

Catherine Kentridge

ELEGANT CEREMONIES CREATED JUST FOR YOU

TIPS FOR PERFECT CEREMONIES



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Venue Choice Tips

With most couples, no sooner has the proposal been made and accepted and the engagement ring put on the wedding finger, than the burning issue of when and where to get married looms. And the minute you announce your engagement, absolutely everyone will want answers to those questions.

They'll also want to know the season, formal or casual, destination or ... The decisions are so numerous, in every way – from choice of location, time of day, time of year, cost, formality, informality, that the whole matter can be overwhelming.

Here are my suggestions to help you focus your choices and to give you a better idea of what will be the right venue, in every way, for your dream wedding.

Six Questions to help you decide where to have your wedding

1. Is there a place that is very meaningful for you – such as where you first met, the location where the proposal took place, a favourite vacation spot, the family flower garden, horse farm or cottage?
2. If there is such as place, would it make sense to get married there? Consider the ease of getting there for guests, size of the space (how many guests could comfortably fit into it?), where would out-of-town guests stay, how easy would it be to get a celebrant to do the wedding? Also consider the options for catering, photography, and music—can you fulfil your wish list in this location and is it ideal?
3. Do you want somewhere formal or informal, traditional or not – a banquet hall, country club, restaurant or bar, or your garden?
4. What size wedding do you want—a small intimate one or a larger affair with several hundred guests?
5. What do venues for weddings cost? And to answer this, it would be worthwhile to pick a range of places and make some enquiries. A good starting point might be to contact a venue where you attended someone else's wedding and which you really liked.

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6. You can then plug some of these numbers into your wedding budget as you begin drawing it up. This will likely, at the very least, narrow your focus on the type of place that will suit your needs best and fit what you have available to spend – e.g. restaurant versus banquet hall, friend's garden versus country club, local versus out-of-town?

What's the most important element of your wedding?

As with just about every aspect of your wedding, from budget to venue to guests to clothes to vows and celebrant, it all comes down to, what is THE most important part of the wedding for you?

Once you have answered that question, everything else will start to fall into place. Every couple will have a different response. There is no right or wrong answer. Go with the wedding venue and type of wedding that feels perfect for you.

And above all, enjoy!

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Informal Ceremony Tips

If you've decided that the surroundings you'd like to get married in are a far cry from the country clubs and banquet halls your friends and relations have chosen, what should you be aware of?

If your style is more casual, you may gravitate towards a more relaxed wedding venue. The ideal venue will probably not need much research.

You will have chosen the venue for your wedding because it is meaningful to you and reflects who you are and your style. Perhaps you have chosen a restaurant, pub, or your own garden or a spot at a remote park, or where you and your partner first met or created happy memories.

Weddings at more casual venues tend to be smaller than at the more formal locations. Brides often invite no more than a hundred wedding guests, and as few as a dozen, or even a couple.

Benefits of the casual wedding

The benefits of an informal wedding venue are that, apart from being less expensive, sometimes even free, you can make the place more your own, and have practically free rein in choosing food, decorations, music, and entertainment, time of day, and your schedule of events. You will likely not have the pressure of having to start or finish at a set time for photographs, ceremony, cocktails, and reception.

I have conducted wedding ceremonies at informal venues ranging from living rooms to ballet studios, gardens, provincial parks, and on board ship. Each one had its unique qualities and reflected the style of the couple getting married there.

Remember!

It may be harder to have a backup plan if the weather does not co-operate, or if you have a sudden flood or power outage.

You will likely have to attend to every detail, large and small, yourselves, (which some couples love to do anyway, and others just don't. They may prefer to focus on the ceremony, for example) rather than hiring a wedding planner or having an onsite wedding coordinator.

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It may be harder to improvise if there are glitches, as there would be fewer resources of people or technology to fall back on than there would be at a formal venue.

Balanced against all that is the joy of getting married in a very special place, and doing it your way, in every way.

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Formal Ceremony Tips

The formal wedding venue

If you've decided on a formal venue for your wedding, such as a banquet hall or a country club, this choice will affect a great many factors to do with your wedding, from cost to guest list, attire for you and your guests, type of invitation, time of day, music, and food. A formal location may also require working with their staff and/or hiring assistants, such as the venue's wedding coordinator, or a wedding planner.

My experience with the resident wedding coordinators or planners at the many venues where I have conducted weddings, is that they are invariably very pleasant, helpful, and efficient. It is clear that their goal is to make each couple feel that their wedding is unique, special, and important, and that everything to do with it should be exactly what they want and hope for.

The venue coordinator is the best person to answer any questions, large or small, that you may have about your wedding at their venue. Both for the rehearsal and on the day, this person will make sure everything goes as smoothly and calmly as possible. The best coordinators take the stress out of your day and allow you to be totally excited and joyful, knowing that all practical details are taken care of.

Hiring wedding planners

Hiring an independent wedding planner is a good idea if you are having a large wedding, or one with complex elements. Couples seem to divide more or less equally on whether to hire a professional or designate a friend or relation to help organize the event and see to the details.

