

## What's a Wedding all About?

By Matthew Ratz

For anyone in the midst of planning a wedding-- and for those about to be-- you're probably approaching the experience with a blend of awe and shock. There's a common saying that says, "being married is the best, but being engaged is the worst"; that's because, far too often, recently-engaged brides feel themselves barraged with questions about dresses and venues and catering and color schemes and music and invitation fonts and on and on. The whole experience can feel overwhelming.

Plus, when couples start to do the math that lies behind those questions-- the gowns, the venue, catering, color schemes, music, invitations, and the works-- their eyes widen, often in terror, of the growing bills.

So, if you find yourself in the fetal position, clutching your knees to your chest, crying, and rocking back and forth trying to calm yourself from the stress, it is helpful to remember what-- at the core-- a wedding ceremony is all about.

A wedding is about you, the couple, sharing the love and care you have for each other with all the people in your life whom you both love and care about.

That's it: a wedding is about sharing and expressing love and care. At the end of the day, guests will forget which varieties of flowers were in their centerpieces; they won't be bothered if the dinner was plated or a buffet; they'll likely have forgotten what was said at the altar. But they won't forget the love and care that was shown between bride and groom and between the couple and their guests.

The key is, really, to not get so lost in the details that you forget the big picture. As each new decision arises, ask yourself, "Will this choice demonstrate love and caring to my future spouse and to my guests?" For more choices than not, the answer will be "No" and the decision will be moot.

As in life, weddings are about the overall feelings created by the event. And, as Maya Angelou presciently stated, "People will forget what you said. People will forget what you did. But people will never forget how you made them feel." If you can make those you invite to your special day feel loved and cared for, your mission will be accomplished.

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## Who is the Perfect Spouse?

By Matthew Ratz

“You’re perfect” is a compliment that many people strive for. We love to hear such a phrase from people in our lives who matter to us: parents, teachers, and romantic partners. But, try to count the number of times in your life you’ve been called “perfect”; you can probably use your fingers for that exercise. In reality, perfection is an ideal we strive for but rarely achieve.

With that said, many brides and grooms, when asked to describe their spouses, default to *that* word: “He’s just perfect” or “She’s perfect for me” or “We’re perfect together.” Many couples will not take the next step and ceremonialize their relationship through marriage unless there is a feeling of “perfection.”

And that got me thinking about wedding vows. Though some people have been writing their own vows-- and this is a trend that spans several generations-- the vast, vast majority of marriages still subscribe to common vows that go something like this:

“Do you take this [man/ woman] to be your lawfully wedded [husband/ wife]; to have and to hold for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health as long as you both shall live?”

Each officiant’s tradition, church, synagogue, or mosque will phrase the vows slightly differently, but the jist is typically the same-- will you stand by each other no matter what life throws your way?

Nowhere in the vows does it say, “Do you believe you are perfect for one another?” Again, being “perfect” is an ideal, not a reality most of the time. To be the perfect spouse, one needs to be present “for better or for worse” and through all of life’s up’s and down’s.

Recognize, as you venture into the world together, there will be times when one of you is healthy and the other is ill; there will be times when one of you is richer and the other is poorer; there will be time that are good and there will be times that are bad. Marriage is like a sew-saw at a playground: no one spend the whole ride sitting down. But as a couple, you’re *together* through it all. Sticking together-- being by one another’s side through it all-- is what makes the perfect union.

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## Managing your Guests' RSVPs

By Matthew Ratz

You've set the date, selected the venue, figured out the music and the flowers, and designed and printed your invitations. You're ready, now, to send the scores of envelopes out into the world and hope that your friends and loved one are eager to share your special day with you and your chosen spouse.

Before you drop those envelopes in the mailbox though, before you seal them, think about this: how do I keep track of my guests' replies? What if my guests don't RSVP? What is someone RSVPs but forgets to write his or her name? Think about how many of your friends and loved ones will quickly check the "I'll be there!" box without thinking to write their names.

