Recorded Digital Exams
A Guide

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RECORDED
DIGITAL
EXAMS
NOW ROLLIN'!

YOUR PERSONALISED GUIDE TO TAKING RSL GRADED EXAMS VIA VIDEO SUBMISSION

Video has become a much easier tool to access over the past few years and even modest smart phones, tablets and cameras are capable of producing a good image and sound if you take a little bit of time to understand the hardware and follow a few simple guidelines.

RSL Awards is excited about the possibilities that Recorded Digital Exams present, but we do still need to make sure that the exams adhere to a reasonable set of principles, to ensure we can still provide the excellent level of fairness and consistency that you would expect from an RSL exam. Candidates will be marked by an official examiner in exactly the same way that they would be in a face to face exam.

Types of Exam

RSL Awards can accept and mark two types of graded music exams via video submission:

- Performance Certificates
- Graded Certificates

Performance Certificates – It is important for candidates to remember a few things to ensure their exam does not break any rules:

- The recording needs to be continuous with no editing permitted, including setting up, tone and equipment adjustments, re-tuning, and any similar activity, and all dialogue either to the camera or with the other person present
- If you make a mistake in a piece you can restart as long as you are not more than 1/3 of the way through. You can restart up to two pieces in your Performance Certificate. **This restart must be instigated by the candidate and not another person.**

Candidates can choose play all five pieces from the repertoire from the Rockschool / RSL Classical Graded Book, or choose to record up to three free choice pieces from the following sources:

- Their own composition
- Songs in the public domain, including hits from the charts. For example, a song by their favourite band or artist
- Pieces from other exam boards
- Pieces from our *Vocal wider repertoire pieces*

For more details visit our dedicated Free Choice Pieces page: *https://www.rslawards.com/free-choice-pieces/*

Graded Certificate - Graded Certificates require the candidate to play **three pieces** (including up to two free choice pieces) and all of the **technical exercises** (omitting the Sight Reading / Improvisation, Ear tests and General Musicianship Questions).

Please refer to our Technical Exercise Guidance downloads and the information under the 'exam checklist' tab for a comprehensive list of requirements.

Please note: in many cases the technical exercises download contains further permutations of exercises than the notated examples that are published in the appropriate grade book. In these instances, candidates should use the grade book as a reference for how these additional permutations should be played.

Technical exercises must be presented as required by the relevant specification and as shown in the relevant Grade Book, including range, octave, patterning, tempo, fingering (where stipulated), use of click, and order.

It is important for candidates to remember a few things to ensure their exam does not break any rules:

- The recording needs to be continuous with no editing permitted, including setting up, tone and equipment adjustments, re-tuning, and any similar activity, and all dialogue either to the camera or with the other person present

- If you make a mistake in a piece you can restart as long as you are not more than 1/3 of the way through. You can restart up to one piece and two technical exercises in your Graded Certificate. **The restart must be instigated by the candidate and not another person.**

Just like with other Graded Exams, candidates can choose to play all three repertoire pieces from the Rockschool / RSL Classical Graded Book, or choose to record up to two free choice pieces from the following sources:

- Their own composition
- Songs in the public domain, including hits from the charts. For example, a song by their favourite band or artist
- Pieces from other accredited exam boards
- Pieces from our *Vocal wider repertoire pieces*

For more details visit our dedicated Free Choice Pieces page: *https://www.rslawards.com/free-choice-pieces/*

Procedure Guide for Recorded Digital Exams

For RSL Recorded Digital Exams to be valid, there are a number of rules you must adhere to:

1. The exam needs to captured as a single, continuous shot in real time - you must not stop or pause the camera in between pieces.

2. You must not use video editing software to cut out takes or reduce the time between pieces - the recording should represent an exam taken in person as closely as possible, so do not worry about taking a little time setting up between pieces.

3. Your face must be visible in the video, so we can identify the person taking the exam - please refer to the framing guide for further details.

