

Planning Your Wedding

After you've announced the exciting news and taken some time to bask in your newly engaged glow, it's time to get seriously busy. Here are the first three wedding planning tasks you absolutely must accomplish before anything else. Cross these items off your wedding checklist - and you're on your way.

Step 1: Decide on a Budget

Every decision stems from the wedding budget. Before you can plan anything, you must know how much you can spend and who plans to contribute. Your budget will determine the type of wedding you can have - from how many guests you invite, to where and when you host your wedding, right down to the specific blooms in your bouquet. And with the ever increasing cost of weddings, financing the event is often a group effort; the bride's parents no longer need to take out a second mortgage just to fund the upcoming nuptials. You'll need to talk to your families about who will pay for what, and arrive at a total wedding budget. See the "Saving Your Budget" article at the end of this guide.

Step 2: Tackle the Guest List

Some "checklists" suggest setting a date and commencing other wedding plans before this step, but the guest count is the most vital decision after the budget. Here's why: Capacity is one of the most important criteria in finding a suitable wedding venue - more so even than style and vision - and you must secure your location before you can successfully plan anything else. Cramming 300 people into a venue that seats 150 will not go over well. You don't need to have the list finalized just yet, but you'll need an estimate from both sides of the family (and yourselves) right away to avert countless planning headaches down the road.

Step 3: Set a Site and Date

Only once you have an estimated budget and guest count can you begin searching for a place to hold your event with any accuracy. Remember - many reception sites book over a year in advance, so you really can't decide on a wedding date until you have officially booked your venue with a signed contract. Find as many reception sites that meet your budget, capacity and overall style quotient as you can. Then schedule appointments to tour each wedding venue and meet with the manager. After that-it's decision making time.

As you may have heard it said, once you find your reception site, everything else falls into place. Once you have accomplished these steps, you will find the rest of your planning task list a piece of, ahem, wedding cake.

Your Wedding Budget

Get started with these three steps to setting your wedding budget

The numbers are in, and they aren't pretty. With the average wedding cost at over \$28,000, it's no wonder tackling the budget is one of the most overwhelming tasks on your to-do list. We've sorted the figures to help you put it all in perspective and build a plan of attack.

Step 1: Talk to all contributing parties

As the cost of weddings increase, so does the number of people paying for them (good news for the bride's parents, who no longer need to take out a second mortgage to fund their daughter's nuptials). You'll need to sit down with everyone who is going to contribute to the wedding-day piggy bank and discuss how to logically divide the tab and arrive at a total number.

The old-school rules dictating who pays for what are meant to be broken, but you can definitely use these wedding etiquette guidelines on who pays for what as a starting point for your budget discussion.

Step 2: Allocate totals for each service accordingly

Now that you've arrived at a reasonable total budget, you'll need to determine where that money is going to go. Come up with a list of items/vendors/details you'll need, and how much you'll allocate to each. Then you can customize each amount based on your style and priorities. If a fabulous wedding gown is particularly important to you, you may splurge in that area, and make up for it by cutting back on your floral arrangements.

Step 3: Get a system and start saving

You'll need to establish a reliable method to keep track of all savings and expenditures. There are endless ways to save and track your finances, from sophisticated software to old-fashioned spreadsheets. You can download easy-to-use budgeting software at My Wedding Organizer, Five Star Software or Elm Software for \$29.95.

[www.elmsoftware.com]

Bank it

If you've already got a hefty seed to put down for your affair, talk with your financial institution about the best way to accrue interest leading up to your big day. A seemingly nominal interest rate can mean the difference between Vera Wang and hand-me-

downs. Just be sure to open an account separate from your personal savings so that you won't be tempted to dip into the funds and ultimately find yourself in the hole.

Save smart

If you are starting from zero with your wedding-day savings, consider paying for as many of your expenses as possible on a credit card that amasses benefits like frequent flier miles, rewards, or cash back that can go toward your honeymoon travel.

Wedding Budget Etiquette - Who Pays for What?

Tradition states that the bride's parents are responsible for fronting the bill for the wedding reception; these days, the bride's parents, groom's parents, and the couple themselves all contribute to the wedding pool. That said, it helps to come to the budgeting table prepped with the traditional list of which side pays for what. These conventional "rules" can then be adjusted according to your financial situations:

Wedding Costs Paid by the Bride and/or Bride's Parents:

- Ceremony rental fee
- Bride's dress and accessories
- Ceremony flowers and décor
- Bouquets for bridesmaids and flower girl
- Photography and videography
- Engagement party
- Bridesmaids' luncheon
- All vendor services for reception, including food, beverages, décor, and entertainment
- Groom's ring
- Invitations and stationery
- Transportation for bridal party to and from ceremony and reception

Wedding Costs Paid by the Groom and/or Groom's Parents:

- Marriage license and officiant's fee
- Groom's attire
- Bride's bouquet, boutonnieres for ushers, and corsages for mothers and grandmothers
- Honeymoon Travel
- Rehearsal dinner
- Bachelors' dinner
- Both of the bride's rings

Costs Incurred by the Wedding Attendants:

- Their own attire, including shoes and accessories
- Bridal party hosts bridal shower and bachelorette party

- Groom's party hosts the bachelor party

How to Stick to Your Wedding Budget

Step 1: Get a Budgeting System

Establish a reliable method to keep track of all expenditures. Try to keep your wedding fund separate from your personal accounts, so you can easily determine what's being spent on the wedding.

