



HOW TO PLAN & EXECUTE YOUR PERFECT WEDDING CEREMONY

There are so many elements that go into the perfect wedding ceremony. Although most couples focus all of their attention on the reception, and the “party” part of wedding planning, executing a beautiful and intentional ceremony is equally important, and creates the perfect start to your wedding celebration.

Whether you’re getting married in a church, outdoors, or another indoor venue, your ceremony requires the most direction, and I highly recommend hiring either a wedding planner, or have a good friend or family member be in charge of this portion of your day. It’s important that whoever you choose is very comfortable in stressful situations as they have a very small window of time to execute things perfectly.

WHO IS INVOLVED IN YOUR WEDDING CEREMONY?

- The Wedding Venue
- Your Wedding Officiant
- DJ or Musicians
- Decorator
- Rental Company
- Don’t forget the marriage license!
- Florist
- Photographer
- Videographer
- Wedding Director
- Bride & Groom
- Wedding Party
- Parents
- Grandparents
- Recognized Guests
- Wedding Guests

Did you realize there were so many people involved in executing your perfect ceremony?? Now, you may not opt to have all of these vendors, or maybe some of them play multiple roles, but you can see it’s a lot to coordinate for what is usually less than 30 minutes of your entire wedding day. How do you make sure your ceremony goes off flawlessly? Remember, although we may stress about the cake, or



the perfect dress, or family drama, THIS is the MOST important part of your entire wedding day. As long as you're married at the end of the day, that's all that matters.

So, where do you begin? Let's start with a list of questions, you can go over as a couple when planning your wedding. The answers to these questions will help shape what you want your wedding to look and feel like. These also help you work through some of the logistics that aren't as fun as picking your wedding theme, or decor style. Remember, these questions only refer to your ceremony. You'll find all the other information regarding your reception, and general planning with our other checklists and wedding tools.

START HERE

SELECTING A VENUE

Do you want an indoor ceremony, or outdoor ceremony? Do you want to get married in a church? What about having a destination wedding?

Things to consider.

GENERAL QUESTIONS

- Is there adequate parking?
- What amenities does the venue include?
- Do you need to rent chairs or tables?
- How many guests can the venue accommodate?
- Are there any decorating restrictions?
- When you rent the venue, how many hours does your rental include?
- Are you required to use their vendors, or hire your own?
- Do they have a sound system or built in speakers?
- What amenities are included in the base price, and what do they charge extra for?

CHURCH/CHAPEL

- What is the distance from the church to the reception venue?
- Is there space to get ready?
- What type of music is allowed to be played?
- Are there any restrictions on decorations?
- How many people can the sanctuary seat?
- Do you need to be a member of the church?
- Where at the church do you want to do your wedding photos?



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OUTDOOR CEREMONY

- Is there a rain contingency plan?
- Would you need to rent a tent? (TENTS ARE EXPENSIVE!)
- How far do your guests have to walk to get to the ceremony location from the parking area? If it's far, do they offer a shuttle, or golf carts for use?
- Are there activities allowed in the same general area at the time of your ceremony? (Beach, Park, Golf Course, Etc.) There may be bystanders.
- Is there power available for the DJ, and how close is it to the ceremony site?
- Is there a covered area for musicians? (if you're using them)
- What are the decorating restrictions?
- What will the venue look like during different times of the year.
 - Will the grass be green, landscaping complete?
- Is there a space to get ready?
- Can you offer water, and or drinks to your guests before the ceremony if it's hot out?
- How long will your guests be sitting outside, and what are the projected temperatures? Do you need to bring fans, sunscreen, or bug spray?
- Are there bathrooms nearby?
- What will your processional look like? Where will people enter from?
- Where will you take your wedding photos?
- Is your reception space near by? If so, where would cocktail hour take place?
- Do you have exclusive access to the property, or is it shared with other groups?
 - For example a golf club, beach, or public park

INDOOR CEREMONY

- Is there a space to get ready?
- Does the venue have air conditioning or heating?
- Where are the bathrooms located?
- How do you enter the space for your processional?
- Where will the DJ, or musicians be located?
- How many chairs can you fit in the space? How wide is the aisle?
- Is the ceremony space separate from the reception space?
 - Sometimes venues use the same space and "flip" it during cocktail hour



