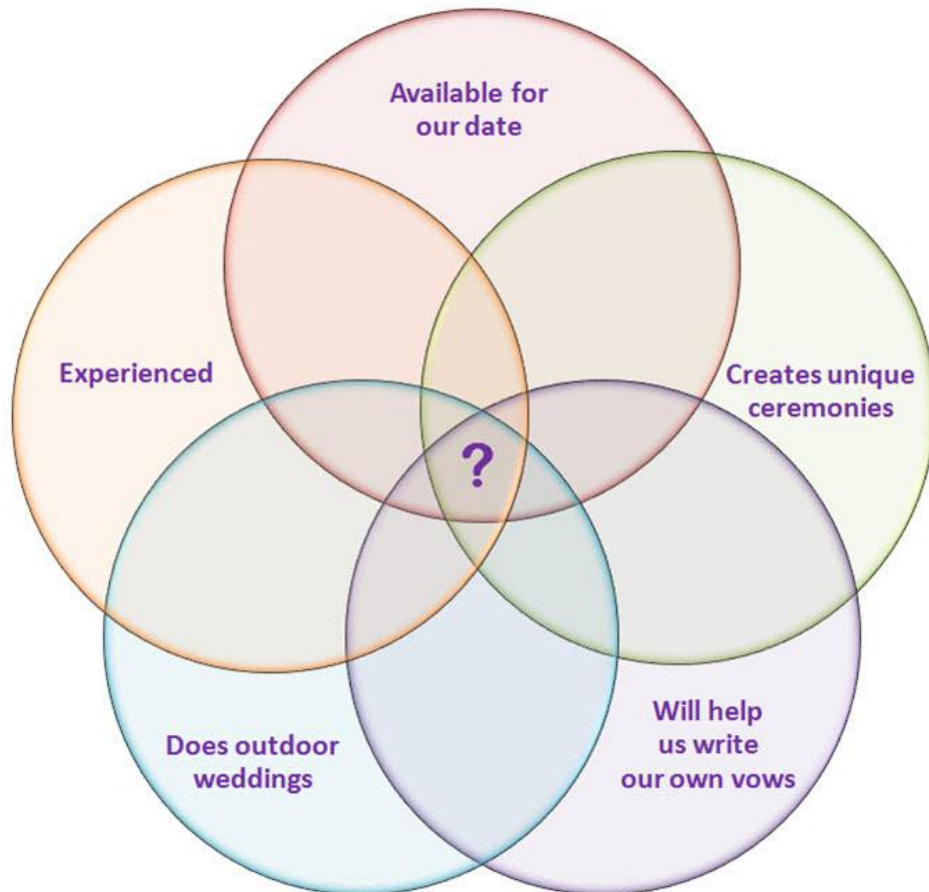


# Find the Right Wedding Officiant

*The First Steps to Getting the Ceremony of Your Dreams*

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## Includes:

*10 Questions to Ask Each Other before Interviewing Officiants*

*10 Questions to Ask Every Officiant*

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## Where Do You Start?

Congratulations on your engagement!

By now you've figured out that planning a wedding means having a lot decisions to make—researching venues and florists, looking at photographer websites, and talking to caterers and bakers. But have you thought about who will perform your wedding ceremony?

There was a time when picking an officiant was simple. Couples were either married by clergy at their local house of worship (usually the one they attended) or by a judge at the courthouse.

Today, depending on where you live, a quick Google search will give you a dizzying array of options. However, the key to finding the right officiant lies in knowing what you and your partner want for your ceremony. Figuring that out may take a few conversations.