Step 2: Prepare to Go Over

Set aside five percent of your budget for a just-in-case fund. If you absolutely cannot exceed \$20,000, aim to spend \$19,000. When last minute costs come up (and they will), your reserve funds will save you from debt.

Some common costs you may not have considered when setting your initial budget:

- Tips for your vendors – 15-25% is customary for certain services. Trial runs - make-up and hairstyling – about \$20-\$100 each
- Overtime fees if your reception goes longer than expected – anywhere from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars
- Last minute dress cleanings or tux pressings – anywhere from \$50-\$100 each
- Postage for invitations and stamps for RSVPs – cost depends on how heavy your mailings are and how many you send
- Marriage license fees – approximately \$15-\$90; depending on state

Step 3: Cut Back

Serve three courses instead of five (save on catering). Have four bridesmaids instead of 10 (save on bouquets and gifts). Invite 150 guests instead of 200 (save on almost everything).

Step 4: Beware the Up-sell

With every detail planned, someone is going to try to up-sell you. Don't crack under pressure! The fabulous designer dress, the top shelf bar, the succulent lobster tail – they all seem like good ideas at the time, but be wary that all of these upgrades add up. The key is to prioritize beforehand. If you want to serve an elaborate five-course meal with all the bells and whistles, you may have to sacrifice your dream of a 10-piece ensemble.

Step 5: Tighten the Purse Strings

Here's a goal – try to save 20% of your income for your wedding expenses. It may sound impossible, but there are easy ways to cut corners in your personal life to make saving for your wedding a tad easier. Simple lifestyle changes like brown bagging your lunch to work, cooking meals at home, brewing your own coffee, renting a DVD instead of pricey trips to the theatre, and inviting your friends over instead of expensive evenings at the club all add up to substantial savings. The best part? You can take these thrifty habits into your marriage – and make it easier to save for other big ticket items like a new home, vacations or a college fund.

Your Wedding Dress

Chances are your wedding dress will be the most important clothing purchase of your life. Yes, you will only wear it once; but, will you ever wear another dress more anticipated and more talked about? And while this is indeed an important clothing decision, you have probably never gone through the process of purchasing a wedding gown until now. Thankfully, I have rounded up useful advice to get you started on your way to walking down the aisle in the dress of your dreams.

Start Shopping Early

Time is of the essence. Most likely, you did not get engaged after a week of dating, so why would you want to rush such an important shopping decision? Planning a wedding is stressful, and the last thing you want to add to your worries is dress shopping. You need time. Not only do you need time to shop, but keep in mind that you will also need time to wait for your dress to arrive and time for fittings. Try to start looking for your perfect wedding dress right after you are engaged. You should aim to purchase your wedding gown at least 6 months before your wedding date, as this will ensure enough time to wait for your gown to arrive and have it tailored.

Wedding only 5 months away, and you haven't even tried on your first dress? Don't panic. While shopping early is preferred, you can always buy a dress off the rack, and many bridal salons can turn a dress around more quickly if necessary. You just may have to be a little more flexible in your dress choice.

Educate Yourself

Wedding dresses come with their own unique glossary of terms (or jargon, as you may want to call it). Before stepping foot into a bridal salon, try to brush up on your

vocabulary. There are terms for gown silhouette (the basic shape of the gown), neckline, bodice, sleeves, trains etc. Learn the basics and try to narrow down which options you prefer and which ones best suit your figure. Overwhelmed? This wedding dress styles guide provides detailed descriptions on every type of wedding gown.

Envision Your Perfect Wedding Dress

Many bridal salons do not allow you to simply browse through all their wedding dresses. They first ask you a few questions about your wedding and your overall style and bring dresses that reflect your vision to you. Therefore, it's best to have an idea of what you want before you shop. After you have educated yourself on the various parts of a dress, think about what wedding dress style suits you. Always dreamed of being a princess? A ball gown silhouette is probably your best bet. Dream of showing off a figure sculpted by hard work at the gym? A sheath dress may be perfect for you. Keep in mind that your dress, while suiting your personal style, should also suit your wedding venue. A formal ball gown is probably not appropriate for a beach wedding in the sand, while a sundress may not work in a cathedral.

Know Where to Shop

The most popular choice is the bridal salon, known for a high level of customer service. Bridal salons exist almost everywhere; you can search our local wedding services section for ones nearest you. Of course, all bridal salons are not the same. Some feature wedding gowns from multiple designers, others feature only gowns from one specific designer custom for their particular store. Price ranges vary as well. While many bridal salons offer gowns starting as low as \$300, prices at other stores can start as high as \$4000. Call and inquire before choosing a store. Brides on a tighter budget can try an outlet. Bridal outlets offer hundreds of dresses, often from past seasons, at a discounted price.

Determine Your Budget

It's best to have an idea of what you would like to spend before stepping into a bridal salon. This will save you the hassle of going to salons out of your price range or allowing the sales clerk to bring you dresses you cannot afford. The average cost of a wedding dress is around \$800. Shop around online and in magazines to get an idea of how much wedding dresses cost and how much you want to spend. In general, your wedding gown shouldn't exceed 10 percent of the cost of the wedding reception.

