Getting Started with TikTok and Instagram Reels

The short, snappy video format originally pioneered by platforms like Vine and Snapchat has quickly become one of the most popular ways to share content online. If your business hasn't created a TikTok profile or explored the various ways to use Instagram Reels, now is the time.

The following should help introduce you to the short video format and serves as a quick primer on how to get started posting videos to TikTok and Instagram Reels.

What is TikTok? How does it work?

TikTok is a social networking platform for the phone focused on sharing quick videos. While TikTok maintains a website where users can log in and view their feeds, it differs from platforms like Facebook and Twitter, which offer as much versatility on a web browser as on the phone app.

TikTok is specifically formatted for use on the phone, encouraging vertical videos with an aspect ratio of 9:16 (this is anathema to anyone who usually turns their phone to capture video in the fuller landscape mode).

Music has played a large role in TikTok's popularity. You've likely seen at least one viral TikTok dance video over the last year. TikTok has both a searchable library of popular music as well as the ability to create your own sounds and music to add to videos.

In the beginning, TikTok videos were only 15 seconds long; if you wanted to post longer content, it had to be in video strings of 15 seconds. TikTok has since added the option for videos up to 60 seconds long. Users can also pre-record longer videos elsewhere and upload them to TikTok.
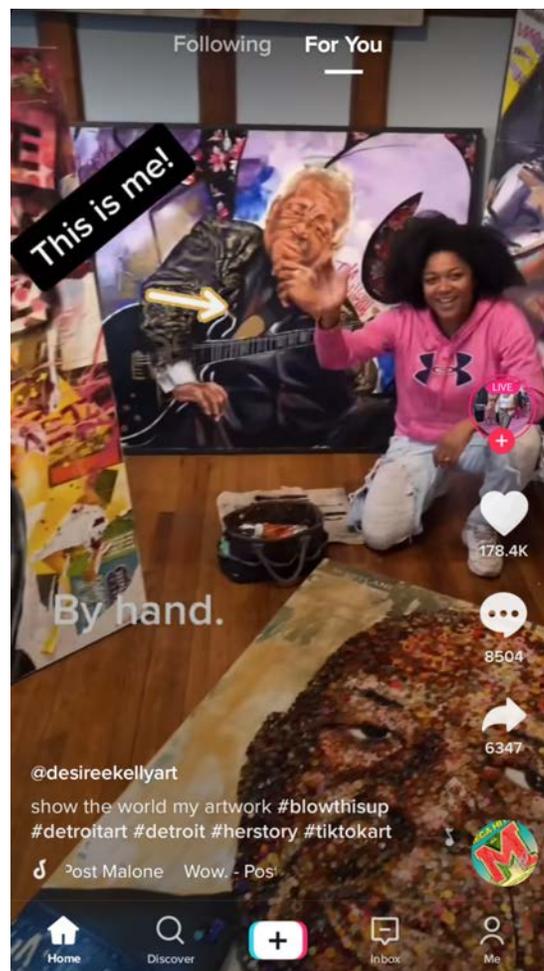
When you log in to TikTok, you'll see two options at the top of the page for your feed: "Following" and "For You". The "For You" option is the default feed option. This was a novel move for TikTok: instead of showing videos from those you follow, the videos in your feed are generated by an analysis of the content TikTok believes you will want to see. The TikTok algorithm has proven tricky to nail down—many users have claimed to see things in their feed that feel specifically catered to them even if it's new content they've never interacted with before. From what we know, TikTok pulls information to create the "For You" feed from your location, your likes, the music you choose to use in your own TikTok videos, your searches, your hashtags, and more.

What is Instagram Reels? How does it work?

Instagram Reels is a feature on Instagram that allows users to upload quick videos. Because it was created in response to TikTok, the two share many similarities.

Reels can be shared to Instagram Stories, to the Reels tab on a user's homepage, and, if your account is public, to Instagram users at large via the "Explore" page.