There are many tasks with which a wedding planner can help—a planner, amateur or professional - can be assigned to take care of catering, entertainment, processions, size of wedding party, flowers, invitations, finding someone to do the photographs or make the cake, or the dress, and may make recommendations about which celebrant to use as well.

Advantages of Formal Wedding Venues

Some of the important logistical extras that formal venues are often better at providing include a special room or suite for the bride and/or wedding couple to get ready in before the ceremony and to relax in afterwards.

(At some informal venues I have been to, the poor bride or groom or wedding party have to slip into a small washroom cubicle to change. Not ideal!) Formal venues also always have a Plan B in case of rain, wind, hail or snow.

And their staff are equipped and experienced in dealing with just about any emergency that can arise – from thread and pins for sewing up tears in gowns and dropped hems, to flowers, printing services, and photocopying to sending cars or taxis to fetch stranded guests, to providing microphones for the ceremony or reception, to calming words to nervous couples or their friends or relatives.

Disadvantages of formal wedding venue

Two things to be aware of when choosing a formal venue: First, no matter how lovely the place or the setting and how helpful and professional the staff, no matter how beautiful the table settings and decorations of the ceremony location and the reception hall, it is always going to be less personal than if you had chosen a less formal place to get married.

Second, a formal venue often has more than one wedding scheduled on any given Saturday, Friday, or Sunday, so you may be under a tight time constraint, for photos, ceremony, cocktails and reception – and all of this can be stressful.

Whatever you decide, make it your day and remember to enjoy it!

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Don't Panic Tips!

In any wedding, no matter how carefully and meticulously planned, something big or small may still go wrong. Things may turn out a little differently from how it was meant to unfold or, indeed, be something totally unexpected. There is no way you can possibly plan for every contingency, but you can take steps to try to ensure proceedings run as smoothly and as calmly as possible.

Allow time for wedding prep

Wedding planners usually do an excellent job of creating a timeline with some space for the unforeseen built into it. For example, if you are getting hair, make-up, and nails done on the day of the ceremony, ideally have the aestheticians come to you, so you are not rushing from one appointment to the other. If that is not possible, make sure you allow yourself time to get from one appointment to the other, and still have plenty of time left to dress and get to the wedding venue at least half an hour before the advertised starting time (i.e. the starting time you put in the invitations).

Wedding photography at the venue

Likewise, if you are having a photo shoot somewhere other than your home or wherever you are getting ready for the wedding, build in lots of time to get to the venue. You don't want to be like the brides who had a photo shoot in the far south west end of town and the ceremony in the far north east, and arrived a good 45 minutes after the ceremony was due to begin. Neither the brides nor the guests, nor the musicians were in the best of moods when things finally got underway. Ideally, schedule your photo shoots at wherever you are getting ready for the wedding and then also at the venue itself. That way, at least you are on the premises!

Baby at the wedding

OK, now let's assume you are safely at the venue and things seem to be running according to plan and on time. Then your baby, who is still breastfeeding, decides to go to sleep just as you are about to process up the aisle...but your plan was to carry him up the aisle in your arms. Or perhaps he has a meltdown, picking up the tension and excitement from all that flurry of activity going on around him, and there is no way you can do anything or go anywhere till he has calmed down. Well, just give him time to calm down. As long as word gets out to the guests as to why there is a delay, they will be understanding.

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Weddings and pets

If a pet happens to be part of your procession, the dog-as-ring-bearer-routine, and the dog has just started throwing up, or is refusing to do its business so there will be no mishaps during the ceremony, again, just relax, and give it time, and let your guests know what's happening. What nobody likes is to just be left hanging wondering what's happening.

Punctuality and politeness

Finally, a word about punctuality and politeness. We all know that traffic is often unpredictable, taxis are late or don't show up, the bus you hired to bring guests from their hotel to the venue inexplicably fails to materialize. What to do? The ideal solution is to find a balance between respecting the value and the time of those who are at the venue on time, and giving those who are not on time, through circumstances beyond their control, a chance to be at the ceremony. This can be a difficult balancing act. It is important to check with the celebrant, the musicians, the photographers and the venue, as to what flexibility they have with delaying the ceremony.

Should you delay the wedding?

There are often tight timeframes for cocktails, music, beginning the dinner, or where the celebrant or photographer has another engagement and can't delay. Do not make the assumption that because it is your wedding day, everyone will just jolly well go along with whatever you want, delays and all. That is selfish and discourteous. Be aware that, even if celebrant, musicians, and photographers are willing to stay longer, you may incur additional charges for the extra time they will be spending waiting for things to begin. Also be aware, that you will need to make a cut-off point beyond which you will not wait, tricky as this can be if some of the bridal party or your parents are not there.

Finally, do realize that there are some things you can't control. Know that by the end of the day, you will be married, and all the stresses will be forgotten in that joy.

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Vow Writing Tips

In any wedding, the exchange of vows is the heart of the ceremony. It's when you make the promises to each other that you will uphold and live by for the rest of your lives.