Now that you know the basics, this complete wedding dresses guide can walk you through the rest of the process of finding the right wedding gown for you.

Your Wedding Ceremony

It is a ritual – time honored and sacred – but that does not mean your wedding ceremony has to be like every other. Here are ten creative ways to infuse your ceremony with elements that are distinctly you.

Hey – it's all about you; take back your ceremony! Of course, some couples choose to be extremely original and opt for exchanging vows on a roller coaster, while bungee jumping or even dressed as trekies. I say – good for them for such uninhibited displays of originality. But even if you prefer a more traditional and "scream-free" wedding ceremony, you can still add a touch of personality.

Here are ten creative ways to infuse your ceremony with elements that are distinctly you.

Make the Location Memorable -

Not every wedding ceremony must take place in a house of worship. Outdoor locations and other types of ceremony sites can make for ceremonies that are both spiritual and memorable.

Refresh Your Guests -

Welcome and refresh your guests by serving lemonade, iced tea or water. It's a nice touch, and your guests will appreciate the gesture. Depending on the season or nature of your wedding, you can use your refreshment of choice to tie in the theme or style of the day.

Get Personal with Decorations -

Who says your ceremony decorations must be floral? How about draping framed photographs of the bride and groom tied with ribbon over the ends of each row? This wedding flowers and wedding decorations guide can help you create a unique and memorable decor scheme for your ceremony.

Customize Your Programs -

Summer brides – how about programs in the shape of a fan? Or keep the shape and style traditional, and include a personal letter or poem to add some interest to this often overlooked detail. This list of ideas for wedding programs has even more suggestions to get your creative juices flowing.

Make Your Entrance Grand -

There are other ways to make your entrance beyond the traditional march with your father. Ride in on a horse. Or be escorted by both parents, a close uncle, brother, friend—even a pet!

Personalize the Aisle Runner -

You will know this is your ceremony while walking down the aisle on a runner personalized with your monogram or logo.

Beyond "Here Comes the Bride" -

If walking down the aisle to the same song as thousands of brides before you doesn't sound appealing, there's no reason why your favorite tune can't make a memorable substitute!

Mix up the Bridal Party -

Who says your maid of honor must be a "maid?" If your best pal happens to be a guy, have a "man of honor." Same goes for the best man; there's no reason why there can't be a "best woman."

Not Crazy about the Unity Candle? Try the Sand Ceremony -

Instead, combine sand into a beautiful bowl or vase. The sand can be of two colors, creating a visual representation of the joining of two families and something you can keep and cherish forever.

Write your own Wedding Vows, Readings, Poems -

Nothing puts that special personalized stamp on a ceremony quite like vows and readings prepared by the bride and groom themselves. These spoken words expose your mind and your heart to each other and to your audience.

Save on Wedding Flowers & Decor

After selecting your wedding venue, it's all about the details. Wedding flowers and decor can make or break the ambiance, but don't assume it has to break your wedding budget. These simple tips will help you get the most bang for your decorating buck.

After selecting the perfect reception site, it's all about the details. Consider the venue a blank canvas upon which to create your stylistic masterpiece. Event décor can make or break the ambiance, but don't assume it has to break your wedding budget. Remember- less is always more. With my sound advice, you can find simple ways to get the most bang for your decorating buck.

Choose Wisely -

Make your wedding venue work for you - not against you. Find a ceremony and reception site that complements your desired style - so that you don't have to decorate around it with pricey floral arrangements. For instance, if you envision a relaxed natural setting, go with a park or botanical garden. Or for a formal stately affair, consider a museum or historical building, with dominant architecture as your wedding backdrop.

Something Borrowed -

Add a personalized touch and honor your heritage by using family photos as wedding décor pieces. Gather some stylish frames and ask for photos from both sides from the family (black and white works perfectly here). These inexpensive touches can embellish your guest book table or decorate otherwise décor-impaired spaces in the facility.

Think Double Duty -

Wedding flowers are pricey, so make your floral arrangements earn their keep. Invite your ceremony flowers to the reception! You can use them to decorate your cake or gift table - and your guests will never be the wiser.

Go For Impact -

Unfortunately, some elements of your special day simply go unnoticed by guests. So if your budget won't allow you to drape your entire reception area in stylish décor pieces, relax. You can still create a noticeable impact by saving your decorating dollars for the areas that will pack the biggest punch - such as the entranceway.

See The Light -

The right lighting can transform an ordinary room into something extraordinary. If hiring a lighting technician is out of your budget, consider creating this effect with candles. Fill glass bowls with floating candles and flowers, or place a single pillar candle in a hurricane lantern for a dramatic effect. The result is romantic and elegant...and inexpensive.

Your Wedding Cake

Your wedding cake should be eye-catching, fabulous, and of course, tasty too! And just like every other aspect of your wedding day – costs can creep skyward. Have your cake (and eat it too) with these money saving tips for wedding cakes.

Your wedding cake should be eye-catching, fabulous, and of course, tasty too! And just like every other aspect of your wedding day – costs can creep skyward. But don't let a tight budget stand between you and the ultimate wedding cake. Size and design are the main determinants in wedding cake cost. You can play with these elements to create a confection that is super-fab...and kind to your catering tab.

