

# Humanist Wedding Ceremonies

A wedding ceremony brings together many cultural influences, family dynamics, and emotional expectations, as well as logistical challenges. A Celebrant who intends to be helpful to a couple and their families and community as they prepare for this event, and to conduct a meaningful, personal, dignified and joyful ceremony, should be able to offer three things: a non-anxious presence, a set of useful resources, and a theoretical understanding of the process and their role.

This course introduces Humanist Celebrants to the process of working with couples in order to plan a wedding ceremony from a Humanist perspective.



by Rev. Kendyl Gibbons

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# Introduction

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ceremony, should be able to offer three things: a non-anxious presence, a set of useful resources, and a theoretical understanding of the process and their role.

# Theoretical Understanding of Weddings

## What is Unique About a Humanist Wedding

Most Humanist couples want what most couples want from their wedding ceremony: a beautiful, joyful, sincere and meaningful celebration of their becoming married. There is nothing about what makes a ceremony work well that requires religious language. It is possible that a particular couple will have



experienced frustration in trying to find someone to officiate or in planning their ceremony if they are looking for a secular or non-theistic approach. They may have had difficult responses from family members, or they may have consulted potential officiants who tried to impose wording that made the couple uncomfortable. The Humanist Celebrant can help to calm the couples' anxiety by assuring them that it is not necessary to say anything they don't want said, and that the ceremony can still have depth and dignity as it expresses the reality of their love and commitment to each other.

## Rite of Passage

From an anthropological point of view, a wedding ceremony is one of a group of Rites of Passage that move individual human beings through the most critical events of their lives. Others Rites of Passage that we will consider elsewhere include ceremonies recognizing birth, death, and coming of age. A rite of passage is by nature a public event that restructures the participants' identities, reconfigures their role in society, and recalibrates their social relationships. This process is to some extent stressful for everyone involved, and is often surrounded by traditions

and taboos intended to make it both effective and relatively safe, although it always carries some inherent risk. The subjects of a rite of passage often consider themselves, and are considered by others, to be in a liminal situation – in transition between one identity and another – and thus in a certain kind of suspense until the rituals are properly concluded and the new identity is assumed.

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## Arnold Van Gennep

Arnold van Gennep, in full Charles-Arnold Kurr van Gennep (born 1873, Wurttemberg, Germany -died 1957), French ethnographer and folklorist, best known for his studies of the rites of passage of various cultures.

Although Gennep was born in German and had a Dutch father, he lived most of his life and received his education in France, his mother's native country. Gennep learned a remarkable number of languages, 18 by his own count, and thus could effectively use linguistic and philological facts in his ethnographic studies. Most of his work was done outside of, and occasionally at odds with, the academic community, which he himself described in *Les Demi-Savants* (1911; *The Semi-Scholars*).



Gennep's major work was *Les Rites de Passage* (1909; *The Rites of Passage*), in which he systemically compared those ceremonies that celebrate an individual's transition from one status to another within a given society. He found a tripartite sequence in ritual observance: separation, transition, and incorporation. Gennep offered interpretations of the significance of these rites as forms of social regeneration, based on such natural symbols as death and rebirth.

Gennep also made studies of European folklore, viewing folk literature and practices as aspects of a living culture rather than as remains of a dead one. His writings include the monumental *Manuel de folklore français contemporain* (1937-58; "Manual of Contemporary French Folklore"). He also edited the "Ethnographie-

Folklore-Religions-Prehistoire” section in the publication *Mercure de France* and wrote *Religions, moeurs et legendes; Essais d’ethnographis et de linguistique* (1908-14; “Religions, Customs and Legends; Essays of Ethnology and Linguistics”).

*Encyclopedia Britannica*

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## **Role of the Celebrant**

People undergoing a rite of passage may seek guidance from someone who is presumed to be familiar with the process, and able to help them move through it successfully and fulfil its requirements. They will frequently attribute power to this guide, even beyond what that person’s expertise may warrant. From a humanist point of view, the task of the Celebrant is to exercise this power in such a way that participants feel that they have in fact been enabled effectively to complete their role transition, as well as to reclaim the power that they have momentarily ceded to the Celebrant in the service of that process. In order for this to happen, the Celebrant must often take the individuals, and the work of transition in which they are engaged, more seriously than they do themselves.

## **The Purpose of the Wedding Ceremony**

While a wedding does create a legal contract, and raise a set of cultural expectations about the couple’s relationship that is not within their control, the central purpose of the ceremony is to create an opportunity for the giving and receiving of covenant promises between the couple in a public setting. At a minimum, this generally means in the presence of witnesses who can subsequently testify to the event having taken place. More usually, it means in the presence of their families and friends; the community that is to a greater or lesser extent reconfigured by the shift in the partners’ new identities as a married couple. Contemporary American society often signals the significance attached to such a process by the amount of money spent



on it, and while this may be considered crass by some, it is not irrelevant to understanding the dynamics among the couple, their families, and their community as all of them move through the event. The Celebrant's task is to guide the couple to focus on the significance of the promises they are making to each other, and help them to articulate what those promises mean to them. Certain elements of the ceremony will address other legitimate concerns as well, but all should function to create a context and a setting for the speaking of these important words.

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## Wedding Traditions

### THE ORIGIN OF THE PROPOSAL

In the 19th century, declaration of love was tantamount to proposal; arranged marriages did not include proposals nor did marriage by capture. Asking the bride's father for her comes from the era of arranged marriages.



### THE ORIGIN OF THE ENGAGEMENT

The engagement is a means to an end - marriage. Indeed, the full term is “engaged to be married.” At one time, however, the engagement was as important as the wedding itself. Anglo-Saxons were used to stealing away their brides-to-be. Romance, wooing and engagements were not in the picture. But the families of the women insisted on being reimbursed for what was, after all, a working member of the family. The engagement itself signified the intended transfer of ownership from father to husband and also provided a person during which the “bride's price” could be agreed. Several centuries later, the



situation was in reverse and fathers were paying future sons-in-law, or their families, a “dowry” to marry off their daughters. The engagement was again a time for agreeing on the payment, or dowry, and also a time for collecting an extravagant trousseau, at least for rich brides.

## THE ORIGIN OF THE ENGAGEMENT PARTY

Once marked by a party called a “flouncing”, the couple met with their future in-laws to make the engagement official. Neither of the couple could be seen talking to another man or woman after this point and should the engagement be broken, the one breaking it forfeited half of his or her worldly goods.