Many couples like to use the time-honoured, repeat-after-me, "For richer or for poorer" vows. There is a great deal to be said for this. These vows have been hallowed and used by millions of couples over the centuries and have that weight of history and tradition behind them. They have been used in countless novels, movies, and plays. These traditional marriage vows are what you expect to hear at most weddings.

Personalized wedding vows

However, many couples wish to personalize their ceremony by writing their own special vows. Sometimes they will combine the traditional vows, repeating them after the celebrant, and then read to each other their personal vows. While some couples may find it daunting to even think about writing their own vows, fearing they will not know where to begin and what happens if they forget them on the day because they are so nervous or excited, other couples love the idea of writing down and expressing their deepest feelings about each other on their wedding day.

If you are considering writing your own vows, you might start by sitting down and thinking about what it is you most love about each other, and why you are marrying this man or this woman. Perhaps you will say to yourself, "*I love him because he can always see the bright side of any situation.*" You turn that into a vow by saying, "I promise to learn from you your wonderful quality of always seeing the bright side of any situation."

Mixing wedding vows and laughter

Many couples mix humour and in-jokes with their more deeply-felt vows. One groom promised his bride "to always clean-up after you cook, as we both deserve to eat well, and neither of us wants to eat my cooking." Of course, most couples include "I love you" in those vows. Many couples who write special vows like to keep them secret from each other as a surprise for the wedding day. To keep the secret of the wedding vows, at the rehearsal I will hand you each a cue card with your words that you read silently to each other, to give you a sense of the timing. Of course, on your wedding day, you read them aloud to each other!

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And tears

All I can say is, both of you should be prepared with linen handkerchiefs, or lots of Kleenex. The vows are the emotional heart of the ceremony, and brides and grooms have often found themselves overcome with the deep feelings the vows bring out.

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Pets & Ceremonies Tips

Many couples have a beloved pet who they feel is a family member, almost like their first child. Over the years, I have often been asked to include pets in the ceremony—usually as a ring-bearer.

Before I go any further, please know that I am a great lover of dogs and cats. I have several of my own. They are very important to my happiness and general well-being. I'm just not sure I'd want them at my wedding...

Now, I am always telling couples that their ceremony should reflect who they are and include the words, rituals, people, and elements that matter most. So if your dog falls into one of these groups, and having the dog participate in the ceremony is vital to your happiness and to the perfection of your wedding day, here are some points to ponder:

- a) However important your dog is to you, having it participate in the ceremony may make your guests a little anxious. They will not be able to help just waiting to see if it misbehaves by lifting a leg on one of the chairs— or one of the guests— barking, or jumping up at you to lick your faces and share the joy (and leaving paw prints on your beautiful wedding gown or tux!).
- b) Pets are notorious scene-stealers – as are babies and small children (see my other posts). You may wish to think hard about whether you want to share the limelight with your pet at the actual ceremony.

After thinking the matter over, many couples opt to include their family pet/s in the ceremony without their actually being present. I have often mentioned the pets when I tell the couple's story as part of the ceremony, and usually include some reference to how the dog or cat (or bird!) features prominently in the wedding photos taken at home.

If you are still bound and determined to have your dog walk down the aisle in a tux and bowtie or sparkling collar and ribbons, with your rings strapped to its back, make sure there is a handler nearby to step in at a moment's notice. He or she will also have to commit to keeping the dog by their side once your pet has delivered the rings to your Best Man or Best Woman.

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P.S. And even more vital, ask the handler to please make sure the dog has had a pit stop just BEFORE the ceremony...

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Creating beautiful rituals in ceremonies

As well as telling the story of your relationship, or writing special vows to make your ceremony personal and unique, you may wish to include rituals that are meaningful to you, to make the ceremony more memorable and expressive of you or your families. Incidentally, this will likely make it live on in the memories of your guests also.

Rituals come in as many forms as you have imagination to create them. They can be traditional or new, local, or from far away, wedding rituals that reflect your heritage, faith, language and culture.

One of the joys of being a celebrant who specializes in interfaith and intercultural weddings is the opportunity it gives me to combine different rituals and traditions in a way that is meaningful to the couple and honours both backgrounds.

Some rituals I have led in ceremonies include lighting a memory candle at the beginning of the service to honour those who have passed away or who cannot be at the ceremony for whatever reason; a unity candle to symbolize the blending of the couple's lives and that they will be light to each other throughout their life's journey; sharing a cup of wine to show that their sorrow will now be halved because they are shared, and their joys will be doubled because they are shared. A hand fasting, an ancient tradition from which comes the expressions "tying the knot" and "giving your hand in marriage," a sand ceremony, where you each pour different-coloured sand into a glass jar to show how your lives are inextricably mingled from this day on.

Of course, you may also wish to consider the various cultural traditions from around the world: coins from Spain, trees from The Netherlands, horseshoes from England and Scotland, wedding crowns from eastern Europe, the Sofreh from the Persian tradition, breaking the glass from the Jewish tradition. The list goes on and on. The possibilities are limited only by your imagination. There are all kinds of resources online to guide you, and often, in your own families.

And you can create your very own ritual, something that has meaning for you.

Whatever rituals you choose to include in the ceremony, I will always give a short explanation of the significance of that ritual. In this way, your guests know its significance and that you are doing this ritual for a reason and that it has meaning for you.