Instagram overhauled its user interface for the first time in many years to reflect the inclusion of Instagram Reels, giving the Reels icon center placement on the app. This should tell you how important Instagram considers Reels to be. Reels can be accessed via this centrally placed button, or by navigating to "Explore" and clicking the large vertical auto-play Reels video at the top-right of the Explore page. As with TikTok, Reels encourages users to see content from everyone on Instagram—don't expect to only see videos from users you follow.

Like TikTok, in the beginning Instagram Reels were limited to 15 seconds long; they have since increased the time limit to 30 seconds.

Instagram Reels also offers the ability to add music from the Instagram song library, or user-generated sounds to videos. As with Instagram Stories, there are also options for AR (augmented reality) filters. You can also add many of the stickers currently available in Instagram Stories to the Reels you create. There are also features like countdown timers to encourage hands-free recording and other video editing options.
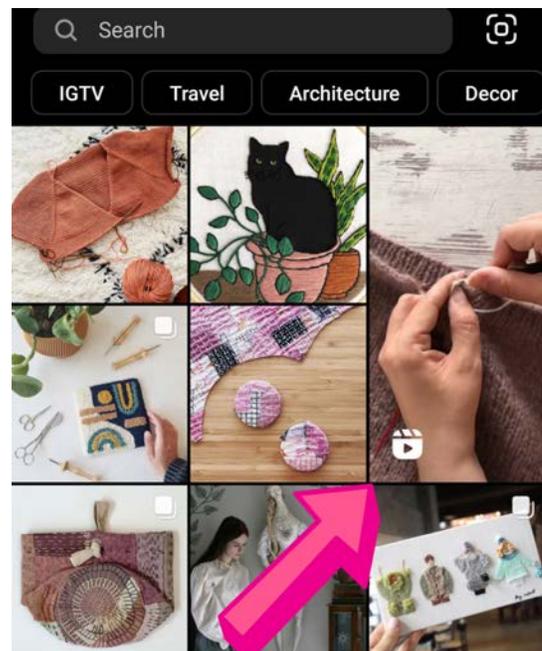
This is the "Discover" page for Instagram Reels

How To Use TikTok

Signing up for TikTok is pretty straightforward. After downloading the app from the App store or Google play Store, you will be prompted to either sign up with a username and password or via a pre-existing Google, Twitter, or Facebook account.

After signing up, you will have a chance to set up your profile. This includes uploading a profile picture or video and connecting your TikTok account to your other social media channels—we recommend doing this so that followers can check out your business's other platforms. There are three vertical dots at the top right of the screen—click here to access more of your settings, like privacy, security, and content preferences. To set your TikTok account as a business account, click Manage account > Switch to Pro Account and follow the prompts.

At the bottom of the home page, you'll see a list of icons. The house icon will bring you back to this home page. The magnifying glass "Discover" icon will bring up a page with a list of hashtag and sound trends, where you can also search by hashtag. The center "+" icon is how you will upload a video. The "Inbox" icon holds your personal messages, and the last "Me" icon is where you will find your profile, where you can edit your profile, add a bio, and connect your social channels.

To create your first video, tap the "+" icon. Choose the length of your video at the bottom of the screen (15 or 60 seconds) by swiping left or right. You can also swipe to choose from "Templates." There are several templates that plug your photos into different video formats, from a film strip effect to a postage stamp-themed travelogue and more. To the left of the record button is the "Effects" gallery, where you can choose from several different kinds of effects like Trending, New, Green Screen, Interactive, Beauty and more. These add backdrops to your video, provide a green screen effect or, like Instagram, offer overlaid AR filters to change your appearance. To the right of the record button is the option to Upload videos or pictures from your personal photo library.

At the top of the screen you'll see "Sounds". Click there to search for different songs and sounds to add to your video—there is even a playlist called "TikTok Viral" to add the hottest songs and sounds of the moment.

The top right of the screen shows a column of recording options. From top to bottom you can: Flip the camera to selfie mode, change the Speed at which the video plays, toggle Beauty mode (for a

skin-smoothing effect), apply Filters, set a Timer for hands-free mode, and toggle the Flash for low light settings.

You can also upload a previously recorded video or captured image by hitting the "Upload" button in the lower right corner. Don't forget to add a short and witty text description (you can choose from different fonts and colors, and select how long you'd like the text to appear over the video or image).