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# Covenant Promise

The wish to be able to make a promise of solemn significance is part of human nature. This aspiration is sometimes expressed in the language of religion, such as calling upon the gods to witness, or to bless, the making of a meaningful covenant, or understanding the promise to be made not only to the partner, but to the divine as well. Even secular couples will sometimes find this kind of language appealing, if only for the sake of tradition. But the task of the Humanist Celebrant is to help those who do not choose the conventional vocabulary of religious imagery to find equally meaningful and powerful ways to express the depth of their intentions toward one another, together with the hope and the seriousness of what they do in the moment of covenant promise. If it is done skillfully, the invitation to articulate this covenant promise becomes a lasting resource for the relationship, allowing both members of the couple to recall both what was promised to them on that occasion, and the promises that they themselves made. When those commitments are recalled, it becomes more possible to deal with immediate issues of stress, disappointment, frustration, and loss in the day to day unfolding of marriage. The opportunity to say with some seriousness, in a setting of some formality, one's deepest feelings and best intentions, helps to balance the reality of those moments, known to us all, when we say things we do not most deeply mean, and behave in ways that do not reflect our better intentions, precisely because we are human.

Promises may be conditional or unconditional, time-limited or enduring, and brittle or mending. A bargain between two people, in which each agrees to do a particular thing the other wishes, provided that the other does their part, obviously ends when each has fulfilled their part of the bargain, or failed to do so; thus it is limited in time. If one does not do their part, the other is released from the agreement, which is thus conditional. A promise which provides the opportunity to try again, if one party initially fails, is able to be mended; where the bargain is



forfeit as soon as one party fails, it is brittle. Legal and commercial culture tend to make people most familiar with brittle, time-limited, conditional bargains; a covenant promise, such as marriage, is meant to be the opposite of these. It is intended to be enduring over time, so that no finite set of actions can complete it; it summons each party to fulfill their commitments as best they can, even when their partner does not always succeed in doing so; and it contains mechanisms for mending, redeeming, and restoring the promise whenever the partners do not live up to its expectations. It is clearly possible for the covenant promises of marriage to be fatally broken, or to be withdrawn from a failed relationship; what is not possible is for this to happen without damage to the people concerned, and to the fabric of the social network around them.

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## Wedding Traditions

### THE ORIGIN OF THE RING FINGER

During 3rd century Greece, the ring finger was the index finger. In India, it was the thumb. During the Christian wedding the priest arrived at the fourth finger (counting the thumb) after touching the three fingers on the left hand ‘...in the name of the Father, the



Son, and the Holy Ghost.’ The Egyptians believed that a special vein, which they called a “vena amoris” or vein of love, ran from the third finger on the left hand, directly to the heart. By putting on a fitted ring, the affections were bound in and could never flow out the fingertips. Also, this finger although not the smallest on the hand is the weakest and most dependent on the others for help in lifting and holding. It seemed to symbolize the young wife supported by the strength of her husband.

The “ring” finger has sometimes been on the left hand, sometimes on the right, according to country and custom. Among English-speaking persons, it has been on the left since the edict of Edward VI in 1549.

## THE ORIGIN OF THE ENGAGEMENT RING

The truth or promise ring is older than the wedding band. Its earliest form was probably plaited sweet grass, which came from the custom of securing the bride’s wrists and ankles with rushes during the age of marriage by capture. When restraint became more symbolical than physical, a grass ring was given to her, succeeded by rings of metal as man became more



accomplished in the crafts. The Romans and Egyptians, with their love of precious metal and stones, initiated the production of platinum, silver and gold rings. In early Rome, a gold band came to symbolize everlasting love and commitment in marriage.

In 860 A.D., Pope Nicholas I decreed that an engagement ring become a required statement of nuptial intent. He insisted that engagement rings had to be made of gold, which signified a financial sacrifice on the part of the prospective husband.

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# Preparation

## The Marriage License

In American society, the officiant at a wedding often functions as an officer of the state, whose action establishes a legally enforceable contract between the parties being married. It is in this context that the Celebrant is accountable for assuring that a valid marriage license has been obtained, getting the required



signatures (who must sign the license on the day of the wedding varies from county to county), and mailing promptly the portion of the license that is to be returned to the Clerk of the Court or the Secretary of State. It is advisable for the Celebrant to retain a personal record of the place, date, and persons involved in ceremonies at which they officiate, in case of any subsequent questions.

## Preparation of the Celebrant

A professional clergy-person who is acting as a wedding officiant may be presumed to have some training as a pastoral counselor, as well as expertise in their tradition's theological understanding of the nature of marriage. From this position, they may offer, or require, to help the couple explore issues of compatibility, values, family background, relational dynamics, or future plans, in order to give the new marriage the best possible chance to succeed. A Humanist celebrant who wishes to offer this kind of advice should receive appropriate education to be qualified for such a role. At a minimum, they should complete training in a program such as Prepare/Enrich, which offers questionnaires to be filled out by bridal couples and scored by the organization, which then provides a discussion guide to the officiant for exploring potential issues raised by the results. If the celebrant has not had any such training, they should refrain from questions about

the couple's history or relationship that are not immediately germane to creating the ceremony.

## Planning the Ceremony

It is best to schedule at least two meetings in advance of the wedding date, with time in between for the couple to complete the work that they will need to do, for the purpose of planning the ceremony. If there is to be a rehearsal, it can serve as a final meeting to review details; if there is no rehearsal, a third meeting within a few days



of the wedding is advisable. While the timing of these meetings is flexible according to the needs of the couple and the celebrant, they should begin at least six weeks before the ceremony if possible. On the other hand, beginning the process for active creation of the ceremony more than six months ahead can leave a lag time that drains the energy, and makes the ritual feel 'canned' by the time it actually happens.

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## Wedding Traditions

### THE ORIGIN OF THE WEDDING RING

Before coinage, gold rings were circulated as currency. By giving a gold ring to his bride, a man showed he trusted her with his property. Under Roman law, the ring was a sign of security, protecting the interests of the bride-to-be. In Elizabethan times, an interlocking set of three rings was used and worn during the engagement period by the bride, the groom and the witness at the wedding. The three rings would be placed on the bride's finger during the wedding ceremony.

## DIAMOND RINGS BECAME POPULAR IN THE 19TH CENTURY

Roman wedding rings were carved with two clasped hands. Very early rings had a carved key through the which a woman was thought to be able to open her husband's heart. Jeweled rings were the next step and the diamond is mentioned specifically from about the fourth century A.D., and frequently from the fifteenth century on.



Although not required to validate marriage under a civil law, rings were required in 16th century by the Council of Trent. Circular shape symbolizes eternity.

## THE ORIGIN OF THE BEST MAN WEDDING TRADITION

In 200 A.D., the male Germanic Goths of northern Europe usually married a woman from within his own community. However, when there were fewer women, the prospective bridegroom would capture his bride from a neighboring village. The bridegroom was accompanied by his strongest friend (or best friend), who helped him capture his bride.



## The First Meeting

Assuming that the celebrant does not know the couple well already, the first meeting is an opportunity for them to become acquainted with one another, to confirm whatever plans are already in place for the wedding, and to establish an understanding of how they will work together.