Replying to a wedding invitation is not the same as re-tweeting or clicking "like" on facebook; there's no profile connected to the paper RSVP card that magically reveals the respondent's name and location. Luckily, there's a remedy for this, and it is called Microsoft Excel (or Google sheets).

Before you send your invitations, create a database with all your guests' names and addresses in Excel (or Google sheets). Notice how each row in your database has a number at the far left? As you label your envelopes, write that number in the bottom corner of your RSVP return envelope; write it large enough that you can see it, but no so large that it becomes distracting.

Then, as RSVPs begin rolling in, use the numbers on the envelopes to match replies to your database. Doing this will help you keep track not only of who's coming and who can't, but also of who has yet to reply. There will be no more frantic phone calls or private-investigator-style attempts to decipher handwriting; your spreadsheet will save the day and simplify the whole process.

As you approach your wedding day, the last thing you'll want to stress about is guests who haven't responded (although there will always be some). Save yourself the stress by planning ahead and by using available technology to simplify this process. You'll thank yourself later.

As an added tip, the same database you used to send invitations can be used to keep track of gifts and thank you cards, so it's a "gift" that keeps on giving!

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## Flowers Cost *What?! Bridal Bouquets on a Budget*

By Matthew Ratz

Did you know that some brides pay more than \$250 *just* for the flower arrangements they walk down the aisle with? Why, you may ask, is a bundle of flowers so pricey? The easy answer: most brides select the most rare and expensive flowers for their bouquets because they're "in style." Think about it, how many bridal bouquets have you seen composed of cala lilies, orchids, or multi-colored roses.

Not to delve too deeply into the economics of flowers, the concept of supply and demand drives the price of petals; costs of different flowers are very tied to the curves of supply (how many are available at any given time) and demand (how badly people want them). Think about how expensive a bouquet of a dozen red roses are on February 14th versus how cheaply they can be bought the *other* 364 days of the year.

When selecting flowers for your bouquet-- especially budget-consciously-- you'll want to be deliberate about which flowers go into it. You'll want to choose flowers that are either readily available in your local area (think about what grows in your neighbors' yards each season) or what flowers *mean* for you.

Maybe your beau's first bouquet to you was pansies, sunflowers, or carnations. Composing your arrangement of *those* would be both inexpensive *and* personally meaningful. Another option is to choose an array of flowers (and herbs) based on their historical and cultural meanings. What follows is a list of what several flowers and herbs signify:

Starting with herbs-- aloe stands for soothing, basil signifies good tidings, lavender expresses devotion, thyme represents courage, and parsley symbolizes celebration (and these are all edible!).

Continuing with flowers-- violets stand for faithfulness, tulips are an expression of love, pansies represent thoughtfulness, lilacs symbolize youthfulness, and daisies mean hope and optimism. Also, though not *flowers*, pine cones represents humility and ivy signifies fidelity and continuity (who'd've thought?)

Including these flowers will not only help make yours a vibrant but also a *significant* bridal bouquet. Also, don't be afraid to use baby's breath, hydrangea, and multi-colored mums to your bouquet because they're almost always on the market and they'll add depth and volume to your arrangement. However you choose to arrange your bouquet, make sure it's uniquely yours!

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## Play That Funky Music! DJ or Live Band?

By Matthew Ratz

One of my favorite memories from my own wedding was watching loved ones from different parts of my life-- namely my fraternity brothers and my octogenarian great aunts-- boogie down side-by-side during our reception. For many couples, the music played during their reception is super important; hence the hours spent deliberating: DJ or live band? Here are some thoughts on each.

There are many things to consider before booking reception music. First, just doing a Google search for wedding bands or DJs will produce a staggering number of hits that will be too many to follow-up on. A better approach, especially if you're attending weddings, is to get a business card from whoever does the music; you could also ask friends who were recently married to make recommendations. Because with the shocking number of options, you'll be hard-pressed to winnow the options down without outside help.

If you're considering a band, typically, after you express interest, they will send you a "demo reel" which will be a professionally-edited video of this band's greatest hits. Wedding bands vary in their experience, but they'll typically combine their experience and *their* setlist with your selections. Know that, even if you pay for a live band, there will be some recorded music played at your wedding; most bands stipulate a meal break for their musicians and they'll put background "muzak" on while they're off stage.