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CEREMONY OPTIONS

- Do you want to hire live musicians, or have a DJ provide all of your music?
- Do you want to hand out wedding programs?
 - How will these be distributed or displayed?
- What are the requirements in your state for wedding officiants? Some states allow anyone to marry you, and others require an ordained minister or registered officiant.
- What kind of wedding ceremony do you want? Do you want it to be religious, spiritual, or something completely unique?
- Do you want to say scripted vows, or write your own?
- Do you want to hire a videographer, or just have a photographer?
- Does your minister need a podium, or table to stand behind?
- Who is providing speakers and microphones for your service? Are they wireless or handheld?
- What type of decor do you want for your ceremony?
 - Flowers
 - Hanging Flowers
 - Pillars
 - Lighting
 - Draping
 - Aisle Runner
 - Flower Petal Aisle Runner
 - Chair Sashes
 - Chair Decorations
 - Lanterns
 - Signs
 - Pick a seat not a side
 - Cell phone usage
 - Reserved signs
 - Schedule
 - Welcome Signs (at entrance of venue or ceremony area)
 - Reserved Seating
 - Easels
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 - 6. Do you need any rentals?
 - Unity Ceremony Table
 - Guest seating
 - Misc. Tables: Guest Book, Gifts, Programs, Beverages
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- 7. Do you want to have a unity ceremony?
 - Unity Candle
 - Sand Ceremony
 - Plant a tree
 - Anniversary Box
 - Wine
 - Love Letter Box
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- *There are a lot of different options available, but please remember a few things. If you do a unity painting, or plant a tree, it's quite possible you'll get your wedding dress dirty. If you do a unity candle, a lot of times they don't work outdoors as a gentle breeze will blow them out. Make sure whatever you pick is meaningful to you.*
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- 8. Do you want anyone to do a special reading, or perform a song during your ceremony? Sometimes this is a good way to incorporate your family or friends who are not in the wedding party.
- 9. Do you want your caterer, or the venue to provide any food or beverages while your guests are waiting for your ceremony? If you have an outdoor ceremony consider serving ice water, or hot chocolate. Especially if it's hot or chilly outside. Do you want the bar open before cocktail hour begins.

MUSIC

What I love about weddings are the pieces that make it unique to the couple. This is what makes your wedding memorable! Music is one of the ways to really show your personality. It can tell a story, create a mood, or be super traditional, whatever you want to communicate to your guests. Everyone remembers the YouTube video of the couple who had a coriographed processional to Chris Brown's "Forever" To date it has several million views, and has been copied on popular TV shows like "The Office." I love that This couple had FUN, and made a huge statement that didn't cost a penny extra. Now most couples won't go that far, but you get the idea.

Here is a list of all the music decisions that need to be made for your wedding ceremony. Please keep in mind, you don't necessarily need separate music for each one of these, but some couples do choose to have a lot of variety. Others choose to have the same song played for several groups. Don't forget to check out our list of favorite ceremony music.

- Music played while your guests are arriving and being seated.



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- Seating of the Grandparents. (sometimes they're part of the processional, and other times they're seated with the other guests. See processional notes for more information)
- Seating of the Parents
- Bridal Party Music
- Processional of the Bride
- Music played during Unity Ceremony
- Recessional

WEDDING PROCESSIONAL

So here's the thing. There are a million ways to do a wedding processional depending on who all is included, and what traditions you prefer to follow. There is the very traditional Emily Post way of completing a wedding processional, and then there are ways to personalize it, and really make it work for you. So we'll start with what's most traditional, but you can shake it up a little to. I'll also give what I believe to be best practices and what I've seen work, and not work in the 200+ weddings I've completed.

TRADITIONAL PROCESSIONAL

Usher's seat all guests. Brides guests are seated on the left side of the aisle, and grooms guests are seated on the right side of the aisle. The front rows are reserved for your special guests, usually immediate family. The two front row seats on either side of the aisle are reserved for the mother of the bride, and mother of the groom.

1. Grooms Grandmother - Escorted by husband
2. Brides Grandmother - Escorted by husband
3. Grooms Mother - Escorted by husband
4. Brides Mother - By herself
5. Minister, Groom, and Groomsmen enter the ceremony area. Traditionally they enter from the side of the ceremony area and do not walk down the aisle.
6. Ushers
7. Bridesmaids



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8. Matron of Honor
9. Maid of Honor
10. Flowergirl
11. Ring Bearer
12. Bride - Escorted on the RIGHT arm of her father

Now as you can see by looking at this VERY traditional wedding processional, it doesn't take into account any variances in family make up, blended families, or your preferences. Lots of couples have to figure out how to include step parents, or other family members or friends that feel it is their RIGHT to be in your wedding. It's a balancing and juggling act, and another reason why a wedding director is so important for your ceremony as they'll handle these issues. Let's start with each piece and break down the options.

USHERS

I rarely see ushers anymore in weddings, and I personally think they're a HUGE asset when organizing your guests when they arrive. These can either be bridal party members playing an extra role before the ceremony starts, or other friends and family that are available to help. In most weddings there are more people interested in participating in your wedding than you have spots. This is where you add those people in.

Ushers can seat the guests and make sure all the seats are filled in. If you are expecting 100 guests, and your venue sets up 100 chairs, you need to make sure every seat is filled and guests aren't leaving a single seat in between groups.