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There is a bonus to having rituals. They can be an opportunity to honour family or close friends by asking them to participate in this very meaningful ceremony, whether it is your mothers handing you lit tapers so you can light a Unity Candle together, or your best friend presenting you with the ribbon for the hand fasting, or your father saying the blessing over the wine in the cup you will then share.

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Live Music Tips

If you decide to have live music for your ceremony, here are some things to think about.

Consider whether it is an indoor wedding or outdoor—where other sounds may filter in. First and foremost, make sure the music can be heard, especially for stringed instruments such as guitar, harp, or dulcimer. This may require making or ensuring that the musician or musicians sit very close to where the ceremony is taking place and not far away under some shady awning where their notes are blown away by wind or traffic noises! I've been at weddings where the musicians were playing their hearts out on harp or dulcimer or guitar, but no one could hear a note.

Wind instruments, such as flute, clarinet, and trumpet carry very well and are a good choice for an outdoor ceremony. And flutes combine beautifully with guitar and harp. If one of your instruments is voice, make sure the singer is very well-miked or has a carrying voice.

Again, I have heard, barely, people with the most beautiful voices, singing wonderful tender or passionate songs at a wedding, but no one else has heard them because they were not close enough and the singer was not using a microphone.

If your ceremony is indoors, miking is not usually an issue, unless you have a large number of guests in an enormous banquet hall.

If you are lucky enough to have a grand piano at your disposal, position it in such a way that the pianist can see the ceremony, especially so that he or she has a good view of the celebrant, so can receive any necessary cues.

And make sure the piano has been tuned recently, or ask to have it tuned for the day. You want to have beautiful music—not sour notes—at your wedding.

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Classical Music Tips

Shakespeare once wrote, “*If music be the food of love, play on...*”

Music is a very important factor in creating the feel and atmosphere you want for your ceremony.

Of course, it's also a great opportunity to include your favourite, most meaningful music as part of the wedding, as well as whatever music you might have chosen for The First Dance.

If you like the idea of classical music at your ceremony, here are the five most popular classical pieces of Processional music: Pachelbel Canon in D, Air on a G String by J.S. Bach, Trumpet Tune by Purcell, Trumpet Voluntary by Purcell, and Jesus, Joy of Man's Desiring by J.S. Bach.

For the Recessional, many people love Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*, Vivaldi's *Spring* from The Four Seasons, Mozart's *Arrival of the Queen of Sheba*, and the first movement of his *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*.

Number One is Mendelssohn's *Wedding March*, which he wrote as incidental music for “A Midsummer Night's Dream”. All these pieces are full of joy and excitement, just what you want for the Recessional.

It's in the music for the Signing that people are most likely to have a wider range of selections – if it's classical, Chopin is a good choice.

Some of the major benefits of having live music are that it is beautiful, elegant, memorable, pure, and organic. Plus, the musicians are there to see what is happening with the timing of the Processional and Recessional as they unfold during the ceremony, and can adjust their playing and timing cues accordingly.

Recorded music can also work very well, as long as you have an alert person to hit the right buttons, and a sound system that carries in the space you are using.

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Contemporary Music Tips

If contemporary music, whether instrumental or vocal, is more your style, choose pieces or songs that are meaningful for you and that reflect the joyfulness of the occasion.

Don't worry if a particular song or tune is not "the right length". If it's for the Procession or for the Entry of the Bride, it does not matter if everyone is in place by the end of the 8th bar. If it is a piece you like, you and your guests will be happy to hear it through to the end, or a suitable stopping point.

Beware of Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah". For some reason, this beautiful song is a wedding favourite. It is guaranteed to reduce absolutely everyone to tears – wedding couple, wedding party, celebrant and all the guests.

At the other extreme, I have seen brides dancing up the aisle to "Chapel of Love". "You raise me up" and "At long Last Love" are also songs I hear time and again, for good reason.

And just about any Beatles' song, just the tune, or the actual song, works well at a wedding ceremony.

Since this music will most usually be "canned" - unless you have friends who can sing and play instruments, or have hired a band - make sure the person operating the playlist also has a copy of the ceremony so they will know what to play when, and also ask them to keep an eye on the ceremony and on the celebrant to catch clues about when to start and stop each particular choice of music.

There is nothing like someone deciding to hit the button for your Recessional of "Blue Suede Shoes" while the celebrant or your favourite aunt, is clearing her throat to being a blessing.

And it is also worth checking ahead of time that the loud speakers are sufficiently powerful that the music can be heard by everyone. This may seem obvious, but I can't tell you the number of times when the correct canned music is being played at the right time, but the loudspeakers have not been powerful enough for the sound to carry.

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And thinking of contemporary music, I have conducted a wedding ceremony where the bride took a favourite pop song and put her own words to it so she could sing her vows to the groom.

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Wedding Ceremonies Elements

What are the elements of a typical wedding ceremony?

Beyond certain legalities, which you will have taken care of in advance, it is up to you to decide what you would like in your ceremony.