One consideration that some people don't think about is that when the music is live, anything can happen. You and your partner may be adamantly against "The Electric Slide," but if a guest makes a request, you could be line dancing at your own wedding. Also, live musicians sometimes make mistakes. My wife and I wanted our first dance to be to the Carol King song "Where You Lead," and we provided chord charts to the band months prior to our affair. When we stepped out for our first dance, the band played Carol King's "I Feel the Earth Move Under my Feet" which was *not* what we expected.

On the flipside, with the live performance element comes the energy of a concert which, when harnessed well, can bring reluctant guests on to the dance floor and create many unique photo ops (like grandma in Wayfarers rockin' out with the lead guitarist).

On the other hand, some people prefer the option of a DJ with a set playlist of their favorite tunes. Couples are sure to avoid song mix-ups when they've provided their own MP3s. Like a band, experienced DJs will blend their setlists with yours. So your playlist is as important as your "Don't Play list." Most DJs will honor the couple's wishes even if a guest asks for "The Chicken Dance."

Also, most wedding DJs are quite able to bring reluctant dancers to the floor and change up their music to the hum of the crowd. Some DJs even bring their own lights and props to add a "show vibe" to your reception. On the other hand, DJs can never be as spontaneous as live musicians, but what you might lose in photo opportunities, you'll gain in high-quality recordings of your selected songs.

Some couples think they can skimp on their wedding music and just make a really good iTunes playlist to provide the soundtrack to their nuptials. My suggestion: don't make your wedding day soundtrack another source of stress and *don't* take matters of music into your own hands.

Whether you outsource to a DJ, to a live band, or to a good friend with a great CD collection, when you're dancing at your own wedding, "Don't Worry, Be Happy."

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## How to Get a Marriage License in the DC-Metro Region

By Matthew Ratz

If you're wedding planning, you've probably spent a few hours thinking about your venue, but did you know that the three regions of the D.M.V. each have unique processes for securing a marriage license? Before you set your heart--and your money--on a particular venue, take a few moments to learn more about how to get a marriage license in the different regions.

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In order to get a marriage license in Washington, DC, the bride, groom, or their designee must bring a completed [application](#) and the \$45 fee (\$35 application fee and \$10 per license), payable by money order or credit card to the DC Superior Court. As the application indicates, each spouse must provide his or her name, date-of-birth, address, and social security number as well as information about any prior marriages. The legal age for marriage in DC is 18, but someone 16 or 17 years old may apply for a license with parental consent.

In order to secure a DC marriage license, neither spouse needs to be a District resident and there is *no* waiting period. What that means is you can apply for and receive your license *on the same day!* As mentioned, the bride and groom need not appear together, or even at all; in fact, a third party may submit the application as long as he or she has the couple's information and proof of ID. Another benefit: Marriage licenses issued in DC never expire.

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In order to get a marriage license in Virginia, applicants can visit any Circuit Court in the State; Clerks of Court issue licenses. Like in DC, applicants under age 18 must have parental consent; in fact, in Virginia, minors must appear with their parent or guardian *in person* to apply for a marriage license. Virginia, like DC, has no waiting period for a license; however, the couple must appear *together* and present valid identification in order to apply. Also, unlike DC, Virginia's licenses only cost \$30 and most circuit courts accept cash payments only.

Like the District, the couples must furnish their names, dates of birth, social security numbers, and information about any prior marriages. One caveat in Virginia--the license is only valid for 60 days.

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Unlike Virginia and DC, a marriage license in Maryland has a 48-hour waiting period. That means if a couple applies on a Monday, their license won't be ready until Thursday. Like DC, the bride or groom may appear; they do not need to appear together. Like Virginia, the marriage license can be procured at any Circuit Court in the State. As in other locales, the couple's names, dates of birth, social security numbers, etc. must be listed on the license application. Also, in Maryland, the license must be issued in the County where the couple is to be wed, but neither spouse needs to reside in Maryland to get married there.

