MARTHA STEWART WEDDINGS

Dream Up Your Day
The Modern Guide to Planning a Celebration

STUNNING DRESSES

SWEET CAKES

SUPER-SPECIAL REAL WEDDINGS
**THE MAIN EVENT**

Ultimately, the marriage ceremony is the reason your friends and family have gathered here today. Every culture does it a little differently, but they all share a handful of traditions.

We mapped out how to make yours personal, meaningful, and above all, official.

**TEXT BY ELYSIE MOODY**

**FIND AN OFFICIANT**

**Your options:** religious or civil.

For a religious ceremony, choose a priest, minister, rabbi, imam, or pandit. If you’re getting married in a place of worship where you’re a member, good news—the resident clergy member comes with the territory. If not, ask a friend or your planner for a referral, or contact your religion’s national headquarters.

To set a less specific but still spiritual tone, consider a Unitarian minister. If you and your partner are combining faith traditions, two religious leaders (for a religious one and a secular one) can share the role. For a civil ceremony, book a celebrant, justice of the peace, or notary, or have a friend or relative get ordained online and do the honors. This person will set the tone for the day, so if you’re meeting for the first time, make sure your personalities (and priorities) align.

**THE SCOOP**

Book your officiant to 12 months ahead. A celebrant’s services typically cost $300 to $800.

*To find one certified by the Celebrant Foundation & Institute, the industry gold standard, go to celebfound.org.*

Start drafting your vows about two months in advance, so you have time to refine and practice them. They should each be three to five minutes long.

**CUE THE MUSIC**

Here’s a local harpist or string duo, or enlist a few members of your reception band to play at the service or cocktail hour. Musicians who need less setup time can often do double duty.

- [AIR ON THE G STRING](https://www.musicnotes.com/readings)
  - Johann Sebastian Bach
  - *WEDDING MARCH* (Felix Mendelssohn)
  - *ODE TO JOY* (Ludwig van Beethoven)
  - *BEST OF MY LOVE* (The Emotions)

**MAKE IT PERSONAL**

**YOUR VOWS**

These words are the heart of the ceremony. Your officiant will guide you, but what you say is entirely up to you. Tanya Pushkine, founder of the Vow Whisperer, offers this advice:

- **Don’t make promises you can’t keep.** “Even something as small as ‘I pledge to never go to bed angry,’ ” Pushkine says, “you can’t promise that! Avoid the words always and never.”
- **Show, don’t tell.** Rather than saying your partner is sweet, tell a story about the time he took your mom to get her hair done. Stay mostly serious, but sprinkled in humor. Skip inside stories or jokes. And keep it forward-looking—**this is the moment to talk about your future.**

Traditionally, the groom goes first, but do what feels right to you. To prepare, Pushkine suggests writing your vows by hand and saying them aloud to yourself or a friend a few times, to get familiar with your words and phrasing. That way, you’ll know precisely when to breathe, look up, lock eyes, and smile.

**OFFER REHEARPENTS**

If the day is hot—

- or cold—set up a self-service drink station so guests can help themselves. (Save the house for cocktail hour.)

- Water with fruit and herbs is quenching on a sunny day. Warm cider heats the chill on an alfresco fall one.

**MAKE IT LEGAL**

**A MONTH AHEAD:** Call the county clerk’s office where you’re getting married to ask what official documentation you’ll need to provide. They can also tell you when to get your marriage license, and what else (i.e., a blood test) is required. Ty ing the knot outside the U.S.? Check with the government bureau a few months in advance.

**AFTERWORD:** Sign the marriage certificate; you’ll need two witnesses to do the same. Your officiant will file the marriage license. This all needs to happen within a certain time frame—ask your local clerk or bureau for specifics.

**SPEAK YOUR TRUTH**

Bible verses blend seamlessly into a traditional Christian or Jewish ceremony. Otherwise, select a passage that resonates with you and your celebration. For Pushkine’s own wedding at a winery, a friend read it by reading “Marriage, a Tender Vintage,” a poem about love and wine by Reverend Liao Zora. Or have readers recite a dialogue from a favorite film, TV show, or musical, suggests Tongg. An excerpt from Justice Anthony Kennedy’s 2015 majority Supreme Court opinion protecting same-sex couples’ right to marry is another meaningful choice. For more ideas, see our favorites at martwashowerweddings.com/readings.

**SEAL IT WITH A SYMBOL**

The ring exchange and kiss are two rituals most couples include. But there are worlds more:

- A folkloric custom: popular now is handfasting, in which the officiant wraps your joined hands with ribbon, says Tongg, at a small wedding, it can feel special to pass the rings around to each guest before you exchange them. You can also craft symbolic moments to fit your interests, date, or venue.

Celebrant Leora Willis officiated a wedding on August 8, 2008, for a couple who wanted to kiss at exactly 8:08 p.m. Her timing was impeccable.

**PLAN THE PACING**

A Jewish or Christian ceremony typically lasts 30 minutes; a Hindu one can go for three hours.

For a secular ceremony, plan for 30 minutes max, says Pushkine. In that half hour, your officiant will welcome your guests, tell your love story; guide you through the declaration of intent, vows, and ring exchange; offer a blessing or closing remarks; and pronounce you married. Feel free to intersperse readings or unity rituals. A half hour generally allows time for two readings or a unity ritual, says Tongg. A note on readings: People get nervous about speaking in public, so allow time at the rehearsal for them to do a full practice round, and slate them at the beginning of the program so they can relax and enjoy the rest of the ceremony.

- **TANYA PUSHKINE,** FOUNDER OF THE VOW WHISPERER

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