Have your cake (and eat it too) with these budget saving tips:

Cut that Guest List

As with all cost-per-person aspects of your wedding, narrowing down your guest list will result in significant wedding cake savings. Less mouths to feed = less slices; you get the idea. And any cake cutting fee, typically charged on a per slice bases as well, will also be reduced.

Hip to be Square

Square wedding cakes yield more slices than round ones with the same dimensions. So go square – and make a deliciously modern statement!

Go Natural

Hand-constructed gum paste or sugar paste flowers can quickly rack up your wedding cake cost. Substitute these costly adornments with fresh fruits and flowers – an inexpensive option that is equally stunning.

Keep It Simple

While intricate, over-the-top cakes evoke the ultimate in wedding day opulence, today's shift towards modern minimalism can foray into the world of cake design. So lose the ornate adornments and infinite skyward-stretching tiers, and opt for a clean design with an impeccably smooth surface. Add simple details such as a Swiss dot pattern or wide ribbon around the base. Stick to one flavor, as multiple flavors will increase the bottom line.

"Dummy Cakes"

Fancy a towering and dramatic wedding cake but don't want to shell out the extra cash? Instead of paying for extra layers, ask your baker to create faux layers consisting of iced Styrofoam. Your guests will never be the wiser.

Outside the Proverbial Cake Pan

Of-the-moment brides are breaking with tradition and forgoing the cake all together - presenting instead pies or pastries on tiered platters as the centerpieces of their

wedding receptions. Depending on your selection, this can be an uber-chic way to save. Even doughnuts are in vogue and have been spotted at some of the poshest black tie events!

Your Wedding Ceremony Music

From the moment guests file in, your music has the power to set the tone for your ceremony. Plan your wedding ceremony music with these tips on selecting your ceremony musicians and choosing your wedding songs for the different components of the ceremony.

From the moment the guests file in, your music has the power to set the tone for your ceremony. With such a variety of options available and so much riding on the selection, choosing your music can seem a daunting task. Plan your wedding ceremony music with these tips on selecting your ceremony musicians and selecting the tunes for the different components of the ceremony.

Consult Your Ceremony Site

Be sure to consult with your ceremony site before making your musical selections. Many places of worship do not allow secular music and have strict rules about what songs may be used. If you are holding an outdoor wedding ceremony, make sure that your ceremony musicians will have a place to set up and, most importantly, be heard.

Determine Your Ceremony Music Style

Setting the theme for the entire wedding ceremony, the site will help determine the type of ceremony musicians you use. Steel drums may be perfect for an outdoor beach ceremony, while a bold trumpet quartet will sound impressive in an elaborate cathedral.

Once you have established an overall theme and selected your ceremony musicians, you will need to choose the specific music selections for the different components of the wedding ceremony.

Prelude

The seats are filling, and the sanctuary is buzzing with guests meeting, greeting and anticipating the big event. Your music selections during the prelude will set the mood for the ceremony; gentle jazz or chamber music works perfectly here. The music should not overpower the mood; rather, it should complement the budding excitement.

Pre-processional

This is a generally solemn moment as important family members are seated. As loving family members relinquish their children into a new life and family, the ceremony music should reflect the significance of the occasion. While the choice is yours, traditional ceremony music usually works best here.

Processional

As the wedding party appears at the head of the wedding aisle, the ceremony musicians will switch from the pre-processional to the processional. Consider a tempo that permits the wedding party to walk at an exact pace while heightening the suspense for the wedding guests.

Bride's Entrance

This is the moment that you and your guests have anxiously awaited. The ceremony music should reflect the excitement and be dramatic and sweeping. The traditional selection is Wagner's Bridal Chorus (Here Comes the Bride), but many brides are not afraid to insert something a little more reflective of their unique personality. Whatever you choose should be bold and exciting and comfortable for you. Take a deep breath and walk...this is your moment.

Recessional

You did it! You're now man and wife, and the music you play while you and your new spouse walk up the aisle should reflect that excitement and elation. Have your ceremony musicians play something joyous and upbeat. The traditional selection is Mendelssohn's Wedding March.

Your Wedding Videographer

Learn this list of common videography terms before your videographer hits the record button.

Analog Cameras/Footage

Analog is about as archaic as your home VCR. Once the industry norm, this format is rapidly becoming passé. VHS tapes (the product of analog cameras) have a shelf life of about 15 years when stored properly, although the quality will still tend to depreciate.

Digital Cameras/Footage

The new standard in video technology, digital cameras offer many more functions than analog. And because they are more receptive to light, less distractive additional lighting is needed. The original footage does not lose its quality when transferred digitally.

Digitization

The method of transmitting your wedding-day video onto a computer's editing system.

DVD

Also known as Digital Versatile Disc. DVDs are the product of digital cameras, and they offer increased picture quality and the ability to easily navigate between scenes.

DVE

Also known as Digital Video Effect, but more commonly known as special effects.

In-camera Edit

Practice where raw footage is shot as neatly as possible to reduce the need for editing later.

Linear Editing

Editing process in which the tape taken from the camera is edited down using multiple VCRs. This method is becoming out-dated with the onset of less expensive computer-based systems.