Some things that make Maryland unique: its application fees vary from County to County. Also, State law allows a spouse to be married at the age of 15 if found, by a licensed physician, to be pregnant. Also, unlike Virginia's 60-day limit, a Maryland marriage license is valid for six months from the date of issue.

Regardless of your venue, for all three jurisdictions your license will need to be signed by your ordained officiant and sent back to the Court for processing before you're officially married.

Hopefully as you progress toward your special day, your knowledge of when, where, and how to get your marriage license will simplify the process.

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## Photography Trends to Consider for Your Big Day

By Matthew Ratz

In the two hundred years since Nicéphore Niépce produced the very first photograph, folks have found innumerable ways to use photography in their lives. The question facing you, as your wedding date nears, is how will you use photography to capture and memorialize your special day?

If you're like me, you probably have fond memories of looking at your parents' wedding album. This huge book, typically 18" by 18" was a staple of weddings in the 1970s, '80s, '90s, and early 2000s. In fact, many couples cannot imagine *not* having a huge coffee-table-sized wedding album of their own to share with *their* kids someday; hence why thousands of wedding photographers still offer albums in the same style as your parents' wedding album.

But photography has come a long way since the 1970s; today, wedding guests can take photos on their smartphones whose camera lenses rival the best lenses available to professional photographers. Some couples wanting to bridge the divide between tradition and technology make a traditional album of photographer-taken shots and *also* produce a digital photo book of stills snapped by their guests' smartphones. As you think about how you'd like your special day framed on film, here are some trends to consider:

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Many event photographers praise the recently-popular "Photojournalistic" style of wedding photography and use it to capture powerful candids and provocative still-lives from a couple's nuptials. Instead of more traditional portrait photography where the subjects are posed and coiffed, a photojournalistic approach goes more "guerilla," endeavoring to capture the event in all its hectic beauty.

Quite often, a photojournalist will take shots with an "angle" perhaps focusing on that one nephew who refuses to smile or capturing a guest's far-off stare as your father gives his toast. These photos are sometimes gritty and sometimes chaotic, but almost always, they are full of life and quite touching. If this style of photography interests you, Google "photojournalism" and "weddings" and see some of the images that are produced.

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A trend that has been around since cameras have been portable is that of guests scurrying behind photographers to capture amateur stills for themselves. Some couples have embraced this entrepreneurial spirit, and have invited guests-- by providing instant cameras on dining tables-- to take photos of the event and leave the cameras for the bride and groom to develop (hey, someone's got to keep the 1-hour photo business running). Like photojournalism, these guest-snapped shots can sometimes be out of focus, but can also reveal details the couple overlooked as they danced and dined the night away.

Whether you opt for a formal album from your wedding photographer or decide, instead, to collect and print your own photos, however you choose to commemorate your day will be worth it. Your wedding celebration is something worth remembering!

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## Writing Your Own Vows that Wow

By Matthew Ratz

There is something very solemn about the “Til death do you part” wedding vows. Even the more modern “As long as you both shall live” version makes some couples shudder. Not because the sentiment is weak; on the contrary! You long to write their *own* vows because everything else about your wedding has been so uniquely YOU, it almost feels like a “cop out” to use someone else’s vows at your altar. If you’re the kind of couple that wants to customize every part of your wedding-- including the ceremony-- this article is for you.

The first question to ask yourself is, “Why am I writing my own vows?” Think seriously about *why* the traditional vows just won’t do. What do you need to say that cannot be summed up in the traditional vows? Do not tread lightly into this decision. If you have something important to say about what makes your union extraordinary, write it into your vows.

Where most self-written vows fall short is they rely on platitudes; couples “promise” this, that, and the kitchen sink, and far too often, their self-written vows sound a lot like “for better or for worse, in sickness, and in health,” etc. Avoid that pitfall by steering clear of turning your vows into a laundry list of promises. Focus instead on what makes your relationship special. Have you already stood by one another in good times and in bad? Have you already felt the sting of sickness and the blessings of health? Tell a story from your years together that *personalizes* your relationship.