Ceremonies may take many different forms. Many couples follow this outline as a framework, and others change it to suit themselves. It is your day and you're building your memories, so choose the order and the elements that will make you happy.

Here are the traditional elements:

- Procession
- Words of Welcome
- Address to the Guests
- Address to the Couple
- Expression of Intent and Consent
- Affirmation of Family and Friends
- Exchange of Vows
- Exchange of Rings
- Declaration of marriage
- Signing of A Certificate of Commitment (more for photo ops than anything else, as you will already have done the legalities, including signing the Marriage Licence at a Registry Office or in a religious venue)
- Introduction of the newly-married couple
- Recessional

You may wish to add readings, blessings and rituals, traditional or original.

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The key question for your wedding day?

What is the most important part of your wedding day?

The answer to that question is as personal and unique as each couple. Whatever answer you arrive at will impact on all the choices you make about who, what, where and when to have your wedding. It will affect everything from the ring to clothes, to budget, to the venue to the time of year and choice of a wedding celebrant.

For some couples, the most important part of the wedding is declaring, in the presence of their family and friends, the commitment to spend the rest of their lives together. For these couples, who they will invite and who will be able to attend becomes extremely important.

Where should you get married?

For some couples the place they choose to get married is the most important part of the wedding– whether it is a beach, a garden, a parent's house, their house, somewhere near, somewhere far and exotic, a restaurant, an art gallery, a nightclub, a boat.

For others, it is the time of year, especially if they want an outdoor wedding, which is the key decision when planning the wedding. Would a woodland glade, a secluded beach, a public or private garden, a waterfall, a field, a mountaintop be better in spring, summer, fall or winter?

The question of who will be in the wedding party is the most important question for others. Who to honour by inviting them to be in the wedding party? Is there anyone who they can't offend by not inviting them to participate? How big should the wedding party be? Does there have to be an equal number of people on each side?

All about the wedding dress

For most brides, after the engagement ring, the dress is one of the most important aspects of the wedding day. It is also usually the first thing brides choose, whether the wedding is in the next few months or the next two years. They want to be sure that the dress makes them look and feel most beautiful. Cost and comfort come a very distant second and third.

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The wedding ceremony is important

For the majority of couples, the most important part of the wedding day is the ceremony. It is the ceremony that makes them married; it is the ceremony that gives them the chance to share their story with guests, to honour friends and family by inviting them to participate in readings, music, rituals or inclusion in the bridal party. And more than that, it is the ritual of the marriage that gives the couple the opportunity to create a ceremony that truly reflects who they are and what it means to be marrying each other.

This meaning and uniqueness can come through in their story, told as part of the ceremony, and in their vows, if they choose to write them themselves, as well as in the readings and rituals they choose.

Start planning your ceremony

Once you have answered the question of what is the most important aspect of your wedding, you can start to assemble the people who will help you: friends, family, dressmaker, jeweller, photographer, wedding co-ordinator, and, very importantly, the celebrant who can turn your idea for your ceremony into a reality.

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Blessing tips for your wedding

Whether you are religious or not, everyone wants their marriage to be blessed, one way or another. Whether in the words of traditional religious marriage blessings – and every religion has beautiful, powerful blessings for weddings – or in blessings that make no mention of any deity, there are words to wish you health, happiness, and fulfilment in your marriage.

Blessings come in many forms, from traditionally religious and solemn to joyful, irreverent and modern. There are also modern interpretations of traditional blessings, very different from literal translations, but in keeping with the spirit of the older blessings. So have fun finding one that is right for you.

I have found that there are two very good places in the ceremony to have a wedding blessing – though most couples want only one blessing per wedding ceremony!

An excellent time to insert a wedding blessing is right after the welcome to the guests. You can ask someone, the celebrant, or a friend or family member, to say a blessing, so that the ceremony starts with a blessing.

Apart from the joy of being blessed, blessings offer another way to include others in your ceremony. It's a good idea to make sure the person you invite to do the blessing is OK with speaking in front of people and will not be too nervous to be able to get the words out!

The other very powerful place in which to have a blessing is right before you are introduced as husband and wife, partners for life or whatever form of introduction you wish to have.

Having someone give a blessing just before that is a beautiful way to round off the proceedings and to honour the importance and profound meaning of the wedding ceremony. And I learned - the hard way! - that trying to say a blessing after introducing you as newly-weds is a waste of breath. Nobody is going to listen. At that point, all everybody wants to do is congratulate you and rejoice with you!

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Reading tips for your ceremony

Including a reading or readings is yet another way to make your wedding ceremony unique and extra special to you. Readings can express how you feel about marrying each other, can be a way of sharing words that have special significance for the two of you, a way to express what you understand by marriage or love, and what you hope for in your marriage to each other.

From poetic to profound

There are readings that cover the whole range from deeply religious to sentimental, to poetic and profound, to outright funny. Rd. Seuss's "Oh the Places you'll go" is a classic in the joyful and humorous line. You may ask the celebrant to do some, all, or none of the readings. Again, this is an excellent way of including or honouring family members or friends by inviting them to do a reading. You may choose the reading for them or have them choose a reading, subject to your approval, of course. It's a good idea to know before you even invite anyone to do a reading, that this particular person will be comfortable giving a reading in front of you and the wedding guests. Some people may be delighted and honoured to be asked, but absolutely terrified of actually getting up there and doing it.