NLE

Also known as Non-Linear Editing System. Done on a computer-based system or a stand-alone editing appliance, this method of editing allows for more creativity at the click of a mouse.

Outtakes

Raw footage that didn't make the cut onto the final version.

Raw Footage

Original recordings that have not been edited.

Video Capture Card

Computer hardware that converts videotaped recordings into digital footage, then turns it back into videotape format to be viewed on any VCR.

HD Video

Video that is offered as an alternative to standard TV videos and is best viewed on

HDTV. Resolution of HD video is 78% higher than VHS, 60% higher than DVD, and 51% higher than standard TV, leaving you with a result that is extremely clear.

Use these terms when asking questions of prospective videographers.

Wedding Planners

Thinking of hiring a professional wedding planner? Coordinators offer planning services at varying costs. Here's a breakdown of the types of professional wedding planning services.

While many orchestrate entire affairs from start to finish, professional planners can facilitate in a number of capacities. Costs vary: Some charge by the hour and others charge a flat fee depending on how much help you need.

Here's a simple breakdown of the various types of professional wedding planning services:

Full Planning

Extremely busy? Not too detail oriented? A full-service wedding planner may be your savior. A complete planning package can handle every last detail—from finding and securing your reception site and vendors, to negotiating and coordinating payment, to ensuring the big day progresses flawlessly.

Partial Planning

Sure, you're resourceful – but who couldn't use a little handholding and advice along the way? With a partial planning package, the planner offers assistance and guidance as needed. You remain hands-on, doing much of the research and decision making on your own.

Week of/Day of Planning

This is a great option if you prefer to plan everything yourself but want a pro on hand to tend to last minute details—so you can relax and enjoy your day as the guest of honor.

Your Wedding Decorations

When it comes to wedding decorations, flowers aren't your only option. Think outside the proverbial flower box with this list of eight blossom-free unique wedding décor ideas.

So you're not a froofy floral arrangement kind of bride - that doesn't mean you can't still have a wedding décor scheme that wows. Think outside the proverbial flower box with this list of blossom-free ideas for wedding decorations.

Love Visually

Build a structure consisting of a bunch of different ornate frames with photos of not only you and your fiancé, but also parents and grandparents whose marriages serve as inspiration for time-tested love.

The Food Pyramid

Fill cylindrical glass vases with fruits and vegetables reflecting your colors. Oranges, lemons, and limes have been done, so try a unique, more contemporary look with mangos or coconuts - or tie it to the season with texture-rich earthy vegetables like husked corn, acorn squash, or artichokes.

Outside Looking In

Give your guests something to really look at with goldfish swimming in aesthetically shaped vases. Consider building interesting mantels or use other species like Siamese fighting fish or white clouds. For their sake, add the water and fish right before the reception and return them to a bigger tank before the party's over.

Au Natural

Consult Mother Nature for inspiration, and bring the outdoors in. Natural objects like stones, leaves, pine cones, even twigs can add an organic aesthetic to your reception décor. Place in rustic containers or scatter amongst pillar candles for added ambiance. This idea will nicely complement a fall wedding theme.

A Library Look

Stacks of books intricately piled can work in a number of different ways. For sophisticates, choose antique leather-bounds. For a more fun approach, use kitschy romance novels. Or, tie it to your wedding location - if beach-side, go with maritime classics like Moby Dick and The Old Man and the Sea.

Wine-O

Wine bottles and decanters create interesting focal pieces. Turn a wine bottle into a "lamp" by filling it with candle oil and adding a wick. Decorate the base of the bottle with bunches of grapes.

Lighten Up

Floating candles in a shallow bowl adds light and elegance to your tabletops. Or arrange multi-level candles on a mosaic of mirrors or tiles, and surround them with seashells or flower petals. Placing coffee beans or red hot candies at the bottom of a vase or bowl to hold the candles steady also adds an aromatic effect.

Consult your Inner Child

For the kid at heart, fill decorative bowls with your favorite candies - such as jellybeans and M&M's - in your wedding colors. These centerpieces are sure to be a hit with your guests!

Wedding Favors

Wedding favors are a great way to thank your guests for sharing in your wedding celebration. Not sure where to begin? Browse this wedding favor guide for everything you'll need to know in selecting and presenting this wonderful little detail with the utmost of style.

No, they're not mandatory, but wedding favors are a great way to thank your guests for sharing in your celebration! They're also a fun little extra to tie in the style of the occasion.

Today, almost anything goes. And just like the rest of the event, wedding favors should reflect the personality of the bride and groom. Not sure where to begin? Browse this wedding favor guide for everything you'll need to know in presenting this wonderful little detail with the utmost of style.

What to Give -

Edible Treats -

Everyone loves something to eat, so delight your guests with something sweet or savory. Chocolates, almonds and candies are always popular. Or give a regional favorite from your wedding location: peanuts in Georgia, Vermont maple syrup, or hot salsa in Texas.

Something Homemade -

Along those lines, test your culinary skills and make a homemade jam or spread for your guests (package them in festive customized jars!).