## Know What You Want:

### *10 Questions to Ask Each Other before Interviewing Officiants*

- 1. Do we want a religious ceremony? If so, what kind?** If you're planning a religious ceremony, the field of possible officiants narrows considerably when you search specifically for clergy of your particular faith. If you and your fiancé are of different faiths, you may need two officiants or an officiant who can blend your two traditions, such as an interfaith minister or a Life-Cycle Celebrant®.
- 2. Where will we have our ceremony?** Are you having your ceremony at the reception site, a park, a farm, the beach or at home? Please note, some religious officiants won't perform ceremonies outside their houses of worship and some government officials may not work away from their offices.
- 3. Do we care if our officiant is a man or a woman?** Who do you picture when you envision your ceremony? If it's important to you that it be a man or woman specifically, odds are you won't be comfortable with someone else.
- 4. We are an LGBT couple, what should we be aware of?** --Make sure you know the laws of the state in which you're having your ceremony and the laws of the state you live in. Will your ceremony be a legal one? If it's a marriage equality state, like New Jersey or New York, or a state that offers civil unions, be sure your officiant is able to perform the legal ceremony.
- 5. Is there anything we absolutely *must* have in our ceremony?** This could be anything from a particular reading or ritual to having Aunt Martha participate. Make a list so nothing gets forgotten.
- 6. Is there anything we absolutely *don't* want?** Do you hate unity candles? Do you not want to read your vows? Do you not want to be "given away" or not want God mentioned? Again, make a list.
- 7. Will we be writing our own vows? Do we need help doing that?** If you want to write your own vows, you'll need an officiant who will create space for them in the ceremony. If you know what you want to say, but are worried you don't have the right words, you'll need an officiant who will help you find those words.

**8. How much control do we want over what goes into our ceremony?** Do you want to have a say in what's going to be said? Or are you comfortable with being surprised—just as long as you're married in the end?

**9. Do we have different ideas about what our ceremony should be?** There's nothing wrong with having different ideas. Weddings and marriage are like that. You will just need an officiant who can bring it all together and create a ceremony that equally reflects both your visions.

**10. How important is our ceremony compared to the rest of our wedding day? How much will we budget for our ceremony?**

Many magazines and websites recommend setting aside as little as 2% of your wedding budget for the ceremony (including location, officiant, and extras like candles or a chuppah). By comparison, they recommend setting aside 8% or more of your budget for flowers. If you prefer to think in terms of dollars, some sites recommend spending \$300 on your officiant but over \$700 on your cake.

When you look at your overall wedding budget, does it really make sense that the smallest investment be for the part of your day when you actually get married and for the services of the professional you entrust with your ceremony?

Your wedding ceremony isn't just something you *have* to do before the reception; it's the reason you're having a reception! Consider what parts of your wedding day that you'll think about on your first anniversary, on your tenth, and your fiftieth. Your ceremony is the moment when you declare your love for each other and formally commit to each other. Your ceremony is when you make your vows, telling each other and the world the kind of marriage you hope to have. Your ceremony is the one part of your wedding day that's just about the two of you.

Remember too that you will get what you pay for. So the officiant's fee is something you really need to consider.

Often we think of the officiant's job as being limited to the time we see them marrying the couple. Even if you're having a traditional ceremony, with no custom elements, and at the officiant's location, your officiant will likely be spending several hours preparing for and officiating at your wedding.

If your ceremony is being created specifically for you, your officiant will be investing considerably more time.

## Contacting Officiants

Once you've worked out what you want and need your ceremony to be, you're ready to talk to some officiants.

When you reach out to potential officiants, tell them your name and your partner's and make sure you have this information handy:

- The date and time of your ceremony
- The name of the venue and its location

Make sure you include this information when emailing officiants or leaving a voice mail. This way the officiant can let you know if he or she is available.

Once you've found an officiant who's available for your ceremony, you'll want to meet to see if he or she is a good fit. It's best that you both attend the meeting because choosing an officiant is a very personal decision.

Come to the meeting prepared with your ideas, concerns and questions... lots of questions. A good officiant will be happy to answer your questions and will also ask a few to get to know you and your vision for your ceremony.

**Print the next two pages and take them with you when you interview officiants.\***

Ask these questions of every officiant you meet with, even if you're having a traditional or religious ceremony (and especially if you're not) and even if the officiant is a friend or family member. Don't assume their vision for your ceremony matches yours or that their services include everything you want or need. You don't really know until you ask! Just like with a wedding dress or suit, one size does not fit all.

\*Don't forget your answers to the questions about what you want in your ceremony!

## Know What You're Getting:

### *10 Questions to Ask Every Officiant*

**1. Are you able to legally marry us?** Your ceremony is both a very personal event and a legal one. Your officiant must be legally qualified to solemnize your wedding or civil union ceremony according to state and local laws **where the ceremony is taking place**. For example, officiants performing weddings in New York City must be registered with the city.