While there may be much that is not yet decided about plans for the wedding day or the ceremony, some details to explore and record include the following:

- Full names of both members of the couple
- Contact information: mailing address(es), phone numbers, e-mail addresses
- Date of wedding, hour of wedding
- Place of wedding, preferably an address
- If the ceremony is to take place outdoors, what are the plans for bad weather?
- Rehearsal, if desired: date, time, place<sup>[1]</sup>
- Time and location of reception, if different from ceremony
- Approximately how many guests are expected?
- Have members of wedding party been selected? How many?
- Children participating, such as ring bearers or flower girls? Ages?
- Are there children from previous marriages who will participate?
- What kind of music has been arranged? What kind of music is desired?
- Has the license been obtained? Is the information for getting it known? When will it be?
- If rings are to be used, have they been purchased?

- Are the couple's parents living? Will they be attending? Will step-parents be present?[2]
- Are there grandparents or other special relatives? Recent bereavements to honor?
- What have the couple decided about their own and others' attire?[3]
- What do they hope the celebrant will wear?

The couple may not be able to answer all these questions yet, but they should begin working toward clarity about them. When this initial information has been recorded, the celebrant should invite any questions that the couple may have arrived wishing to ask. They may have many, or none at all. The celebrant may not be able to give an answer to certain questions until more work has been done to formulate the ceremony itself; it is fine to say, "Let's come back to that after we have gotten a little further in the process."



The celebrant should then describe their approach to planning and conducting a wedding. This may include such information as:

- Why I believe that wedding ceremonies are important, and what they exist to accomplish.
- Why I do, or do not, use a 'fill-in-the-name' standard ceremony text.
- Why I do, or do not, use traditional religious or 'God' language in a ceremony.
- How comfortable I am with cultural conventions around weddings, and ceremonies.

- How the participation of the couple in the planning process will affect the ceremony.
  - What the planning process and timeline will look like.
  - How much I charge for services, including meeting, planning, travel, and performing the ceremony.
  - Best ways for the couple to be in touch with me, in case of issues or questions.
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[1] The importance of a rehearsal is a function of several issues. One is how familiar everyone may be with the location of the wedding. The rehearsal, if held on site, is an opportunity to make sure the wedding party knows how to get there. A rehearsal is also advisable if the wedding party is large – more than six people – or if young children are involved. A run-through in advance can save much confusion and stress at the ceremony itself. By contrast, for a small wedding party with no children in a familiar location, a rehearsal may be superfluous. The rehearsal will usually take about 30-45 minutes AFTER THE LAST PARTICIPANT ARRIVES. It may well take more than an hour of the celebrant’s time waiting for the final bridesmaid or groomsman to appear, and this reality should be factored into the fee charged.

[2] These questions will be significant particularly for arranging the processional entrance or formal seating process. They should be considered before there is awkwardness between former spouses at the rehearsal or the ceremony.

[3] Knowing what the bridal couple plans to wear offers a way to assess how formal or casual their vision of the wedding is. The celebrant should seek to match this level of formality in their own attire, as well as in the language and ritual of the ceremony.

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## Wedding Traditions

### WHY IT BECAME BAD LUCK FOR THE GROOM TO SEE THE BRIDE BEFORE THE WEDDING

Until relatively recently, brides were considered the property of their father. Their futures and husbands were arranged without their consent. The marriage of an unattractive woman was often arranged with a prospective groom from another town without either of them having ever seen their prospective spouse. In more than one instance, when the groom saw his future wife, usually dressed in white, for the first time on the day of the wedding, he changed his mind and left the bride at the altar. To prevent this from happening, it became “bad luck” for the groom to see the bride on the day of the wedding prior to the ceremony.

### THE ORIGIN OF THE TRADITIONAL WHITE WEDDING DRESS

White is the ceremonial symbol of purity and virtue and hence of maidenhood. It has been so since Biblical times. But white has not always been the fashion for wedding gowns. Prior to the 19th century, it was fashionable to wear a colorful outfit that could be adopted for later wear.

In 1499, Ann of Brittany wore the first white wedding gown. Nellie Custis revised the wearing of white at her marriage to George Washington’s favorite nephew on the ex-president’s last birthday, February 22, 1799 and white has now been the fashion for some 200 years.



## THE ORIGIN OF “SOMETHING BLUE”

In early Biblical times, blue not white symbolized purity. Both the bride and groom usually wore a band of blue material around the bottom of their wedding attire, hence the wedding tradition of “something blue”.



## THE ORIGIN OF THE BLUE GARTER

We all know that something blue is lucky for the bride, but why a blue garter? This seems to stem from the noble Order of the Garter, the oldest order of knighthood in Europe. Its regalia includes a collar, a star and an actual blue velvet garter. Since queens and princesses are the only women invested with the Order, and a bride is a “queen for the day”, she may enjoy royal prerogatives by wearing a blue garter below her left knee.

## WHY THE BRIDE STANDS TO THE GROOMS LEFT

After the bridegroom captured his bride, he placed on her in his left to protect her, thus freeing his right hand or sword against sudden attack.

## THE ORIGIN OF THE TERM WEDDING

Although some brides were kidnapped, marriage by purchase was the preferred method of obtaining a wife. The “bride price” could be land, social status, political alliances, or cash. The Anglo-Saxon word “wedd” meant that the groom would vow to marry the woman, but it also referred to the bride price (money or barter) to be paid by the groom to the bride’s father. The root of the word “wedding” literally means to gamble or wager!

## First Meeting Continued

At this point, other questions may have occurred to the couple, or they may have been reminded of questions they forgot to ask before. Be sure to invite any further questions.

The next fruitful inquiry is to ask the couple, “Is there anything that you know you want, or know that you don’t want, in your ceremony?” It may be helpful to ask whether either or both of them have attended any weddings recently, or have recollections of weddings they have attended in the past. What was memorable, either good or bad? If



either partner has been married before, is there anything about their previous wedding ceremonies that influences their wishes about this one? Couples vary widely in the amount of thought that they may have already given to these kinds of questions, as well as in how articulate they may be in responding. The celebrant should make note of any hopes or distastes that come to light through these questions.

At this point, the celebrant should offer the couple whatever set of resources the celebrant makes available as choices of material for the ceremony, and walk through it with them, explaining the function of various parts of the service. It is helpful to give the couple options for how to approach the material, as well as how to use it. Some couples like to read through the options together, discussing them as they go. Others prefer to have each partner review all the material, selecting pieces that appeal to them, and then compare notes with each other when both have looked at the options. Some couples will be pleased to select from the given choices as they stand; other couples may want to edit and personalize the selections, or write new material of their own. The celebrant can be helpful by assuring the partners that there is no wrong approach, as long as they give the process attention and care, and share their thinking with each other.

If the couple has indicated a desire for a component of the ceremony which is not already included in the celebrant's collection of material, the celebrant can offer to compose the wording of this piece, or invite the couple to write what they would like said. Either way can work; much depends on how eager the couple is to undertake this work. If they are reluctant, the celebrant should take the lead, and either research to find existing material, or compose something new for the occasion. This can be the most rewarding part of creating a unique ceremony.