Quench their thirst -

If your budget allows it, wow your guests with a nice bottle of wine, whether a selection served at the wedding or from a local winery. If you're really ambitious, consider making your own, and stamp it with a personalized label. This is one of my favorite wedding favor ideas, but plan ahead - this must be done at least 3 months in advance.

Entertain Them -

Give your guests something that will forever remind them of your wedding day. Nothing brings a person back to a special moment quite like a song. So make a wedding playlist, and feature songs from the ceremony and reception. Getting married in a place known for a great music scene? Feature selections from local artists. Or if the two of you just

love music and want to share your tastes with your guests, make a cd of your favorites. Every time they pop it into the player, they'll think of you and what a great time they had at your celebration.

Personalize It -

These days, almost any item or trinket can be personalized, so think of something creative that goes along with your wedding theme, and stamp it with your initials or wedding date. You name it; someone can customize it - golf balls, koozies, ornaments, seashells, matchbooks, candles or soaps. You're only limited by your imagination. I've even seen fortune cookies filled with personalized fortunes!

Give Something Back -

Another one of my favorite wedding favor ideas: Some brides are foregoing the traditional favor altogether, instead making a donation to their favorite charity. You can print nice cards that read "in lieu of a favor, a donation has been made to xyz charity." Just be sure your chosen charity is legitimate, and get a receipt for tax purposes.

How and When to Give them -

Wedding Favors are all about presentation. A few m & ms can be the epitome of panache when wrapped in a pretty package. Choose packaging that matches or complements your wedding colors and table decor. Matching ribbons and personalized logo stickers or favor labels always add a nice touch. Depending on the favor you choose to give, the choice of packaging may be obvious. If not, consider these fun options:

- Mini Chinese take-out boxes (or any miniature box decorated to reflect your wedding style)
- Miniature canvas bags (printed with your monogram or wedding logo!)
- A Seashell
- Customized bottles or jars
- Miniature baskets
- Small Julep cups
- Mini Terracotta pots

In determining just how and when to present them, you also have some options. Set up a table and display them along with a card that says "Please take one" or "Thank You." Or make your favors part of your table décor and place one at each place setting. A waiter or coatroom attendant can also hand them out at a designated time. Some couples even add the extra special personal touch of distributing them personally to their guests as they leave the reception. However, due to timing and logistics, this method is best saved for smaller weddings.

Your Wedding Invitations

Wedding invitation etiquette is one of the most common wedding etiquette questions bride's face while planning a wedding. This list of invitation etiquette dos and don'ts will help you get it right and avoid any etiquette blunders.

As one of the biggest and most potentially stressful events of your life, getting engaged and subsequently planning a wedding brings with it an onslaught of questions. As times change and weddings evolve, traditional rules of etiquette have followed suit, only adding to the confusion.

To gain perspective, first understand that "etiquette" is above all about treating people with courtesy and making them feel comfortable. When an etiquette question arises, consider the feelings of those who will be affected.

This list of invitation etiquette dos and don'ts will help steer you through the most common wedding etiquette dilemma and get it right.

- Don't print "no children" on the invite if you're planning an adult's only reception. Simply address each invitation explicitly to your intended guests (i.e. Mr. and Mrs. John Smith, not "The Smiths").
- Do invite the partners of guests who are married, engaged, or living with a significant other. Try to find the name of your guest's intended date (if you don't already know it), and include that person's name on the invitation.
- Do spell out all dates and times (half after four o'clock in the evening, not 4:30 pm; and the twenty-second of April, not April 22)
- Don't use punctuation on the invitation, except after abbreviations and between the city and state
- Do put return postage on your response cards.
- Do send wedding invitations at least six weeks before the big day. Try to order invitations three to four months in advance to ensure they go out on time.
- Don't forget to invite your officiant and his/her spouse to the reception
- Do send a separate invitation to children over the age of 18 still living with their parents.
- Don't print registry information on the invitation.
- Do publicize your registry information by word of mouth only

Writing Your Own Wedding Vows

Looking for ways to personalize your wedding ceremony? Consider incorporating your own carefully chosen words into this momentous occasion, and build the foundation for a life-long relationship. Writing your own vows is definitely an ambitious undertaking. Not only must you determine the perfect words to say, but those words must be rehearsed and recited in front of your closest family and friends on a day that will be one of the most important of your life. Follow these easy steps to pen and recite beautiful vows from the heart.

Step One - Before you put pen to paper, consider these factors:

Get approval -

Talk to your officiant to make sure personal vows are even allowed. Some religions object to non-secular expressions during the wedding ceremony. Even with the go-ahead, submit your personalized vows to your officiant for review before the big day; he or she may have specific objections or even helpful ideas.

Establish an estimated length -

Your audience will find it odd and even comical if one rambles for 5 minutes while the other says 10 words.

Be succinct -

Overly lengthy wedding vows may lose your audience and will only increase the potential for error. Review them in front of someone else. You can rehearse with each other, or if you'd rather keep them a surprise, read your vows to a trusted loved one.

Step Two - Decide What to Say:

Consult your past -

Time for a trip down memory lane. Start jotting down the details of special firsts in your relationship—first meeting, first date, first kiss, first "I love you," etc. What qualities made you fall in love in the first place? Are there special milestones in your relationship that have helped bring you here today?