4. Candidates should introduce themselves by their full name, the exam grade and discipline they are taking, as well as introducing each piece.

5. For Grades 6-8 candidates should clearly display for at least ten seconds valid photographic identification (such as Passport, Driving Licence, Student Union Card, ID Card) at the start of the video recording *in line with our policy.*

6. Candidates must make clear on the video that they are using the appropriate RSL resource: physical copy of the grade book, digital equivalent, or proof of subscription to the RSL Learning Platform.

7. Another person is permitted to be present in the room in order to operate the camera. However, the other person is not permitted to interact with the candidate or intervene in the exam, with the following exceptions:

   1. to introduce the candidate
   2. to introduce each piece and/or the technical exercises section and/or each technical exercise (Graded Certificate only).

8. Drummers supplying Recorded Digital Exams recorded by mobile phone or camera where it has not been possible to create a successful balance between drums and backing track only need to supply video of their drum performance while listening to the backing track on headphones or in-ear monitoring – but as well as introducing each piece should audibly mark the final bar of the count-in before the performance begins, by clicking their sticks together. This will allow the examiner to sync the video to the backing track for assessment. Failure to indicate the count-in could make the synchronisation between video and audio impossible and may affect the marks awarded or result in the exam being deemed inadmissible for assessment. Please also note that where there is evidence from the video that the candidate is not listening to a backing track while performing, this may affect the marks awarded, as performing to a backing track (where one is provided) is a requirement of the exam.

9. The use of a microphone is optional for vocals candidates **at all grades** (including Grades 6-8). Regardless of whether or not a microphone is used, candidates should ensure they are able to evidence relevant and appropriate dynamic expression, projection, tonal contrast and balance, as appropriate to the grade.

10. For the Graded Certificate, please refer to our Technical Exercise Guidance downloads under the 'video exam checklist' tab *on our website* for a comprehensive list of requirements. Please note: in many cases the technical exercises download contains further exercises than those that are published in the appropriate grade book. Technical exercises should be presented in the order shown in the Grade Book. Technical exercises should be presented as shown in the relevant Grade Book, including range, octave, patterning, tempo, fingering (where stipulated), and order.

11. Check the recording of your exam carefully before submission, making sure that each piece is introduced to camera, the picture and sound are of a reasonable quality and that the full exam has been captured.

How to apply for an exam

To register for an exam, candidates (or their parents or their teacher) purchase an exam on our shop and then complete the entry details on their RSL secure account. Please note that Recorded Digital Exams are not bound by exam periods, but the recording needs to be submitted within 3 months.

After uploading the recording, the candidate can relax and we will send a notification when the result is available.

We will then produce the official qualification certificate which confirms the award of the qualification. A minimum of 'Pass' is required to receive the certificate.

To summarise, candidates/parents/teachers:

- **Read up on all of the information about Recorded Digital Exams**
- **Purchase your exam**
- **Set up the recording**
- **Record the exam performance**
- **Upload the recording**
- **Await results. We aim to send these by no later than 4 weeks after submission.**

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Recorded Digital Exam Checklist

Performance Certificate (Debut to 8)
- Record and upload 5 pieces (up to 3 free choice pieces)
- One take, unedited performance
- No more than 2 restarts
- Only the performer in the room and someone to film the recording
- Upload the sheet music (and backing tracks if necessary) for any free choice pieces

Graded Certificate (Debut to 8)
- Record and upload 3 pieces (up to 2 free choice pieces) and ALL the technical exercises outlined in the technical guidance for your instrument (please ensure you read the technical guidance carefully before submission)
- No more than 1 restart (pieces) or 2 restarts (technical exercises)
- One take, unedited performance
- Only the performer in the room and someone to film the recording
- Upload the sheet music (and backing tracks if necessary) for any free choice pieces

Understanding Digital Video

We understand that it can get very confusing just trying to understand all of the words and codes used by companies to try and sell us their latest gadgets. You are likely to have come across terms like 720P, 1080HD or 4k - but may not know what any of the numbers or letter stand for. This part of the guide should help you navigate through the jargon and make the process easier.