Many couples who seek a Humanist celebrant intend or hope to write their own wedding vows.

When the couple has clarity about what to do with the material in preparation for the next meeting, the celebrant may want to ask them to tell something of how they met, and how the decision to marry came about. This should not be to probe the quality or health of the relationship, but rather to give the celebrant a sense of their personalities and the meaning that they attach to the process of getting married. It also ends the meeting on a fun, cheerful note. A time should be established for the next meeting – preferably 2-3 weeks later – and the couple should be reminded of any details from the list above that need to be followed up in the interval, as well as how to be in touch with the celebrant should questions or problems arise.



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## Wedding Traditions

### THE ORIGIN OF THE BOUQUET

Symbolizes life, growth, and fertility. Herbs ward off evil spirits. Flowers with different meanings are assembled into a bouquet. Flower meanings:

*Acacia = Elegance*

*Carnations = Fidelity*

*Honeysuckle – Generosity*

*Hyacinth = Playfulness*

*Irises = Wisdom*

*Orchids = Fertility*

*Roses = Love*



### WHY ORANGE BLOSSOMS?

There are cycles of favor for bridal flowers just as with other bridal fashions. There was the era of rosemary, then myrtle, and more recently, the orange blossom has enjoyed a full century of popularity. Carried from Spain to France many years ago, and then to America, the orange blossom wedding tradition became so strong that brides wore the flowerets moulded in wax when they couldn't get fresh blossoms.



The meaning is significant: the orange tree is one of the very few in all nature that bears its flowers and its fruit at the same time — a symbol of young and fruitful spouse. Because the tree from which orange blossoms come is an evergreen, they are also thought to symbolize the everlasting nature of the newlywed's love for each other.

#### THE ORIGIN OF THE FAMILIES SITTING ON OPPOSITE SIDES OF THE CHURCH

Fathers would sometimes offer their daughters as peace offerings to warring tribes. Because of the hostility, the families were placed on opposite sides of the church so the ceremony could go on without bloodshed. The ceremony united the two warring factions into a family, and danger of war was resolved.



#### THE ORIGIN OF TAKING EACH OTHER'S RIGHT HAND

The open right hand is a symbol of strength, resource and purpose. The coming together of both right hands is a symbol that both the bride and the groom can depend on each other and the resources that each brings to the marriage. It also represents the merger of their lives together into one.



## At the Second Meeting

Couples should arrive at the second meeting with selections from the material provided at the previous session. If they have not in fact completed this task, the celebrant may be well advised to reschedule the meeting, and encourage them to use the time now available to review the options and make some choices, so that the process can move forward. In rare instances, a couple that does not read well, or has other difficulties accessing the material, may benefit from the celebrant doing this work with them. In most cases, it is not a good use of the celebrant's time to be present throughout this conversation between the couple, and the resulting ceremony may owe more to the celebrant's tastes than the couple's. A couple's repeated inability to get this task done may be an indication of hesitance, either about the wedding plans specifically, or about the marriage more generally.<sup>[1]</sup>

The celebrant should review the couple's selections quickly to see that the order makes sense, to check for any omission of elements discussed at the previous meeting, and to see if the language of the various parts works harmoniously together. If immediate difficulties appear, they can be pointed out, and questions



asked or suggestions offered. If the first glance looks good, the celebrant should offer to look at it more closely later, and ask how the process felt to the partners. If they are content with the way it went, and with the result, then it is time to review the details that may have been undetermined at the first meeting. Decisions should have been made about the music and the wedding party; arrangements for the license and the rings should be in place, if not the items themselves. When all these topics have been covered, and commitments to follow up on any loose ends have been made, the conversation can proceed to the vows.

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[1] See the section on Difficult Situations for thoughts on how to proceed if this seems to be the case.

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## Wedding Traditions

### THE ORIGIN OF THE WEDDING KISS

No ceremony is complete without the kiss. In fact, there was a time when an engagement would be null and void without one. Dating back from early Roman times, the kiss represented a legal bond that sealed all contracts. If one of the engaged paid died before the wedding, the other could keep the gifts only if they had already kissed. The



wedding kiss is no longer a required part of the wedding ceremony. The wedding kiss is a symbol of the newlywed's faith and love, respect and obedience to mutual benefits. It grew out of the feudal practice of kissing the lord's ring.

Another story goes; the priest first kissed the groom after the ceremony. Then the groom kissed the bride, the priest kissed his assistants, and his assistants kissed the guests. No longer is the tradition carried this far.

### THE ORIGIN OF THE WEDDING RECEPTION

The fact is that marriage feasts have been in existence nearly as long as marriage ceremonies. The early Greeks held a splendid wedding feast for every couple. And it was a very special occasion indeed, because although women were not usually included in other Greek banquets, they were invited to wedding feasts.

## THE ORIGIN OF SERVING GOOSE AT A WEDDING FEAST

According to folklore, goose was served at weddings because the gander, always faithful to his original mate, became the symbol of marriage and fidelity. By serving goose, it was believed that the main dish would symbolize things hoped for and dreamed for in the marriage.



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# Elements of Wedding Ceremonies

## The Vows and the Consent

The Vows and the Consent are often conflated in the popular imagination, but they constitute two separate functions of a wedding. On the one hand, marriage is a public institution, carrying legal responsibilities and cultural expectations which are the same for all married couples, and which this couple now agrees to undertake. These expectations have little to do with the particularity of their



personal ideals and feelings. In the Consent, the officiant inquires as to the willingness of each person to agree to these legal and social terms, with a question directed to each of them in turn, which the individual answers in words directed to the officiant. The traditional form of this question is “Will you have (or do you take) this man/woman to be your wedded husband/wife, to live together according to

god's holy ordinance, and forsaking all others, keep you only unto him/her, so long as you both shall live?" to which each member of the couple replies in turn "I will (or I do)", addressing not each other but the celebrant. Clearly the wording of this question can and should be updated, although some couples like more traditional language at this point, to remind them that they are part of a long heritage of those who have also made this commitment. Others like to add an expression of hope that soon all couples, gay as well as straight, will be entitled to this legal and social recognition. In any case, the function of the Consent remains important and separate. It may occur quite early in the service, before some of the readings, music, or messages that precede the Vows.

The Vows, on the other hand, are words spoken by each member of the couple directly to the other, expressing their hopes, intentions and commitment for the relationship they aspire to have in their life together. This can be a very personal statement, and many couples are eager to create their own unique vows, reflecting the character of their particular ideals of marriage. A few may arrive with ideas or a draft of the vows already in mind; most will hope for assistance from the celebrant to help them with this creative work. The exercise described below is one way to guide the couple in formulating what they might say to each other; each celebrant should develop a structure for this process, because the creation of words of covenant is not something that most people have any practice in doing. This kind of exercise can be useful even if the couple prefers to use the traditional prayer book vows –

***I, name, take you, name, to be my wedded wife/husband, to have and to hold from this day forward; for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health; to love and to cherish until death do us part.***

– because it will help them to unpack what those promises mean to their particular relationship.