When do you do wedding readings?

Readings usually come early on in the ceremony, for example, after the Address to the Guests or the Address to the Couple. Two readings are about right. Any more than that, and the ceremony starts to become more of a show than a ceremony, with too many people coming back and forth from their seats to participate. It can break the flow of the ceremony. But if it is done smoothly, it adds an extra dimension.

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Rehearse wedding readings

If you are planning to have readings, blessings, or rituals of any kind, it is a very good idea to have a rehearsal so that everyone has a chance to practise what they will be doing, and to get comfortable with whatever part they are playing in your ceremony.

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Telling your Wedding Story

Your story is unique and special. No other couple will have the same story as yours, of how you met, the course of your relationship, and the proposal. Many couples choose to share their story with their guests as part of the ceremony. There are many ways to do this.

It is usually part of the “Address to the Guests” section at the beginning of the ceremony. Some couples write out their story in full and have the celebrant read it aloud, word for word as they have written it.

Others send it in point form and give the celebrant a certain amount of freedom in how the story is crafted. Of course, before anything is used in the ceremony, it has to have your complete approval! One of the great benefits of having your story told by the celebrant is that you have total control of the contents.

This is very different from the situation at your reception where, in ninety-nine cases out of 100, you do not know what is going to come out of the mouths of your speech givers... it could be terrific, or it could be embarrassing, or even inappropriate – you have to take your chances. But when you send your story, whether detailed or abridged, to the celebrant, he or she can use only what you have sent, because those are the only facts he or she knows. So it's entirely up to you to choose what to share and what to keep to yourselves.

Sharing your story at the ceremony is also a very pleasant, and often light-hearted way, to relive the journey that has brought you to your wedding day.

It is an opportunity for some of your guests to hear it for the first time. For those who already know your story, it is a chance to savour their favourite parts and share your memories.

A fun approach is to write it from your respective points of view—for example, his first impression of her and her first impression of him. the proposal from his point of view, the proposal from her point of view... Couples often like to include funny moments and episodes as well as more important ones. Your story can be told in detail or very concisely. It is entirely up to you.

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Wedding Rehearsal Tips

A wedding rehearsal is an important way to ensure that the ceremony itself runs as smoothly as possible. The rehearsal serves many purposes.

It is a chance to do a run-through of the real things, so that you — and everyone who is participating — knows how it feels, how long it takes, and who is standing where, and who is doing what when.

When I plan a wedding rehearsal, I treat it like the dress rehearsal for a show.

We go word for word, ritual for ritual, reading for reading, action for action, through the entire ceremony (though you do not say your vows, saving them for the day of the actual wedding ceremony).

I try to go through the ceremony without stopping, if at all possible. However, the wedding rehearsal is also the time when it is possible to pause to make adjustments, or to rerun any elements so that they go smoothly.

A rehearsal is a chance to practise readings, rituals, processions, and placement of people. It is a chance for you, the wedding couple, to actually hear your ceremony and savour it. On the actual day, you will likely be in a state of such euphoria, and so full of adrenaline, that it will rush by you like a dream.

Wedding rehearsals are also very good safety valves. Friends and relations, and you yourselves, may be inclined to show your excitement and joy by goofing off and giving smart aleck answers to questions such as the one about whether you intend to marry each other (the right answer is “I do”) or whether your family and friends give their support to your marriage. It’s okay at the rehearsal to say, “hmmn, I have to think about that one,” or “maybe.”

At the ceremony, you want to hear only, and very loudly, “I do,” or “We do!” from your spouse and from all your guests. So the rehearsal is a good place to get the goofiness out and be ready to be happy and joyful, but not goofy or wisecracking, during the ceremony on the day.

If at all possible, have the rehearsal at the venue where your wedding will take place, and if it’s outdoors, at the time of day the ceremony will take place. That way, you can really get the logistics fine-tuned, for placement of people, and position of the sun, so that, for example, no one is looking directly into the sun as they make vows, or do readings.

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And finally, the rehearsal serves as a virtually failsafe test to be sure that you have all the “props” needed for the actual ceremony, from candles to sand, to wine glasses, coins, ribbons, or whatever you may be planning to give your wedding ceremony a personal flair.

Of course, a rehearsal is not a guarantee that everything will run perfectly or smoothly on the day, but it is an excellent preparation. And besides, it is my experience that there is almost always some little unexpected thing that happens, and almost every time it is something good.

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Tips to de-stress families at weddings

Family and Guests

With a little forward planning it's perfectly feasible to have the wedding of your dreams, while respecting the wishes of family members.

When family and friends have divergent views, or are from different cultures or religions, you may think it's impossible, especially if you're dealing with estranged parents or tricky siblings with strong views... but these are issues that can be resolved, at the very least, for long enough for everyone to behave in a civilized manner on your wedding day.