Do you have reserved seats for designated family and friends? Usher's help to make sure the right people are in the right seats! This saves a lot of confusion when people are finding exactly where to sit.

Do you have programs that need to be handed out? Flower petals that you want guests to throw? A random family member that thinks they need to sit in the front row? Your ushers can handle all of this.

Guests tend to arrive to your ceremony about 30 minutes early. They need to be directed to the ceremony area, and not be trying to get into your reception space or wandering around. If it's a venue that has a bar, most guests gravitate to this area before the ceremony starts. Your ushers will need to round up all of your guests and let them know it's time to be seated. This is especially important if you're running a little behind schedule, or the ceremony is outside on a hot or cold day. Guests don't want to take their seats until they absolutely have to.



Ushers can also help handle the late guests. We've all seen them sneaking in right when the wedding procession is about to start. They can help hold those guests until after the processional is complete, or sneak them in a side door. This helps to ensure there are no interruptions for the wedding party, or the photographers trying to get the perfect shot.

GRANDPARENTS

If you want your grandparents to be part of your processional, that's great, but keep in mind, this does add a lot to the coordination. It's potentially four extra couples starting your wedding procession. Here are some pointers.

Make sure they are at your rehearsal. This is really important as they need to sit in designated places, and you don't want them asking where to sit 30 seconds before they're walking down the aisle. Make sure they know exactly where their seats are, and that they're marked clearly so other guests don't take their seats accidentally.

Are your grandparents participating physically able to walk down the aisle. I know this seems pretty basic, but I see this all the time! They need to use a walker or a cane, and it's a lot of standing and waiting to get everyone organized and moving. They might be much more comfortable being seated with your other guests. Some grandparents who aren't as spry as they used to be also don't like to be the center of attention in front of all of your guests as they proceed down the aisle. Make sure to ask them if they want to be part of this.

Anyone can escort your grandmother's if they aren't married, or their spouse has passed away. This could be someone in the wedding party, or a sibling or close relative of the bride or groom that isn't in the official wedding party.

Make sure your grandparents know where to be before the ceremony starts. Everyone who is involved in the processional, need to be in a designated area about 30 minutes prior to the ceremony starting. This allows your wedding director to do a roll call to make sure everyone is in place and ready to go on time. Make sure you have seats available for your grandparents to sit as they're waiting as they could be standing for a long time.

PARENTS

Best Practice

Traditionally the bride's family and friends sit on the left side of the aisle and the groom's family friends sit on the right. Even if this tradition isn't followed for all your guests, the mother of the bride and the mother of the groom normally stick to their respective sides.



Consider this. Have them switch places. This allows both moms to be able to see the faces of the bride and groom as they're exchanging vows, and not the back of their heads. It's much more meaningful to see their expressions, and for them to be able to MAKE EYE CONTACT WITH THOSE WHO THEY LOVE THE MOST DURING THIS SPECIAL TIME.

Depending on your family composition, this can be super simple, or a little tricky. Weddings bring out the crazy in some people, and certain family members will force their opinions and wishes on others. Specifically the BRIDE AND GROOM. DO YOU HAVE STEP PARENTS? ARE your parents divorced, and have a really bad relationship? Do you have anyone who would normally participate in your wedding that you don't want to be a part of it? All these things have to be figured out ahead of time, or others will force their will on you and your wedding ceremony. When making these decisions just make sure to communicate with everyone very clearly so they know the expectations. It is extremely important that whoever is directing your wedding ceremony knows exactly who you want to be a part of it. Who would force themselves into your wedding processional 10 minutes before it's supposed to start? I've seen it people. I've seen it happen SO many times. Good planning can fix MOST of these issues.

So let's keep this simple and you can fit your family dynamics into these basic rules.

GROOMS MOM (MOTHER FIGURE)

The grooms mom is the first parent to be seated. She can be escorted by her husband, her significant other, a designated escort, or my favorite, THE GROOM. As a mother of one son this is my wish for his wedding day. I would love us to have that moment of him escorting me to my seat, as well as that special photograph that will be captured. If your mom is married, her husband/grooms dad can walk behind the mother and groom, or take his seat before the processional.

If the groom has a step-mom they want to include, she would walk down the aisle before the groom's biological mom. If your parents are divorced, but not yet remarried, it's up to you if you want their significant others in your wedding processional. Keep in mind whoever they are will be in your wedding photos forever.

BRIDES MOM (MOTHER FIGURE)

The bride's mom is the last parent to be seated, and specifically the last guest to be seated before the official processional of the wedding party begins. She can walk by herself, be escorted by her significant other (maybe the parents are divorced), or have anyone you designate escort her to her seat. Just make sure whoever it is, she feels very comfortable with them.