There are several ways for the vows to be presented, and the celebrant should consider with the couple what will be most comfortable for them. The traditional method is for the celebrant to prompt one member of the couple, line by line, to repeat the words of the vows, and then do the same with the other partner, with the



two of them looking at, and addressing, each other. If the couple is particularly shy public speakers, they may find it comforting to both repeat the suggested line together, rather than one at a time. If the vows are much longer than the traditional forty-two words, (and when the couple writes their own, they usually are) it can be tedious to listen to them four times through; the both-repeat-together method also helps keep the ceremony moving. Couples may wish to present their vows to each other without the intervention of the celebrant; this will mean having the prepared vows printed on card stock in an easily legible font and size, to be handed to the couple at the appropriate moment. Some couples attempt to memorize the vows and recite them without prompting; if they succeed, this can be very moving, but the effort can also create anxiety. The officiant should always have the planned vows available in written form, and be prepared either to prompt the speaker or to hand them the written text. In order to have her hands free for the vows and rings, or other ritual activities, if the bride is carrying flowers, she should have a plan for when during the ceremony she will hand them to an attendant.

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## Wedding Traditions

### THE ORIGIN OF THE WEDDING TOAST

What about the origin of “toasting”? As drink goes, wine has always been central to the wedding, even mentioned in the Bible. The first recorded toast was given at a Saxony feast in 450 A.D. by a woman who became a bride herself before the end of the evening.

British King Vortigern was so moved by the sentiment: a simple “Lord King, be of health,” offered by Rowena, daughter of the Saxony leader Hengist, that he proceeded to make passionate love to her. Intoxicated by the drink, possible love, and definitely greed, he then bargained with Hengist for her hand. A deal was arranged whereby Hengist received the province of Kent in exchange for her hand. Vortigern and Rowena were married that same evening. From that time forth, “to life, to health, to love,” has been a part of the toasting tradition, as glass touches glass and a chorus of clinks heralds a festive time for all.

Once it literally involved scorched bread. In the days when wine was regularly decanted, it left much more sediment than other modern bottles do. So the French cleverly placed a piece of toast in the bottom of the cup to absorb the dregs.

A competent toaster drank everything to get to the toast at the bottom because decorum dictated that one drain the glass.

So good wishes were often accompanied with the dictum, “Bottoms up!”



Today the good wishes remain but happily, the actual soggy toast has disappeared. And, clinking of glasses after a toast scares away the devil who is repelled by the noise.

#### THE ORIGIN OF DANCING AND GAMES

Ancient weddings dances were communal and symbolic of life giving and beginnings. The first dance of the bride and groom leading to their dancing with the guests was to give them strength from the community before they retired to the bedchamber.



#### THE ORIGIN OF THE BRIDAL BOUQUET TOSS

Guests invaded the bridal chamber and threw the bride and groom's stockings. The one whose throw landed on the bride or groom's nose was the next to marry. It was customary in the 14th century for the bride to toss her garter to the men. Sometimes the men would get drunk, become impatient, and try to remove the garter ahead of time. Therefore, the custom evolved for the groom to remove and toss the garter. By the end of the 14th century, the groom was throwing the bride's garter to prevent their being rushed at the altar. With that change, the bride started to toss the bridal bouquet to the unwed girls of marriageable age.

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## Exercise for Creating the Vows

In a meeting with the couple several weeks before the ceremony, the officiant should review relevant logistics and details, including other elements of the service. When these have been resolved, invite the couple to let go of the planning process for the moment, and recall the most basic, important reasons why they are getting married. Ask



them to brainstorm a list of qualities that they hope their relationship will have through the years to come, with the officiant recording their words. Depending on how articulate the couple is, press them to come up with somewhere between a dozen and twenty words (more is fine, if they flow freely) describing the marriage they want. These can be nouns – friendship, loyalty – or adjectives – fun, growing, honest – or phrases – good communication, financial responsibility. Periodically read the list back to them, and ask if anything important is missing. The list need not be exhaustive, just long enough to suggest what their vision for a successful marriage looks like. When a sufficient list has been generated, congratulate the couple on their good work, and set this list aside for the moment. Suggest that most couples when they get married have a similar hopeful vision for what their relationship will be like, and yet often it does not get fully realized. Ask them to think of married couples they know, among their friends and family, people in the news, even fictional couples in movies or literature, and from these examples generate a list of things that get in the way; what prevents couples from having the marriage they once hoped for? The focus should be off the present couple’s own relationship, but looking at what they see in the culture around them. Suggest that there will be both process issues – lack of trust, respect, communication – and content issues – money, family, careers. Do not move into problem solving, or how to prevent such and such an issue, at this time; just create the list. If the couple does not spontaneously mention basic issues such as trust, respect, and communication, or infidelity, health/addiction, or violence, the officiant can from time to time suggest these as possible additions, while recording

the couple's ideas. Again, aim for a list of fifteen to twenty or so items that the couple identifies, with additions from the celebrant as needed. Read the list back, and ask whether anything important is missing.

When the second list is finished, write the following two questions on the same page, and describe their assignment to the couple as follows. They should do this work individually at first, so that they do not unconsciously modulate each other's thinking, but they are welcome to compare notes when they both have finished their parts. Each partner is to take both lists, and for each item on list two – What gets in the way? – answer the two questions written on the bottom of the page.

The first question is: What are you prepared to promise to the person you are marrying that will assure them that this issue will not prevent the two of you from having the kind of marriage described in the first list? Note that you cannot always prevent issues from arising – health concerns, for instance, or career choices, or family emergencies – but you can make a commitment about how you will respond to them.

The second question is: What would you like that person to promise you, so that you will feel confident that this issue will not prevent the two of you from having the relationship you hope for? Note that the fact that you would like to be promised something doesn't guarantee that you will receive that promise, but it gets your expectations out on the table. Also pay attention to places where what you are prepared to promise, and what you would like to be promised, may not be quite the same. These may be interesting areas to explore with your partner, when you have each completed the assignment separately. The object here is to get the couple to express themselves in their own language; it need not be elegant or poetic, or even grammatical; just honest phrases and ideas. It should also not be a legalistic negotiation of who will do the dishes or walk the dog, but more general concepts. It is likely that some of the responses to the



various items may be quite similar, and that is fine, but it is important to complete the list as thoughtfully as possible.