Whether you recorded the video natively or uploaded a previously recorded video, the final confirmation screen will offer the opportunity to add additional details about the video (the text on screen does not offer much real estate, so you'll have to keep that short) and relevant hashtags. More on that in our best practices section!

How To Use Instagram Reels

Instagram has seamlessly integrated Reels into their existing platform, making Reels creation easy and straightforward.

There are three ways to post to Reels. The "+" button that once occupied the center bottom position in the Instagram feed has now been replaced with the Reels button. Users can click this button to access a Reels feed generated by likes, searches, shares and other Instagram algorithmic criteria. The feed can be navigated by swiping up or down. At the top right corner of this Reels feed is a camera icon—click it to begin the process of recording a Reel. You can also begin this process by clicking the "+" button at the top of your Instagram feed, then choosing Reels from the four options (Post, Story, Reels, Live) at the bottom of the page. The third and final way to post to Reels lives on your home page. Click the "+" button on your Instagram home page and a list of actionable items will appear: Feed Post, Story, Story Highlight, IGTV Video, Reel, and Guide.
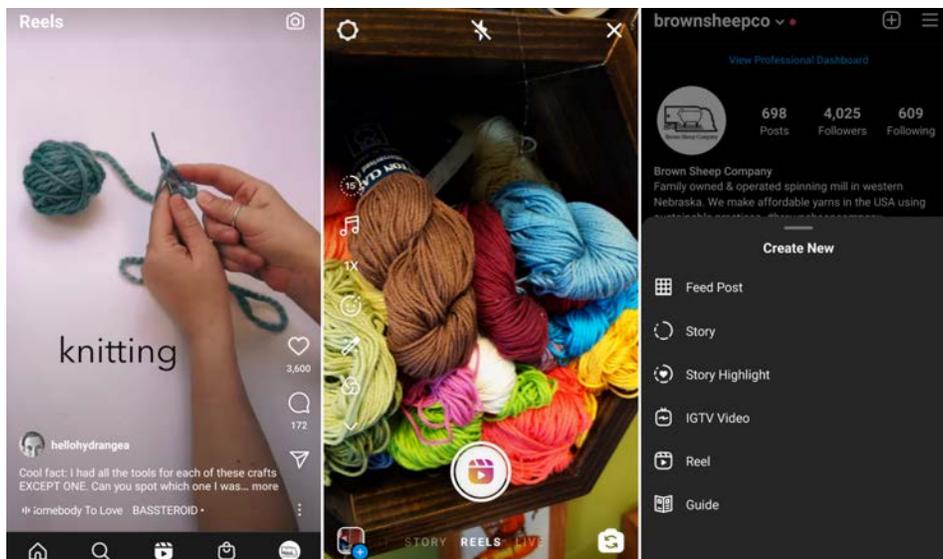
The 3 options for navigating to Reels: from the Reels feed, from the Instagram feed "+" button, and from the Instagram home page

Instagram offers similar options for Reels as it does for Stories. As you can see in the middle image above, there are various formatting options along the left hand side of the screen. From top to bottom, you can: change the length of the video between 15 and 30 seconds; search and add music from Instagram's music library; change the speed at which the video plays (helpful for shortening lengthy tutorials); apply different beauty and augmented reality filter effects (the same as in Stories); apply a skin smoothing effect; choose a simple filter (the same filters offered when posting a photo); and utilize a timer for hands-free recording.

Once you've recorded your Reel, the next screen before posting offers additional options that should also be familiar if you've been using Instagram Stories. Along the top right corner of the image to the right, from left to right you'll see: an option for downloading your Reel; the Instagram Story feature that includes options for adding gifs, stickers, time, and temperature; a drawing mode; and the option to overlay text to your video (helpful for accessibility and also for including additional information that might not fit into the video length).

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To learn more tips and tricks for utilizing these platforms and features—including our best practices for crafting successful TikTok and Instagram Reels videos—check out our blog post on Navigating TikTok and Instagram Reels.

For more help strategizing your social media marketing plan contact us today!