With this in mind, please read the guidance below in full to help you have the best chance of submitting a video that we can accept for submission and allow you complete your RSL exam successfully.

What frame size should I set my equipment to use?

As a very rough rule, the larger the number stated, the more detail is captured within each video frame you record - but there is a downside. More detail often means bigger digital files - which require more storage and take longer to upload to the internet.

4k video can, and often does, look fantastic - but the file sizes are big and can cause some compatibility issues too. At the other end of the spectrum, if the frame size is too small, the images can look blurry or pixelated when you try and view them on computer monitors or tablets, so it is best to go for a happy medium - striking a balance between detail and file size.

Full HD (often referred to by the names 1080i or 1080P) is a very good happy medium. However, 720HD video can still look very good (720i or 720P) and will produce noticeable smaller file sizes. As a result, RSL is asking for a minimum of 720HD videos and currently setting a maximum of 1080HD, to ensure your picture quality is good whilst keeping the file sizes manageable. Please note that the current file size limit is 2GB.

### What does the 'i' and/or 'P' after the numbers mean?

The 'i' stands for 'interlaced', meaning that the video file captured refreshes every other line of pixels every frame, so the video file actually contains half the amount of data. It refreshes very quickly, so you can't see the interlacing in a perfectly set up system. However, most mobile phones and cameras now only give you the option to record in a progressive format - meaning every line is captured. It's probably best to avoid interlaced formats if you can. If your settings don't mention it and your equipment is relatively modern, it's more than likely to be a progressive video format.

But what do those numbers actually mean?

Look at the chart below to see how each frame size relates to each other. This should also explain why 4k is so detailed, but why the file sizes are so big:

What frame rate should I use?

This figure refers to how many frames your camera captures every second. A camera that captures 30 frames per second (30fps) is essentially capturing 30 images which, when played at the correct speed, gives a good impression of natural movement.

480p (DVD)

720p (HD Ready)

1080p (Full HD)

4Kp (UHD)
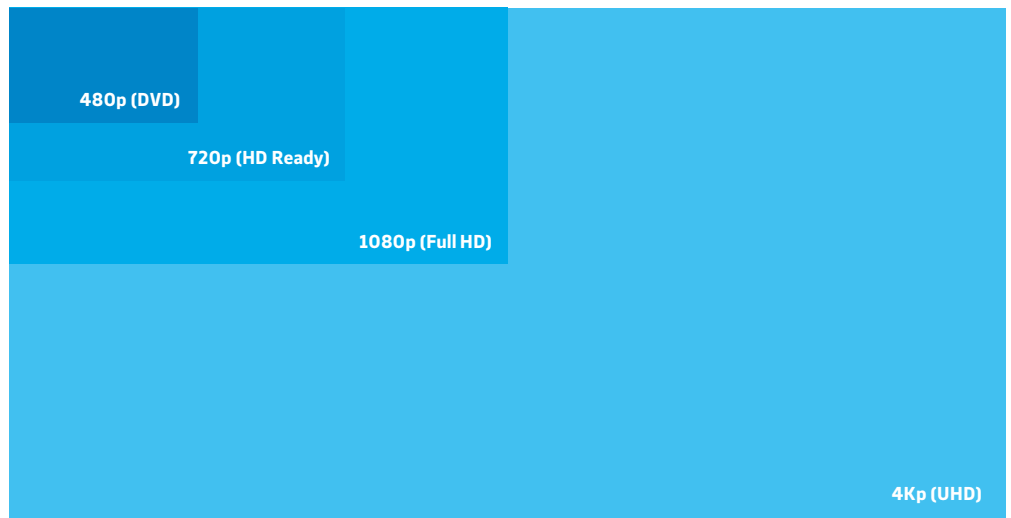
Frame rate has an impact on the perceived quality of video to an extent - a very low frame rate will result in jerky video. However you don't need a huge amount of frames per second before things start to look pretty smooth. Feature films, for instance, typically use 24 frames per second. This is important, because mobile phone and camera manufactures are currently increasing the frame rates that their devices can capture, largely so extreme slow motion video can be produced. Whilst this is impressive, Rockschool don't need this - and the more frames your video contains, the bigger the file sizes get again.