If the bride has a step-mom they want to include, she would walk down the aisle before the bride's biological mom. Make sure they know exactly where you want them seated for the ceremony. If the



moms get along that's fantastic, if not I'd put them in separate rows. Again, if your parents are divorced, but not yet remarried, it's up to you if you want their significant others in your wedding processional.

WEDDING PARTY

You finally got through all the parents and grandparents, and now you have a whole new set of questions to ask yourself. I wasn't kidding when I said a wedding processional was a lot to orchestrate. :)

Do you want your bridal party walking down the aisle as couples, or do you want them walking individually. This will help answer most of your questions before you begin. Think about how you want your pictures to look and if it's a good fit for your group. If you have uneven numbers, having them walk in pairs may emphasize this, or you can have your maid of honor walk by herself as a distinguished bridal attendant.

GROOM OPTIONS

Walk with his mother.

Follow the minister down the aisle walking single file

Walk down the aisle single file followed by all of his groomsmen

Enter from the side with the minister and groomsmen.

THINGS TO CONSIDER.

What pictures do you want? If the groom is walking down the aisle, this gives your photographer a chance to get a really good photo of him. Make sure your wedding director spaces out groups in your processional to give the photographer enough time to get shots of everyone.

Does the groom want a personalized song for his processional entrance?

Does the groom want to be in the spotlight, or does he prefer to sneak in without the fanfare.

Bridal Party

Bridesmaids/Groomsmen



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At this point either the bridesmaids are entering individually, or escorted by the groomsmen. They will enter in the opposite order of where they stand at the altar. The ones that stand the farthest away will be the first ones down the aisle.

Maid of Honor - Escorted by Best Man

Flower Girl

Ring Bearer

BRIDE - Traditionally escorted by her father, but this role can be filled by anyone who you feel is significant in your life.

QUICK GUIDE & SUMMARY

CEREMONY VENDORS

- The Wedding Venue
- Your Wedding Officiant
- DJ or Musicians
- Decorator
- Rental Company (if not provided by the venue)
- Don't forget the marriage license!
- Caterer (If you want beverages served for your guests)
- Florist
- Photographer
- Videographer
- Wedding Director

CEREMONY MUSIC

- Seating of the guests
- Seating of the grandparents
- Seating of the parents
- Bridal Party Entrance
- Bride's Entrance
- Unity Ceremony Song
- Recessional

SIGNS

- Welcome

- Cell Phone Use During Ceremony
- Seating
- Directions

RENTAL LIST (If Venue Doesn't Provide)

Chairs (always get a few extra)
Tables

Altar Ceremony
Gift Table
Guestbook Table
Beverage Table

EXTRAS

Wedding Programs
Wedding Signs (optional)
Easels (optional)
Flower Petal Aisle Runner
Card Box/Container
Unity Ceremony Supplies
Guest Book
Pens/Markers
Flower Girl Basket
Ring Bearer Sign, box, etc



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Reserved Signs
Sunscreen/Bug Spray (If outdoors)
Clear Umbrellas (If outdoors)

FLOWERS

- Bridal Bouquet
- Bridesmaids Bouquets
- Corsages
 - Grandmothers
 - Mothers
 - Minister (if female)
- Boutonnieres
 - Groomsmen
 - Fathers
 - Grandfathers
 - Minister (if male)
- Flower Girl Petals
 - Most venues require you to use real flower petals.
 - Any flowers used for decor
- Ceremony Decor
 - Chair markers
 - Entry Flowers
 - Altar Decor
 - Flowers for Unity Ceremony
 - Garlands for signs

PROCESSIONAL OPTIONS

CLASSIC

1. Grandparents of the Groom
2. Grandparents of the Bride
3. Parents of the Groom
4. Mother of the Bride
5. Minister, Groom, Best Man
Groomsmen Enter (from the side)
6. Bridesmaid Processional
7. Maid of Honor
8. Flower Girl
9. Ring Bear
10. Bride & Escort

GROOM ESCORTS MOM

1. Grandparents of the Groom
2. Grandparents of the Bride
3. Minister
4. Groom Escorts his Mother
5. Mother of the Bride & Escort
6. Groomsmen Single File Processional
7. Bridesmaid Processional
8. Maid of Honor
9. Flower Girl
10. Bride & Escort



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TWO BY TWO

1. Grandparents of the Groom
2. Grandparents of the Bride
3. Mother of the Groom & Escort
4. Mother of the Bride & Escort
5. Minister
6. Groom
7. Bridesmaids/Groomsmen in pairs
8. Maid of Honor & Best Man
9. Flower Girl
10. Ring Bearer
11. Bride & Escort

PERSONAL FAVORITE

1. All Grandparents already seated
2. Minister
3. Groom Escorts his Mother
4. Mother of the Bride & Escort
5. Bridesmaids/Groomsmen in pairs
6. Maid of Honor & Best Man
7. Flower Girl
8. Ring Bearer
9. Bride & Escort