Envision the Future -

What challenges and achievements do you foresee in the future, and how do you expect to meet those things together?

Complete Me -

Sure, it's a line from a movie—but there's a reason for its now cliché status. What characteristics does he/she bring out in you? How does he/she make you a better person?

Use the right words -

Compile your notes, memories and reflections, and begin turning words into sentences. Consult your thesaurus for the perfect expressions to reflect your thoughts. Some words to get you started: love, trust, support, strength, encourage, respect, cherish, admire, value, commit, pledge and promise.

This article offers even more advice on what to include in your wedding vows

Step 3 - Say it With Heart:

Have a cheat sheet -

Even if you plan to memorize them, the nerves may kick in when the big moment

arrives. To avoid a potentially awkward scene at the wedding ceremony - bring a cheat sheet just in case.

Mother of the Bride Dress

Sure - the day may be all about the bride and her big dress, but as the mother of the bride or groom - you need to shine too. Here's everything you need to know to ensure you look stylish and perfectly coiffed on the big day...

Getting Started

When it comes to selecting wedding day attire, the bride goes first. The moms need to start shopping as early as possible - but not until after the bride has selected her gown and the bridesmaids' dresses. Once this has been done, the bride will discuss her preferences of lengths, colors and styles with her mother or both mothers. If you're not happy with the style she suggests, let her know and work out a compromise. It is her day - but the moms have to be comfortable too.

Etiquette

Typically the mother-of-the-bride (MOB) selects her dress (taking cues from the bride), then politely consults with the mother-of-the-groom (MOG) as soon as possible to inform her of the style. The MOG should then select an ensemble that complements - not matches - that of the MOB. This custom is definitely not required, however. If the MOB is lagging and the MOG is anxious to get shopping, she can definitely take the initiative and consult with the MOG or the bride. Regardless - it's important for everyone to be flexible and considerate.

Style Tips for the Moms -

1) Color

Everyone has their own preferences, and any color can really be worn if the bride and moms agree on it. That said, most would advise against these hues:

- White or Ivory - (don't compete with the bride)
- Black - (don't appear as if in mourning)
- Red - (don't be too flashy)

You usually can't go wrong with lavender, beige, silver, burgundy, blue and rose.

2) Matching the Bridesmaids

There is no rule that says that mothers' dresses should match or coordinate with the bridesmaids' attire. You can either choose to stay within the same color family - yet different shade (i.e. maids are in seafoam green, you choose a deep emerald green), or feel free to mix and match as you see fit. Again - talk to the bride about her preferences.

3) Formality

While you have more room to maneuver in color - the formality of your gown should match the formality of the rest of the wedding party and the event. If it's an evening wedding and the maids are in floor length ball gowns - it's probably best to avoid a short hemline in a casual fabric - and vice versa.

Where to Shop

Most department stores and many specialty boutiques feature appropriate gowns that can also be worn again to another formal party. Shop with a trusted friend or relative, one whose judgment you can trust to help you choose the style and color that is best for you.

Saving Your Wedding Budget

Worried that your perfect wedding will break the bank? Here are 10 ways to have a fabulous wedding, even on a small budget. Remember...it's not how much you spend, but how you spend it!

1. Budget Bluffing

Set a budget that's slightly smaller than you can actually afford. There are always last-minute expenses that must be met, but if you keep the bulk of your expenses within your predetermined smaller budget, you'll be able to pay for the unexpected costs that pop up.

2. Choose your Battles

Decide what's most important to you, those one or two things you won't compromise on, whether it be your wedding gown, photographer, invitations or cake. After accounting for this must-have, adjust your budget accordingly and try to keep the remainder of your expenses within it.

3. Say it Simply

Invitations can easily cost hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars. Luckily, it's become quite popular to make your own invitations. The availability of supplies at scrapbooking stores, specialty paper shops and mass retailers makes it easy to find the materials you need. Today's "homemade" invitations look every bit as elegant as those engraved by a printer, but save you lots of money. Also, for less formal weddings, you can have guests call or email their RSVPs to you, eliminating the need for RSVP cards and their matching stamped envelopes. (Just think: if you send out 100 invitations, you're saving \$41 in postage alone.)

4. Who's Who

Sure, it's tempting to invite your second cousin's third grade teacher, but it will cost you. One of the most effective ways you can cut back on invitation and reception expenses is to cut your guest list. Limit your guest list to close friends and family, not people you haven't seen or talked to since 2nd grade.

5. Creative Shopping

Dollar stores, thrift stores and garage sales can provide a wealth of low-cost wedding and reception decorations...and they look like they cost full price! Strands of lights, faux florals, linens, balloons and more can be found for extraordinarily low prices at these stores. Be sure to look after holidays, as this is when items such as these go on clearance or are donated to thrift stores.

6. To Updo or not to Updo? That is the question.

Does everyone in your wedding party really have to get their hair and makeup done by Mr. Bruce at that exclusive salon? If you feel you need a special updo, by all means, go for it. After all, you're the bride. Otherwise, have your bridal party do their own hair and makeup. Chances are, it will turn out better anyway, since they know what works for them. You'll avoid ending up with bridesmaids that look like very formal clowns with shellacked hair, and save some money, too.