So, it's for this reason RSL is asking you to set your frame rate to somewhere between 24 fps (frames per second) and 30fps. Typically this will be a choice between 25fps and 30fps, depending on the hardware. This will generate video that is smooth but should keep your video file size manageable.

What video format should I use?

Mobile phones and consumer cameras largely gather video and process them and store them in a file, which makes it easier to share using the internet. The results vary, but a well designed video format can do an excellent job of retaining a good sound and image while squeezing it into a small package. The most common formats are .MP4 files which are a good choice, as they are both quite small and open across lots of devices, but .mov files and .avi files are also pretty well supported. If you are at all confused or concerned, it may be worth contacting RSL to check that your submitted video files will open.

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TIP

You should ensure that there is enough battery charge and storage on the device for the full length of the exam. With many devices such as mobile phones it is useful to have a memory card installed if the device offers this as a feature to extend storage. The app used for making the recording would typically have its settings adjusted to set the card as the destination for recordings.

In order to gauge the amount of storage required, a short 1-minute test recording could be made and then inspected for its size. This size would need to be multiplied with the number of minutes taken up by the exam. Please see the syllabus guide for exam durations.

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Framing Guide

It is important to read the guidance below, so you can be confident your submitted video will be accepted for assessment.

1) We need to see you and your instrument clearly.
For all instruments at all grades: the whole of the instrument, all associated equipment being used, and accompanist (if present) needs to be fully visible in the camera shot:

Drums: Snare, bass drum, all toms, cymbals, pedals, and the player in the seated position, in full view throughout, with the kit presented side-on showing hands and feet. Getting a single camera shot of a drummer can be challenging, so try and find an angle that allows the examiner to see performer and equipment clearly: a slightly elevated position with the camera pointing slightly down can work well. Note that some video angles can make recording audio difficult, with the volume of cymbals and snare drum resulting in distortion: striking a balance between video framing and audio may take some experimentation, but a compromise can be found.

Piano/Keys: Full extent of the keyboard, all pedals, and the player in the seated position in full view throughout, the piano presented side-on showing hands and feet.

Stringed instruments: Full extent of the player, instrument, any equipment being used throughout (e.g., footswitches/amps) and accompanist if present.

Vocals: Full extent of vocalist, microphone, mic. stand, any equipment being used throughout, and accompanist if present.

Ensure music stand/s and other equipment do not obscure these views, and ensure all effects changes/tone adjustments between and during performances are shown.
The camera shots are intended to replicate the same view as examiners would have in a face-to-face exam. If the available assessment vantage is not as per these guidelines, a resubmission may be required.

**2) The shot needs to be reasonably well lit.**
Try to avoid shooting in dark environments, as this significantly affects the video quality. If you can record your performance in a space with good natural light, or have access to good quality photographic or stage lighting, the end result will be better. Please avoid coloured or moving lights in your videos too - we need to see you clearly.

3) Keep your footage as steady as possible.
If you can use a tripod or some other kind of camera mount, that would be ideal. If you do need someone to hold a camera or phone, please ensure you keep the video as stable as possible and avoid zooming in or out during the exam.

Take a look at the photos overleaf, to help guide you when setting up to film your exam:
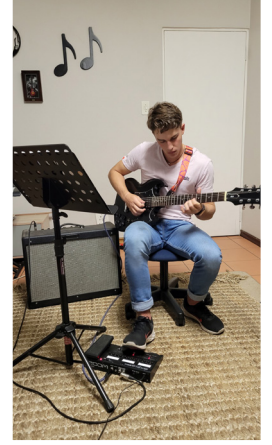
Audio Guide for Video

- Don't set your volume too loudly when using amplifiers or PA speakers. Mobile phones and video cameras record sound fairly well most of the time, but struggle with high volume sound sources. This can prove especially challenging when trying to record the sound of drums - so please read the Recording drums for RSL exams section below for further guidance

- Spend some time getting a good balance between your performance and the backing track. RSL needs to clearly hear your performance when examining, but equally we want your performance to feel connected to the accompanying backing track. It is worth experimenting and producing some test recordings to ensure the balance is good.