**2. Are there any restrictions as to where you will perform a ceremony?** Make sure potential officiants know, up front, where you plan to have your ceremony. Are they willing to do an outdoor ceremony? How far will they travel? Some officiants will go to the ends of the Earth for a ceremony, others don't stray too far from home base. Will they travel for the rehearsal? Have they done outdoor ceremonies? Have they been to your venue before?

**3. What is your training and experience?** These can determine the type and quality of service you get. An officiant who has received formal training will likely have more knowledge and skill than someone who was only ordained online.

Even if you've decided to ask a friend or family member to officiate your ceremony, you may still want a professional officiant's help creating your ceremony or taking care of the legalities. If you need something special (see question 4), you may need an officiant who has the training or experience to deliver it.

**4. Do you always use the same ceremony or do you write ceremonies specifically for each couple?** Put another way, how much do you and your partner get to decide what goes into your ceremony? Religious officiants often have rules they must follow about what can be in a ceremony. Some officiants have a standard ceremony script that they stick to and don't allow changes.

Other officiants may allow couples to choose from a specific selection of readings and vows but won't change anything else. Certified Life-Cycle Celebrants<sup>®</sup>, like myself, offer completely customized ceremonies written specifically for each couple.

If all you want is to say a quick "I do" before your reception, a standard ceremony may be all you need. But if you'd like something special, unique, or very personal, or if you need to bring together two cultural or religious traditions, you need an officiant who is ready, willing, and able to work with you.

**5. Have you ever done a \_\_\_\_\_?** Do you want a flash-mob processional? Is there a cultural tradition you're going to include in your ceremony? Are you planning a handfasting or jumping the broom? Will it be a costume wedding? You want to be certain that your officiant is comfortable with everything you want to include and able to provide you with options for text and choreography if you need them.

**6. Will you let us read our ceremony in advance and make changes?** Discovering at the last minute that your officiant won't make the changes that are important to you can force you to make compromises that you don't want or leave you scrambling to find a new officiant at the last minute.

Finding out *during* your ceremony that your officiant has inserted a few surprises (for example adding a homily on a wife's role in the home or defining marriage as between a man and a woman) can really dampen your wedding memories, give a false impression of *your* views, and maybe even insult some of your friends and family. So make sure that you will be able to review and approve the text of the ceremony at least one week before the event.

**7. What is your process? How do we get from this first meeting to our final ceremony?** It's good to know how your officiant works and what the timeline is for creating your ceremony, especially if you will be asked to do homework (such as filling out questionnaires) or if you need an outline of the ceremony by a certain date so you can have programs printed.

**8. Will you come to the rehearsal?** Not every ceremony needs a rehearsal, but for more complex ceremonies or ceremonies with a large wedding party, it's a good idea. If you want a rehearsal and want your officiant present, then it's important to ask about this in your first conversation.

**9. Have you ever had to back out of a ceremony? Would you help us find a replacement if it became necessary?** It happens more often than you think. Several times a year, I find myself working with couples whose officiant suddenly became unavailable. You want to be sure that your officiant will suggest a backup plan so you're not left hanging.

**10. What is your fee and can we read the contract?** Once you have the answers to the previous questions, it's time to ask about the fee. Then, read the contract and consider the value of the officiant's services.

- Is it a quick "I do" from a pre-written ceremony or is the officiant writing your ceremony from scratch?
- Will you be getting personal attention? Will the officiant take the time to get to know you? Will he or she be researching rituals and readings or even creating new rituals for you?
- Will the officiant let you see the ceremony beforehand and make changes?
- Will the officiant come to the rehearsal?
- How much travel will be required for the officiant?
- Is the officiant offering special services, like exclusivity for the day or a PA system for the ceremony?

## You'll Be Glad You Asked

It's *your* wedding ceremony! Knowing what you want and asking the right questions will help you make sure your ceremony is a happy memory for years to come.

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### About the Author

**Cristina Kollet** is a certified Master Life-Cycle Celebrant® and owner of InclusiveCeremonies.com. She's also an instructor at the Celebrant Foundation & Institute, where she teaches the art of creating personalized wedding and family ceremonies. She loves creating meaningful, personal ceremonies and telling couples, "Yes!"

Contact Cris today about making your wedding ceremony a unique and personal expression of your love. Call 973-985-0798 or go to <http://inclusiveceremonies.com/ContactCris>