7. Time is on your side.

Consider having your wedding early afternoon. There's less demand for that time slot, but most importantly, you can get away with serving just cake and punch or small finger foods at the reception. The occasion will seem more intimate, and your guests won't necessarily be expecting a meal (since the reception doesn't fall during a mealtime). Best of all, you'll save thousands!

8. For Everything There is a Season...

...but it might be more cost-effective to get married during the off-season. Spring and summer are the most popular wedding seasons, and prices for venues rise accordingly. Choosing a fall or winter wedding not only gives you beautiful decorating themes to work with, but also offers more affordable venue options.

9. Party On

Sure, anyone can have a beautiful reception in the ball room of an exclusive hotel. But with a little creativity (think strands of lights, faux ficus trees, candles, etc.,) even the

local lodge can be transformed into a beautiful reception location. Remember, the lights are usually dimmed, and your guests are there to celebrate with you, not critique the crystal chandeliers (or lack thereof). Choosing a more affordable reception location will leave you with more money to spend on food, drinks and decorations - or even your new life together.

10. All Dressed Up

If you're like most brides, you already have a picture of your perfect wedding gown in your head. But if you're really interested in saving money, keep your options open. You might be surprised by how much you like other (translation: less expensive) styles of dresses once you try them on. Plus, less-expensive dresses can often be uniquely embellished and still cost less than the whole Cinderella-type dress. You may also want to check out consignment stores. The wedding gowns you find there have only been worn once, or in some cases, never. You'll save a bundle on a beautiful gown that you'll wear just once, and no one will be the wiser.

The Wedding Checklist

Formal Attire	Other Wedding Items
<input type="checkbox"/> Bridal Gown	<input type="checkbox"/> Organizer or Planner
<input type="checkbox"/> Bridal Headpiece	<input type="checkbox"/> Wedding Etiquette Book
<input type="checkbox"/> Bridal Slip	<input type="checkbox"/> Napkins
<input type="checkbox"/> Bridal Shoes	<input type="checkbox"/> Book Matches
<input type="checkbox"/> Bridal Handbag	<input type="checkbox"/> Ribbon
<input type="checkbox"/> Bridal Hosiery	<input type="checkbox"/> Place cards
<input type="checkbox"/> Bridal Garter(s)	<input type="checkbox"/> Table Numbers
<input type="checkbox"/> Bridal Shoes	<input type="checkbox"/> Table Reserved Signs
<input type="checkbox"/> Bridal Gloves	<input type="checkbox"/> Something Old, New, Borrowed...
<input type="checkbox"/> Lingerie	<input type="checkbox"/> Guest Book
<input type="checkbox"/> Bridesmaids' Dresses	<input type="checkbox"/> Plume Pen
<input type="checkbox"/> Bridesmaids' Shoes	<input type="checkbox"/> Sixpence Coin for Your shoe
<input type="checkbox"/> Mothers' Dresses	<input type="checkbox"/> Toasting Glasses
<input type="checkbox"/> Tuxedo Rental	<input type="checkbox"/> Cake Knife and Server
<input type="checkbox"/> Tuxedo Shoes	<input type="checkbox"/> Engraving
<input type="checkbox"/> Men's Formal Hose	<input type="checkbox"/> Ring Bearer Pillow
<input type="checkbox"/> Gown Preservation	<input type="checkbox"/> Flower girl Basket
Wedding Stationary	<input type="checkbox"/> Wedding Card Box or Basket
<input type="checkbox"/> Engagement Announcements	<input type="checkbox"/> Cake Top
<input type="checkbox"/> Invitations	<input type="checkbox"/> Wedding Favors
<input type="checkbox"/> Announcements	<input type="checkbox"/> Unity Candle
<input type="checkbox"/> Reception Enclosure Cards	<input type="checkbox"/> Aisle Runner

<input type="checkbox"/> Response Cards	<input type="checkbox"/> Jewelry
<input type="checkbox"/> Map/Direction Cards	<input type="checkbox"/> Bride's Wedding Ring
<input type="checkbox"/> Informals	<input type="checkbox"/> Groom's Wedding Ring
<input type="checkbox"/> Thank You Notes	<input type="checkbox"/> Bride's Attendants Gifts
<input type="checkbox"/> Postage Stamps	<input type="checkbox"/> Flower girl Gift
<input type="checkbox"/> Calligraphy	<input type="checkbox"/> Groom's Attendants Gifts
<input type="checkbox"/> Wedding Programs	<input type="checkbox"/> Ring Bearer Gift
<input type="checkbox"/> Scrolls or Ribbons	<input type="checkbox"/> Wedding Music Tapes
<input type="checkbox"/> Personal Stationary	<input type="checkbox"/> Invitation Keepsake
<input type="checkbox"/> Address Labels	<input type="checkbox"/> Marriage License
<input type="checkbox"/> Calligrapher	<input type="checkbox"/> Gift for Groom
<input type="checkbox"/> Bachelor Party	<input type="checkbox"/> Gift for Bride
<input type="checkbox"/> Rehearsal Dinner	<input type="checkbox"/> Floral Bouquet Preservation
<input type="checkbox"/> Moving Cards	<input type="checkbox"/> Bird Seed
<input type="checkbox"/> Wedding Certificate	<input type="checkbox"/> Wedding Rings