- Avoid very noisy or reverberant spaces. Your examiner wants to give your performance their full attention, so avoid recording your exam in a space where there is likely to be significant background noise. Also, whilst it may sound creatively pleasing, please avoid capturing your videos in very reverberant places. We want to hear as much of your signal as possible. If you do opt to use a microphone for vocal recordings avoid using excessive amounts of reverb and avoid long reverb times.

- The use of a microphone is optional for vocals candidates at all grades (including Grades 6-8). Regardless of whether or not a microphone is used, candidates should ensure they are able to evidence relevant and appropriate dynamic expression, projection, tonal contrast and balance, as appropriate to the grade.

- Don't mix or 'produce' your audio. Overall audio should replicate as closely as possible the effect of live studio performance as an examiner would normally hear it in a face-to-face exam; ie. the sound of the instrument, either acoustic or amplified through a speaker, balanced against the backing track played over a PA. Candidates should not mix or produce the audio post-recording, or add any further effects or processing, as this could obscure the examiner's ability to make a valid assessment of the performance, which may in turn impact negatively on the marking.

Whilst you can record reasonable audio using a mobile phone in most instances, there are a number of devices you may wish to consider if you want to ensure your audio is of a good quality. Please see below for a list of devices and apps that RSL recommends that can help you improve audio quality when creating your video exam.

Recording drums

The acoustic drum kit provides some challenges when trying to capture clear audio, especially when filming with a mobile phone. Whilst it is possible to record usable audio with a mobile phone with care, RSL highly recommends that drummers use a video device where they can have full control over the microphone's sensitivity and volume. Mobile phones do not allow you this control by default, so it is worth installing an app that gives that that control, or using a microphone designed for use with a mobile phone that allows you to control the volume of the incoming signal. Please see below for a list of devices and apps that RSL recommends to help you improve audio quality.

We are also advising that, should you need to record your exam directly into a mobile phone, you avoid capturing your acoustic drum performance whilst playing to an audible backing track – the volume required will almost certainly make the recorded audio difficult to hear or result in audio distortion. In this instance, it is permissible for you to record a video of your drum exam with the backing track fed to you via either headphones or in-ear monitoring. RSL will synchronise the backing tracks to your performances for marking – but you will need to audibly mark the final bar of the count-in before the performance begins by clicking your sticks together, so we can easily synchronise the audio to the video. Please see the drum exam video for a demonstration.

Alternatively, you may wish to consider performing your exam to video using an electronic kit, where you will have greater control over your volume balance. Many electronic drum modules provide the facility to plug in an audio device directly and allow the user to blend a backing track with the drum kit. However, we recognise that many drummers will prefer to play acoustic drum kits during assessment, so this approach is entirely optional.

Please note that where there is evidence from the video that the candidate is not listening to a backing track while performing, this may affect the marks awarded, as performing to a backing track (where one is provided) is a requirement of the exam.

Recommended audio / video devices and apps

Microphone for use with mobile phones (check for handset compatibility):

- Zoom iQ7
- Shure MV88
- RØDE iXY
- RØDE VideoMic

Mobile phone video apps that allow manual control of audio:

- FV-5 (supported Android devices)
- Filmic Pro (IOS devices and some supported Android devices)

Dedicated video cameras for recording high quality audio:
- Zoom Q4
- Zoom Q2n

We hope this set of guidelines has helped you understand the Recorded Digital Exam process. Should you require any further advice, please contact us on: *info@rslawards.com*