When this material has been generated, and the couple has had an opportunity to share their responses with each other if they wish to do so, they can bring their work (or send it, if they have worked on line) to the officiant, who will then arrange it into the format of vows, as described below. Some couples prefer to do this process themselves, with the officiant having a final editorial review, but many find this an intimidating prospect. It is actually not difficult; an experienced liturgist can usually do it in about half an hour. Begin by gathering any particularly graceful phrases or unusual words, and any concepts or wording expressed by both partners, and arranging these in a coherent order, being sure to draw material from each member of the couple. The vows often naturally begin with an affirmation of love for the partner, and then proceed to sentences in the format of “I promise...,” or “I commit myself...,” or “I pledge to you...”, and may end with an assurance that the duration of the commitment is “forever,” or “always” or “for all our lives.” Look for a balance between the expectation of joy and delight in sharing life together, and the intention to work through challenges and difficulties without giving up. Something between four to seven sentences should usually be sufficient to capture and blend together the most important statements that the partners have made. Note that there may be reasons why one partner’s vows would differ in part or as a whole from the other’s; there is no requirement that they be the same. The language of the vows should feel compatible in style with other elements of the ceremony, but not repetitive or redundant. The couple should be given the vows in draft form, and asked for suggested changes. It is helpful for them to try reading the words out loud, to make sure that nothing in them is a difficult tongue-twister for them to pronounce. When couples have completed this exercise, and seen their own words carefully arranged, most are excited to use their personalized vows. A few may wish to return to the familiar prayer book wedding vows, but the value of the process is that they now have a better understanding of what that traditional language means to them.

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## Wedding Traditions

### THE ORIGIN OF THE WEDDING CAKE

The tradition of the wedding cake has ancient roots. The Roman wedding ceremony included a simple cake made from salt, water, and wheat flour. The cake culture may also be connected to the fertility rituals of many cultures. One custom, similar to that of throwing confetti, involved showering the bride with many small cakes after the wedding. Sometimes the cakes were even broken over the bride's head.



In Shakespeare's time, sheaves of wheat were carried in the wedding procession and sometimes the bride wore wheat in her veil because this graceful grain is a symbol of fertility. In a later era, the wheat was ground to flour and little hearth-baked cakes were broken and eaten by the bride and groom. Gradually these loaves became more elaborate. The bridesmaids carried them to the church to be blessed, which led to the belief that the very crumbs under one's pillow would induce dreams of romance.

At Elizabethan weddings, the bride and groom would kiss over a stack of small sweet buns. A 17th century French chef frosted the little cakes with white sugar to hold them together.

The bride and groom feed each other a taste of cake to symbolize the sharing of life's bounty. A small bit of icing on his face foretells a "rich and sweet life"; his face smeared with icing, "trouble"; and if a child under five snatches frosting, their first-born will be the same sex as the child.

## BREAKING THE CAKE OVER THE BRIDE'S HEAD

An old tradition that isn't practiced today, breaking the cake over the bride's head has its origins in the Roman Empire. The groom would eat part of the loaf of barley bread baked for the occasion and break the rest over the head of the bride. It is believed that this symbolized the breaking of the hymen and the dominance of the groom over the bride. As time wore on and wedding cakes evolved into a more modern form of a cake, it became impossible, much to the relief of many brides, to properly "break" the cake over the bride's head.

## CUTTING THE CAKE

Perhaps the most well-known tradition associated with wedding cakes is the joint task of cutting the cake. Here the first piece is cut by the bride with feigned assistance from the groom. It has come to symbolize the first task in the couple's life together and is a key image for the wedding photographer to capture. Originally, it was the sole duty of the bride to cut the cake for sharing by the



guests. As cakes became grander, the task became quite formidable, particularly in the early multi-tiered cakes where the icing had to be strong and rigid enough to support the upper tiers. It became a joint task more out of necessity than symbolism. Immediately after the cutting, the bride and groom feed each other the first slice. This action symbolizes the commitment to provide for each other that the bride and groom have undertaken. However, in most American weddings, this task has the appearance of a traditional slapstick pie-fight.

# Particular Challenges for Celebrants

## **1. I sense hesitancy in one or both of the partners; they might not really want to get married. Should I intervene?**

It is not the function of the Celebrant to evaluate the future chances of success for a particular relationship; however, it is within the role of the Celebrant to attend to the free will with which each partner participates in the ceremony, and by extension the planning process. Often reluctance will be manifest by one or both partners not being able to complete their assignments, or to appear in good order for appointments. The Celebrant should take into account that the period of time surrounding a wedding can be stressful for many reasons, and make some allowances for scattered attention.

It is also possible that one or both of the couple has difficulty that they have not mentioned, with reading and/or writing, with English, or with computer technology, if that is being used. If this is determined to be the case, the Celebrant may need to offer more assistance – in taking notes for a person who speaks but does not read or write well; paying attention to whether a person for whom English is a second language is tracking what is being said; or moving from web-based communication to additional meetings or phone calls.

Nevertheless, if no impediments appear, but participation in the process is still lacking, it is legitimate for the Celebrant to point this out, and inquire directly whether the couple can explain the source of this reluctance, and whether it might reflect hesitancy about the marriage itself. Sometimes an offer to postpone the ceremony, with the assurance that this does not necessarily mean that the couple doesn't really love each other, or are somehow bad people, frees up their energy to proceed. Sometimes it may provide great relief for a couple that feels trapped by the inertia



of the whole wedding enterprise. Occasionally, couples may drop out of the planning process with minimal explanation; this may mean that the process has surfaced an ambivalence that they do not care to discuss. In the worst case, a Celebrant may have to withdraw from the wedding; this will always create dismay and possibly anger from the couple. It is an unfortunate representation of Humanism, and should be a last resort only for very grave cause.

## **2. The couple is not located near me during the preparation period, and I may not meet them in person until the day of the rehearsal, or just before the wedding. How can we plan the ceremony?**

Although the planning process is easier and more engaging if the Celebrant can meet with the couple in person, it is possible to create a ceremony through e-mail, web meetings, or even written correspondence. Much of the information that the Celebrant needs to give the couple, and receive from the couple, can be put into writing. Many couples may have access to Skype, Google Hangout, or other internet-based communication facilities, and the Celebrant may find it a good investment to learn to use these applications. The Celebrant who anticipates doing this kind of work occasionally should consider composing a series of letters/messages introducing the various elements of their planning process, so that they need not be created anew each time. It is also useful to maintain an electronic document file of the options suggested for various elements of the ceremony script, so that this is easy to provide to long distance couples by e-mail, shared docs, or a drop box. Be sure the couple has planned how they will arrange for a local marriage license. If at all possible, the Celebrant should meet with the couple a day before the wedding, to go over final details, and to examine the license. It is also practical to receive the fee for the Celebrant's services either ahead of time by mail, or at the advance personal meeting, since the couple may be difficult to reach if they are traveling on a honeymoon following the wedding.