Also, to avoid cliches, stay away from phrases like, “You’ve always” or “You’ve never”; find a way to say what you’re trying to say gracefully and poetically. Instead of writing, “I can always count on you to be by my side,” write metaphorically, “In all the time I’ve known you, you’ve been my anchor, holding me steady when I needed steadiness and letting me sail free when the winds took me.” (For tips on poetic writing, start by reading poetry at websites like [www.poetry.org](http://www.poetry.org) and [www.loc.gov/poetry/180/p180-list.html](http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/p180-list.html).)

Also remember, as much as your vows are *for you*, they are your testament of love and devotion before your guests; keep your guests in mind and keep your vows *concise*. Blaise Pascal famously wrote, “I have made this [letter] longer than usual because I have not had time to make it shorter”; writing concisely takes more time than writing long-windedly. But, for the sake of your spouse and your guests, keep your vows to a pithy paragraph or two *at most*.

A final thought as you write your vows is what you hope for in the future. Instead of wishing yourselves a “Happily ever after,” seek more of the same positive things that have kept your passions burning. Turn back to that central story and state how you hope those key qualities become the cornerstones of your marriage and how you look forward to “building a home together” well into the future.

To recap: your vows should tell *one* story in a poetic way; they should be concise and powerful; and they should end with a promise of more good things to come. Follow that guidance and there won’t be a dry eye in the house.

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## Writing an Amazing Bridesmaid's Toast

By Matthew Ratz

You've been asked to be Maid of Honor; what a touching tribute to the important role you have played! Being the Maid of Honor comes with many responsibilities, not the least of which is the toast to the newlyweds during their reception. Here are some tips for making writing your toast both easy on you and memorable for your audience.

The first thing to consider as you prepare to write your toast is to think about who will be listening. Yes, your toast is an opportunity to bring up happy memories and childhood laughs between yourself and the bride, but will the other hundred or so people listening care about that game of Barbies you played when you were seven? The best toasts are brief toasts, so you do both yourself and your audience a favor if you live by that motto.

As you approach writing your brief toast, try to bring to mind a single image that represents your friendship. Use that image as your touchstone. The trick to a powerful toast is narrating a *single memory* with as much vividness and passion as you can muster; you turn that one photo into a metaphor for your friendship, and you extend that metaphor to the newlyweds. Strive to find a *single* emotion or a single adjective that you can harp on.

Toasts that are thoughtful and memorable can really “wow” both the couple and the crowd. If you can fit your story into the following skeletal outline, your toast will be both touching *and* appreciated by everyone in the room.

**Part 1:** Introduce yourself. Give your name and the length of your friendship with the bride. Don't dwell too long on how many years you've known one another, and *do not* try to be funny by saying things like, “We've known each other before either of us found grey hairs.” Be quick; your introduction is *not* the crux of your toast. **Part 2:** Describe the memory or the photograph. Start by saying, “When I think back on our friendship, I can clearly see...” Provide just enough detail to allow others to imagine what you're seeing in your head.

**Part 3:** Delve into that memory and find the “central nugget”-- the emotion or the adjective-- that defines your friendship. Is the memory one of spontaneity? One of deep caring? Is it somber or is it joyful? Don't be afraid to crack open a thesaurus to get the perfect word and try to repeat the word at least three times. **Part 4:** Speak to the spouse. Let the groom know that the quality memories you and the bride shared are now his to partake of. Acknowledge that the depth of your friendship is the precursor to the developing depth of the couple's love.

**Part 5:** Wrap up by highlighting the “central nugget” and wishing that both the couple *and* all their guests have many more occasions to “raise a glass” together. **Part 6:** End a toast with “Cheers,” or, depending on the couple's culture, “*L'chaim*” or “*Salut*.” This single word tells everyone-- including yourself-- that your toast is finished.

Embrace your role with pride, follow the guidelines above, and you'll be giving the couple the best gift: shared memories of warmth and love to bring them joy on their special day.

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