The key is to consider what makes you as a couple happy, and plan ahead to help defuse any potential for a tense situation. Think about what your family might expect or appreciate and try to work with it. Many couples today are spiritual, but not conventionally religious, and this sometimes leads to conflict. Ceremonies may be interfaith or involve different cultures and languages.

It's important to respect your own beliefs and wishes on your important day, yet you may also wish to honour your heritage or the wishes of your parents. A family member may want to have a blessing, but you or your partner may not be religious. A way round this issue is to choose to have blessings that are not religious, yet meaningful.

I often encourage the soon-to-be-married couple to involve family members in an active role. Perhaps have the mothers helping to light candles and grandparents giving readings. Assigning defined roles to family members and including them in some way in the ceremony often helps as everyone has the same goal of making the wedding a special day for everyone.

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Tips to include older children

Whether it is their first or subsequent marriage, many couples have children whom they wish to include actively in the ceremony.

We are talking here about anything from ring bearers to flower girls and groomsmen or groom's boys to the select list of people called upon to do or say something as part of the ceremony.

At some weddings, the children are the ones to *give this woman to this man and this man to this woman*.

At others, the children have given a reading of a poem, sung a song, performed a special dance, or played a musical instrument.

Blending families at the wedding

I have also created wedding ceremonies where the couple is blending two families – *his* children, *her* children and *our* children. For these couples, I have written special words to say to the children, about being welcomed into the new family and being so loved and such important and precious members of the family. Often this part of the ceremony includes the giving of gifts by the couple to the children.

And sometimes the child or children will say words of welcome to the new parent.

Children unhappy about the wedding?

In rare circumstances, the child or children may be finding it difficult to accept the new “mother” or “father”.

It's wise to be sensitive to how they are feeling, and take the time in the months leading up to the wedding to prepare them for the ceremony and to talk to them about their feelings and yours.

If any of the children is particularly upset about the situation, it may be worth making alternative plans for them to be doing something else during the actual ceremony.

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It is also a sanity-saver for you to be flexible, and to be prepared for the child or children to change their minds at the last minute as to whether they want, or don't want, to be at the wedding. Forcing them to be there makes everyone unhappy.

In almost all weddings I've been to where the families are blending, the children have come around, and been delighted to be involved in the ceremony.

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Tips to include small children

Many couples want their own or other people's small children to be included in the wedding ceremony. This can be very charming and special. It can also be a cause of chaos and may even end in everyone dissolving in tears—including the couple. Here are some tips to make the participation of very small children as stress-free as possible, for them and for you.

1) Make the child feel comfortable

Always ensure that there is someone with whom the child feels comfortable to walk with (or to carry them) up the aisle – whether it is an attendant, the bridal couple, or someone in your wedding party. You may also ask a grandparent, aunt, uncle, brother, sister, or nanny. A solution that has often worked very well is to have one parent set the child on its way at the bottom of the aisle, and the other wait at the end. If the child gets stage fright, he or she can just be picked up, carried, and comforted. On several occasions, a very young child has been carried up the aisle in the arms of the bride or groom and has participated in the wedding in that way.

2) Carrying the rings—have a backup plan!

If you choose to have a small child, say under the age of six, as your ring bearer, it is a good idea to have them carry fake rings, tied to the pillow or in a box, or to make sure the Best Man or someone else in the wedding party retrieves the rings once the child has walked up the aisle. Then you'll be sure that the rings are available and ready for the "Exchange of Rings" part of the ceremony. Be prepared that the child may simply have a meltdown in the presence of so many strangers and will need to be taken away from all the excitement to calm down. Everyone loves to see a child running about and chatting during the ceremony. No one is happy if that child is crying or having a tantrum. Make sure you have a backup plan, and are prepared to be flexible and can work round moods or crankiness. It is lovely to include children in the ceremony, but a backup plan and making sure someone is in 'charge and keeping an eye' and can step in and help, will be a bonus.

3) Children as guests at the wedding

If your guests have been invited to bring along their very young children, it might be as well to ask (in advance) if they will keep an eye on them to avoid holdups or too much distraction during the proceedings. It's not unusual to suggest that if their child becomes very unhappy during the ceremony, would they mind taking charge and taking him or her out of the room or garden where the ceremony is being held so that it may proceed peacefully. It is not fair to the wedding couple or to the guests if the ceremony is disrupted and, least of all, to the child, to be wailing and upset.

P.S. If you are expecting lots of guests with very young children, it might be worth investing in a child minder or two for during the ceremony and even for the reception.

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Wedding Etiquette Tips

Punctuality and Timing

You should never be late for a wedding—barring unforeseen or unavoidable delays or disasters.

One of the most important matters for guests to respect on your wedding day is to arrive on time—this means at the time specified in the invitation, give or take (maximum!) 10 minutes.

If you're a guest, it doesn't matter if your experience has been that none of the weddings you've ever attended started at the advertised time... It is still important to believe and behave as if it will, so that the ceremony is not held up while everyone waits for you to arrive, or that you disrupt the proceedings when you do arrive. This is good wedding manners. Your late arrival could mar the ceremony and affect the happy couple's memories of the day.