## **3. The couple is seeking an extremely simple, informal, and private ceremony, without any significant**

## **preparation. Should I insist on going through the whole process?**

It can happen that a couple must formalize their legal marriage at a time other than their planned ceremony, because of travel plans, health insurance issues, the critical illness of family members, or the imminent birth of a child. A couple who has lived together for many years may decide to be married, and not want a public



event. If a Celebrant decides to officiate in these cases, it is helpful to design a very simple ceremony text to be used for such occasions, and to establish a fee which recognizes the limited preparation time involved. A valid marriage license must still be produced, and the Celebrant should be aware of the state requirements concerning witnesses, to be sure that there are enough people present to satisfy this condition. [Click here for a sample minimal ceremony](#), more examples can be found in the Resources Section at the end of this course.

## **4. The couple is not able to obtain a legal marriage license. What should I do?**

It is important that the Celebrant not participate in a fraudulent ceremony; there may be civil or criminal penalties for doing so. It is always legitimate for the Celebrant to withdraw from the planning process, and decline to proceed with the wedding until such time as a valid license can be provided. It should also be remembered that there need not be a legal aspect to celebrating a couples' commitment to each other. In many cultural systems, the state function of legal marriage and the religious ritual are two separate events. Also, in parts of the U.S. at present, a Celebrant might be creating and officiating at a wedding for a same-sex couple in a state that will not issue a license to them.

The traditional concept of Betrothal can sometimes be helpful in situations where the timing of divorce decrees, residency, or age of majority interferes with the possibility of a marriage license. What is crucial is for the Celebrant to be clear with all those present that such a ceremony does not constitute a legal contract; confusion about this can lead to accusations of fraud. A Betrothal is a promise by the couple that they \*will\* be married at some point in the future. It can offer much of the same beauty and emotion as a legal wedding, but it must not end with a Pronouncement of marriage, or the assertion that the couple are now husband and wife. [Click here for a sample betrothal ceremony.](#)

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## Marriage License

A marriage license is a document issued, either by a church or state authority, authorizing a couple to marry. The procedure for obtaining a license varies between countries and has changed over time. Marriage licenses began to be issued in the Middle Ages, to permit a marriage which would otherwise be illegal (for instance, if the necessary period of notice for the marriage had not been given).

Today, they are a legal requirement in some jurisdictions, a “pardon” can be obtained, for marrying without a license and in some jurisdictions, common-law marriages and marriage by cohabitation and representation are also recognized. These do not require a marriage license. There are also some jurisdictions where marriage licenses do not exist at all and a marriage certificate is given to the couple after the marriage ceremony did take place.

Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares that “Men and women of full age, without limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution. marriage shall be entered into only the free and full consent of the intending spouse.”

*Wikipedia*

## Counseling

Unless you hold a degree in one of the counseling sciences (and any applicable state certifications), you legally cannot offer counseling services, nor can you use “Humanist Counselor” in your title. If you do hold a degree that allows you to counsel individuals and you are approached as a Celebrant-counselor, then you should take advantage of your shared humanist perspective as well as your secular credentials. Celebrants can and are encouraged to “lend an ear” to anyone who wishes to know what a Humanist perspective would be for any given situation. Referring to such services as “coaching” or “mentoring” can help to ensure people do not confuse your services for licensed counseling, social work, or mental health services.

The above also applies to pre-marital counseling of a couple approaching you for wedding services. Unless you are specifically trained to offer such services, it is strongly suggested that if the couple wishes such counseling, that you refer them to qualified practitioners in experience or knowledge. When making referrals, advise them to ask for the counselor’s experience, education credentials, and any licenses and certifications.

*Humanist Society, A Handbook for Celebrants*

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# At the Rehearsal

The Celebrant should be prepared to welcome various members of the wedding party who arrive before the bride and/or groom, and invite them to make themselves comfortable while waiting for others. When the bride and groom arrive,

the Celebrant should ask for introductions to anyone not yet met, especially parents if they are present. Have a quick check in with the couple about the ceremony, including any logistics that are not yet clear. This is a good time to take custody of the marriage license, assuring that it will not be forgotten at the wedding. It also allows the

Celebrant the opportunity to fill out any part of the license that must be completed by hand except for the actual signatures. Some license forms require quite a bit of writing, which can become tedious when witnesses or the couple themselves are anxious to sign and move on to other activities following the actual ceremony. It is also a good time for the couple to deliver the agreed upon fee for the Celebrant's services. It often happens that no one in the wedding party has a checkbook with them the day of the ceremony, and it becomes a nuisance to chase down the fee once the event has passed. Books of traditional etiquette often advise that the gratuity to the minister be delivered in cash; the Celebrant should let the couple know whether this is actually convenient or not, since it may result in the Celebrant being responsible for keeping track of a significant amount of cash in a situation of little security. Many officiants actually prefer a check, if confident that it will clear; if not, the inconvenience of carrying cash may be preferable. Usually these details can be settled in the interval of waiting for the last expected members of the wedding party to appear at the rehearsal. The officiant should also be clear about attending the rehearsal dinner, if one is planned, as well as the reception following the wedding. It is a courteous gesture for the couple or their parents to invite the celebrant to these events, but it is not a requirement that the Celebrant accept. Attending these social functions can be enjoyable, but is also time consuming. Unless the Celebrant shares a social circle with the couple, the bride and groom may be the only people with whom they are acquainted. However, it is



inconsiderate to let those hosting the event prepare a place for the Celebrant, and then fail to appear.

When all members of the wedding party who will attend the rehearsal are present, gather the group's attention, and say a few words about the purpose of the exercise, which is to make sure that everyone is comfortably familiar with their role in making the ceremony go smoothly. It is not necessary to read every



word of the actual ceremony, but the party should practice lining up for the entrance, including where the Officiant and anyone who does not participate in the formal procession will wait, and when and how they will enter. Traditionally, the seating of the groom's parents and the bride's mother signal that the entrance procession is about to begin.

There are many ways to order the procession, including dispensing with it altogether, but there must be some way of signaling the beginning of the ceremony, and bringing the participants into the visible center of attention. If there is to be a formal procession, traditionally the Officiant, together with the groom and best man, enter from the side front, so as to be able to observe the procession from the front of the room. Alternately, the groom may process with his parents, or alone. In a less formal setting, the bride and groom may wish to enter together. The entrance of the bride is normally preceded by the bridesmaids, with the maid of honor last before the bride. If there is a flower girl and/or ring bearer, they are often placed after the bridesmaids and just before the bride. Unless a child is quite poised, it is usually intimidating for them to be the very first person to walk down the aisle. Depending on the age of the child, it may be advisable for them to deliver the rings, or drop the flower petals, and then sit with parents or other relatives in the audience. Arrangements should be made for them to be able to do this at any point during the ceremony, if they try to stand with the wedding party, but become restless.

When the participants have been arranged for the procession, they should practice entering and arranging themselves as they will be placed for the ceremony. It is more important for the groomsmen and bridesmaids to stand where they can see the couple well, than to be looking at the officiant. Whoever will



hold the bride's flowers should be where they can be easily received; whoever will hand the rings to the Celebrant at the appropriate moment should be placed where this can be done without awkwardness. If the bride enters with her father, while the groom watches from the front, the symbolism of how she moves toward the groom should be considered. It is graceful for the bride to embrace her father, and have him take his place with her mother, before she moves to join the groom, so as to avoid the impression that she is being 'turned over'.

