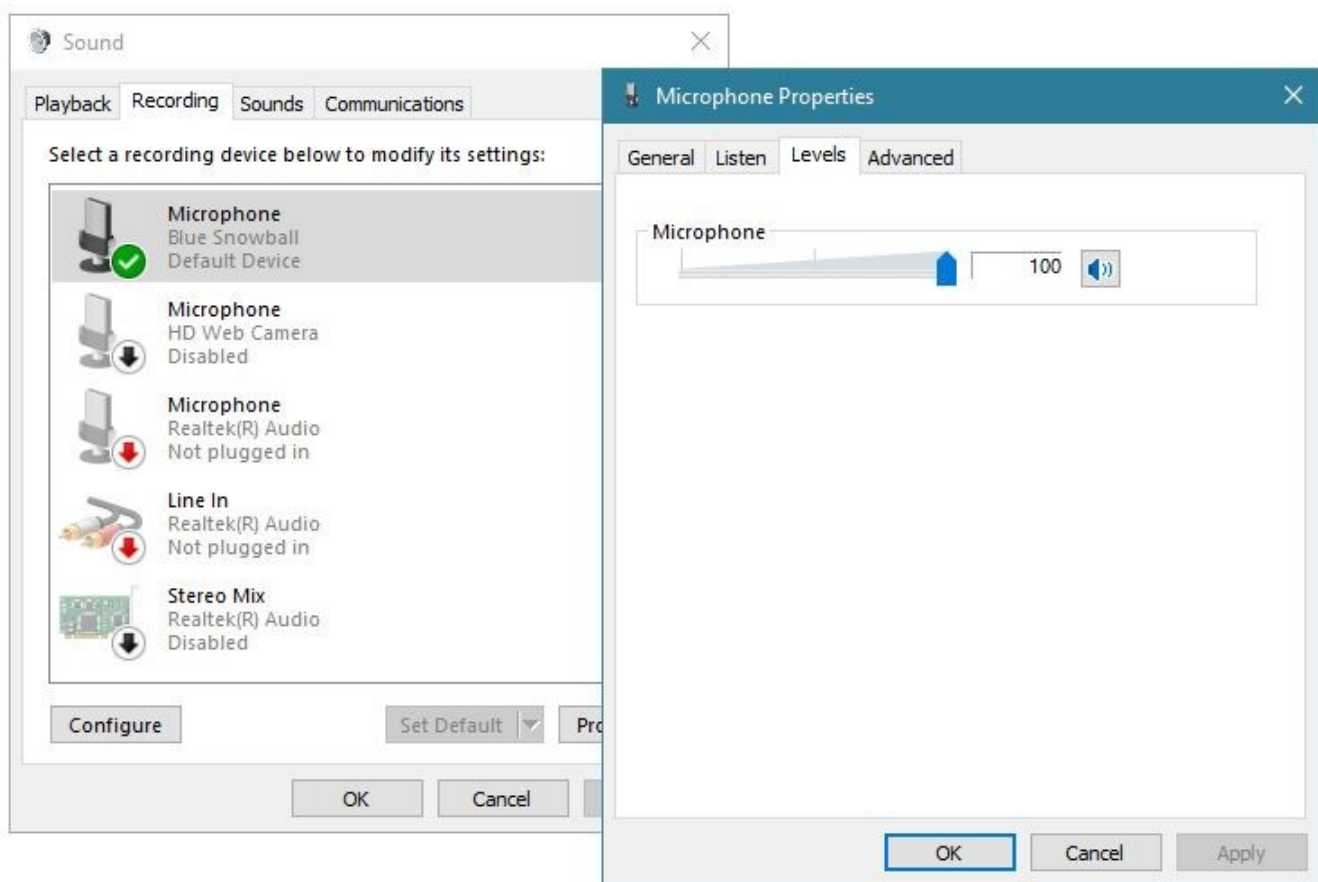
In normal times, I would recommend a basic webcam by Logitech. Right now, you probably can't buy one at the \$24 price from last year, and I'm not sending anyone to the scalpers selling them on eBay for \$80. There are a few no-name webcams on Amazon with good reviews and shipped by Amazon, and shipped/refunded by Amazon if they don't actually work. Look for these features: 1080p HD resolution, microphone, and 'plug and play USB.' I can recommend a specific model if needed, but because that model changes week-to-week, call me when you need a webcam.

Test Your Camera in Advance

Click on Start, type 'camera' and click on the Camera app in the search results. Click the movie icon on the right to record a test video, and talk while it's recording. Click again to end the recording. The test will show up at the bottom-right corner of the app, and you can click on it there to play it back. Videos from the Camera app are stored in the Pictures\Camera Roll folder. That's the same as:

C:\Users\YOUR-USERNAME\Pictures\Camera Roll

If the sound volume is too low, try setting it higher: Go to Start, Control Panel, Hardware and Sound, and then click the 'Recording' tab. Click on the default device with the green checkmark, and then on Properties. In the Microphone properties box, go to the 'Levels' tab, and set the volume up to 100.