Being punctual is particularly important if you are in the wedding party. The couple will likely be feeling rather stressed and excited, and you do not want to increase the stress by having them worry about where you are and when you will arrive.

Getting there on time requires a little work on your part. Figure out where you will be coming from and how long it is likely to take you to get there, allowing for traffic and weather conditions. This is especially so if you need to travel in rush hour, or from one end of the city to the other, or far out of town on a Friday afternoon, for example. If you possibly can, give yourself extra time to allow for the unexpected, so that you get there early instead of cutting it so fine that the chances are you'll be late and arrived stressed out.

If it is winter, be sure to allow for longer travel times because of snow or ice or generally problematic driving conditions—heavy rains and flooded roads perhaps.

Of course, traffic or weather conditions or accidents are not something you can control. If you find you are running late, for whatever reason, if at all possible phone or text someone at the wedding to let them know what is happening, and when you think you will be there.

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Avoid Problems on the Wedding Day/at Rehearsal

You do not want to be like one notorious mother of the bride who arrived 45 minutes late for the rehearsal because she had underestimated cross-town traffic. And the very next day, for the ceremony, made exactly the same miscalculation, causing everyone from bride to musicians to celebrant to groom to guests to be totally stressed out, and for the ceremony to be cut down from a 25 minute to a five-minute ceremony. The celebrant had another wedding to go to, something which the couple and everyone else concerned knew. But the bride refused to proceed without her mother being present. So, after months of hard work and designing together a beautiful, meaningful ceremony, sadly, it had to be cut short.

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Wedding Photography Etiquette

Most professional and experienced amateur photographers have an excellent understanding of how to get beautiful and candid photographs of the ceremony without getting underfoot or in the way of the couple, their bridal party, and the celebrant. It's also very important that the photographers—professional or experienced amateur—not block the guests' view of the ceremony.

Most photographers are pretty good at making themselves unobtrusive. They know how to kneel, or squat, and move around quietly to get the pictures you'll want to keep to remember your day.

It is a good idea for you, the couple, to talk to the photographer ahead of time about whether they object to guests taking photos during the ceremony, especially if the ceremony is indoors. Guests using flash, whether on camera or mobiles, can seriously impact the quality of the professional photos. As well, people may be popping in and out of their seats and standing up or moving around for good angles to take a photo with their mobile. This could will ruin the photographer's carefully composed shots. After all, there's a reason you have hired a professional, and you want wonderful photos of your special day.

It's also important to decide whether you as a couple mind guests snapping away during the ceremony. This can be disruptive and obtrusive. If you would rather they did not, and that they paid attention to the ceremony instead, ask your celebrant to spell that out right at the beginning of the ceremony, when she announces that the ceremony is about to begin:

"James and Sarah have requested that you give them the gift of your attention during their ceremony and not take photographs. They promise there will be ample paparazzi opportunities *after* the ceremony."

I had one bride who was so strict about no-guest-photography that she paused mid-kiss to yell at her father, "Put that camera away!" before continuing with the kiss.

It's also important to clarify with the photographer whether you wish him or her to take only candid, rather than posed pictures, during the ceremony. In other words, do you want the action of the ceremony to be continuous or do you want to pose for shots of you exchanging rings, vows or kisses?

My preference, shared with most of the couples I've worked with, is that the action of the ceremony should be a continuous flow, that the place for posed photographs is before or after the ceremony, and that, in any case, most professional photographers worth their salt get fabulous photos on the go.

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This is a matter I always discuss with the photographers as soon as I arrive at a venue, so that we know the ground rules.

And, finally, if you plan to depart straight after the ceremony for a photo shoot, with or without your bridal party and family, do ensure that there are light refreshments for your guests while you are gone and before the reception begins. We have all been to weddings where the couple seems to be gone for ever, and the guests are left hungry and thirsty, twiddling their thumbs for a couple of hours.

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Guest Etiquette for Weddings

It is a fact of life that people take their phones with them everywhere, and find it almost impossible not to use them constantly to text, twitter, Instagram, photograph, and film anything and everything. That's fine—a lot of the time.

However, at a wedding, it is distracting and downright rude to be so busy snapping away (and performing all sorts of other social media activities!) that you are not actually paying attention to what is happening during the ceremony. At the wedding, you should feel and be in the moment with the couple. When you're looking through a lens... you're not.

Taking pictures at the ceremony also interferes with the enjoyment and comfort of the other guests. And it can block the view of the proceedings if people are constantly popping out of their chairs or leaning sideways to get a good snap of the couple.

I have been at weddings where the guests were so brazen, and inconsiderate, about taking photos, that they crowded to the altar and blocked the way for the bride and groom to get there, so busy were they snapping away. It was almost time to call for the crowd-control cops!

Of course, some couples and some official photographers are just fine with all this activity. But if they are not, and especially if they specifically request that you refrain from doing all these things during their ceremony, it is simply good manners to respect their request.

There will always be masses of opportunities to take photos and videos and to send tweets and Instagram's after the ceremony and during the reception.

P.S. Many couples put disposable cameras at each table, so their guests can take candid photos during the reception, or they set up a photo booth for guests.

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