When the bridal couple are standing in the front of the room with the officiant, they should be led through the actions of the ceremony. If there is to be a blessing from parents or the gathered community, the couple should turn and face those involved. If there are readers other than the officiant, they should understand where to read from, and when to come forward, and the couple should face them while they are reading. If there is a candle lighting, wine sharing, or other ritual element, the motions should be practiced, with consideration of how clothing, especially the bride's dress, veil, and train, may affect movement. At some convenient point in the ceremony, before any of these actions and before the vows, the bride should give her flowers to someone else to hold until the conclusion of the service; decide who and when this will be. If there is to be music during the ceremony, it should be established when this will be, and what the cues to the musicians will be.

The couple and the officiant should be clear about how the vows are to be presented; see the options for this under Vows. It is better for the actual words of the vows not to be fully repeated at the rehearsal; just the final line is adequate for practice. Rehearse who will go first in giving the wedding ring, and how the partner will give them the appropriate hand. When people are nervous, as many couples

are, their fingers sometimes swell, so that rings which come off and on easily at most times will get stuck at the crucial moment. It is more graceful for the partner who is receiving the ring to ease it on than for the one who is giving it to push forcefully.

Traditionally, the couple will exit the ceremony together, followed by the attendants, the officiant, and the parents. Practice this exit procedure, and decide where the couple and their families will go, or stand, immediately following the ceremony. Usually if they pause for congratulations just past the door, they will create a bottleneck for everyone else exiting. If they do not want a receiving line



at that point, the couple should have a plan either to disappear – for instance, if they want those attending to leave, so that they can take formal pictures – or to go to a room or hallway where they can greet their friends without blocking traffic. Any plan can work; having no plan leads to chaos. The Celebrant must also determine who needs to sign the license once the ceremony has taken place. If witnesses are needed, decide at the rehearsal who they will be, and instruct them where to meet the Celebrant with the license to sign. If the couple must sign, arrange where that will happen, before they either leave for the reception, or become part of a receiving line. Determine whether the signing of the license is considered a photo opportunity, so that the photographer can be advised when and where it will happen.

It is the responsibility of the Celebrant to make sure that the appropriate signatures, including their own, are gathered, and that the return portion of the license is mailed immediately. Usually the license comes with a self-addressed envelope for the Clerk of the Court or other state official; make sure to obtain this from the couple, or look for the appropriate address in the instructions that accompany the license.

When the wedding party has practiced the exit process, ask whether there are any questions or unclarity on anyone's part. Ask the couple whether they are comfortable with the way the ceremony is structured. Once everyone is satisfied, walk through the entrance procedure once more. When all are again gathered in

front, ask what time they are expected to be present for the ceremony, and make sure all are clear. The officiant should be on site an hour before the ceremony, but should not need to be present for hours of getting dressed and photographs, as long as the couple has made arrangements to have the space. Remind everyone to eat something before the ceremony; fasting can result in fainting.

At some point during the rehearsal event, the Celebrant should learn what, if any, arrangements have been made for a sound system. If there will be a microphone on a stand, where will it be located? Will the Celebrant be wearing a lapel mic? Who will be controlling the volume? Will readers and/or musicians be using the same mic? If the sound system can be operational for the rehearsal, it is helpful to try it out, but even if not, getting answers to these questions will save confusion and frustration at the time of the ceremony.

During the time between the rehearsal and the ceremony, the Celebrant should make any relevant changes in the text of the script, and fill out any parts of the license other than actual signatures.

# Course Review

[Humanist Weddings](#)

## Humanist Celebrant Resources

One of the most challenging tasks facing a Celebrant is writing the ceremony itself. Below are resources to help you get started. There are many sources of information out there, these are simply a place to start.

### Sample Wedding Ceremony Elements

These options for various segments of the wedding ceremony have all been used in successful, meaningful services, but they should not be regarded as fixed. A couple may wish to use an element as it stands, simply filling in their names in the appropriate places. They may wish to alter a specific word or two, to suit their own preferences. They might like to combine a certain part of one option, and another sentence from a different segment, in a cut and paste operation. Or, they might use these suggestions as a starting point to write an original piece of their own. Any or all of these possibilities are appropriate ways in which to use this material.

[Download Wedding Ceremony Elements.](#)

### Humanist Society:

#### Resources for Humanist Celebrants

The national credentialing organization for Humanist Celebrants is the Humanist Society. This organization is able to endorse Celebrants which enables them to sign marriage licenses.

Read through the Humanist Society's official handbook with information on business development, legal matters, ceremonies, sample readings, and much more.

In addition to the handbook, the Humanist Society offers resources on state marriage laws, endorsement renewal, and a directory of Celebrants.

[Visit the Humanist Society website.](#)

## Wedding Readings:

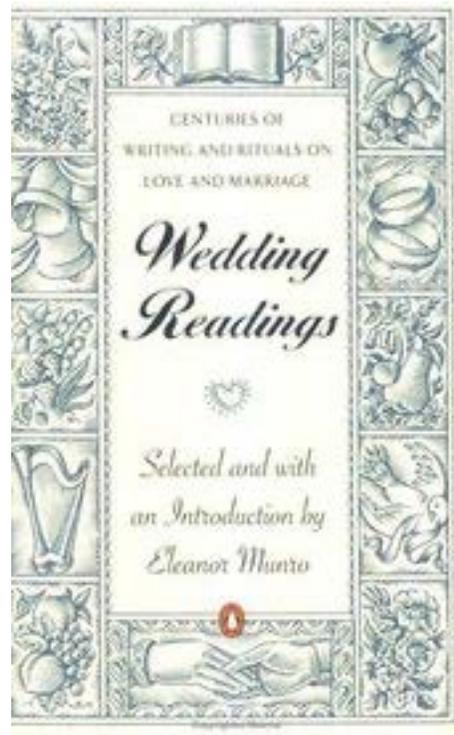
### Centuries of Writing and Rituals on Love and Marriage

This rich collection of writings on the nature of love and commitment has long delighted brides and grooms of every denomination. Culled from both sacred and secular texts, and suitable for either traditional or informal wedding ceremonies, these selections might be included in Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, interfaith, and non-denominational exchanges of vows.

Among the passages appropriate for readings by parents, friends, or the bride and groom are selections from Plato and Sappho, Rilke and Auden, Ecclesiastes and Euripedes, Shakespeare and Donne, Pascal and Montaigne, Emily Dickinson and Anne Morrow Lindbergh.

You can purchase this on Amazon or any other book provider.

[Link to Wedding Readings listing on Amazon.](#)



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*Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world — Nelson Mandela*