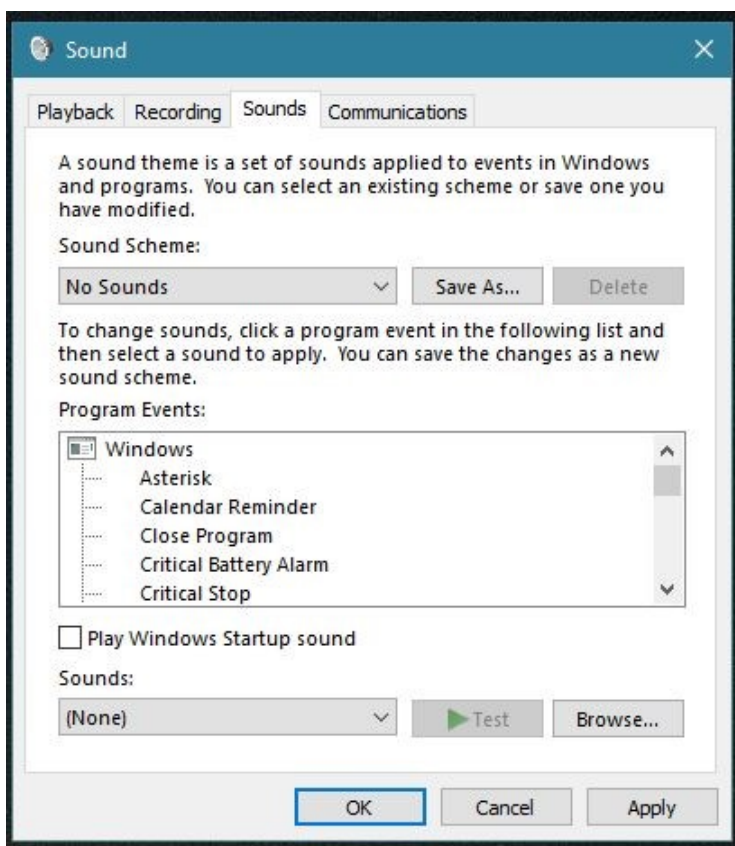
You can also test your connection, and pre-install the Zoom software in your browser. Go to their test page, and click on 'Join', and follow the prompts to install the app, and test your sound and microphone. <https://zoom.us/test>

Look at the lighting in your test. Can you be seen clearly? On older webcams, you will need more lights turned on. Lights that are farther away work better, lighting you without throwing your cluttered office into the dark. And tidy up before Zooming, or choose a room that will look good behind you. Bookcases and diplomas seem to be the default backgrounds now.

Soundproof your Windows

Windows has sound themes. Because it's not sure if it's an operating system or a cell phone, Windows calls them sound schemes and sound themes, depends where you look. There's one scheme called 'No Sounds' which is basically silent, but it will still play sounds from web pages and videos. Just the beeps, blips, and cascading arpeggios are gone. Highly recommended for business offices, and for anyone on speaker phones or video calls.

Switch to the 'No Sounds' sound scheme: From Start, click settings (the gear), and in the app, type 'theme' and click on 'Themes and Related Settings', then Sounds. In the top pull-down list 'Sound Scheme:' choose 'No Sounds', and click OK.



The bottom-right slide-in notifications won't be noticed in the video conference, unless they're set to play a sound or you're sharing your screen. If you have Outlook running, the default option is to show each new email as it arrives as a notification, and play a sound effect. Combining that with screen sharing will lead to publishing private message subjects. You can turn that off in Outlook settings (in the mail section, in the settings dealing with mail arrivals).

Or, better, you can turn off all the distractions, er, I mean notifications. Again, go to Settings, search for 'Notifications & actions settings.' First, uncheck all five options. Then, slide 'Get notifications from apps and other senders' to Off.

Windows Updates

Finally, run Windows Updates the day before your meeting. Starting Windows at the last moment before a conference just tempts Windows to say 'Installing Updates...', or it will slow down because it's getting updates ready in the background. Pre-empt all that by bringing everything up to date early.

Updates are bunched up on the second Tuesday of each month (Windows, Adobe, and some other vendors), and the fourth Tuesday of each month (Microsoft Office). Some urgent security updates will just show up whenever they're ready. To check for updates at any time, close all programs, and then, from Start, type 'Update' and 'Check for Updates' should appear in the search results. Follow the directions on-screen. Reboot the computer.

Ready?

Sign in to meetings at least 5 minutes early, just in case you have to update the Zoom plugin, or add

some other plugin. They're usually from Cisco, LogMeIn, Microsoft Teams, or RingCentral Meetings; there are dozens of meeting providers now, and they each provide their own browser plugin, so allow a little time to get set up for any meeting.

Zoom tries to label your video with your computer name, so set your name in the Zoom settings. Click your name in the Participants list, and then the "More" button, and enter your name.

And finally, you probably didn't successfully make your office a quiet place, so mute your connection to your conference when you're not speaking; there will be a clickable mute/unmute option, below the video windows in Zoom. (In the dogs picture above, it's at the bottom-left.)



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