

A woman in a white wedding dress is holding a large, elaborate bouquet of flowers. The bouquet features a mix of peach, orange, and yellow roses, along with smaller white and blue flowers, and various greenery and dried floral elements. The woman's face is partially visible at the top, and her hands are holding the bouquet. The background is a soft, light blue gradient.

MARTHA STEWART Weddings

Dream Up Your Day

The Modern Guide to
Planning a Celebration

STUNNING
DRESSES

SWEET CAKES

SUPER-SPECIAL
REAL WEDDINGS

MARTHA STEWART
WEDDINGS
ANNUAL PLANNER
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THE MAIN EVENT

Ultimately, the marriage ceremony is the reason your friends and family have gathered here today. Every culture does it a little differently, but they all share a handful of traditions. We mapped out how to make yours personal, meaningful, and above all, official.

TEXT BY ELYSE MOODY

FIND AN OFFICIANT

Your options: religious or civil.

For a religious ceremony, choose a priest, minister, rabbi, imam, or pandit. If you're getting married in a place of worship where you're a member, good news—the resident clergyperson comes with the territory. If not, ask a friend or your planner for a referral, or contact your religion's national headquarters. To set a less specific but still spiritual tone, consider a Unitarian minister. If you and your partner are combining faith traditions, two religious leaders (or a religious one and a secular one) can share the role. For a civil ceremony, book a celebrant, justice of the peace, or notary, or have a friend or relative get ordained online and do the honors. This person will set the tone for the day, so if you're meeting for the first time, make sure your personalities (and priorities) align.

THE SCOOP

Book your officiant **9 to 12 months** ahead.

A celebrant's services typically cost **\$300 to \$800**.

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

Start drafting your vows **about two months in advance**, so you have time to refine and practice them.

They should each be **three to five minutes** long.



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

PICK A PROCESSIONAL
Opt for a piece that's about four minutes long.

CANON IN D
Johann Pachelbel
"PRINCE OF DENMARK'S MARCH"
Jeremiah Clarke
"A THOUSAND YEARS"
Christina Perri & David Hodges*

*"This one is giving Pachelbel some competition," says celebrant Alisa Tongg.

“IT’S NOT ABOUT BEING A HALLMARK CARD UP THERE. YOU’VE GOT TO BE REAL. TALK FROM YOUR HEART. ‘TILL DEATH DO US PART’—THOSE ARE SOMEONE ELSE’S WORDS. START FROM SCRATCH, AND CREATE YOUR OWN TRADITION.”

—TANYA PUSHKINE, FOUNDER OF THE VOW WHISPERER

ROCK THE RECESSIONAL

End on a song with bounce to set a party mood. If it makes you smile, it's a winner; so are these classics.

"AIR ON THE G STRING"
Johann Sebastian Bach

"WEDDING MARCH"
Felix Mendelssohn

"ODE TO JOY"
Ludwig van Beethoven

"BEST OF MY LOVE"
The Emotions



OFFER REFRESHMENTS

If the day is hot—or cold—set up a self-serve drinks station so guests can help themselves. (Save the booze for cocktail hour.) Water with fruit and herbs is quenching on a sunny day. Warm cider beats the chill on an alfresco fall one.

Fold in Everyone

Here are four easy ways to get loved ones—young, old, and furry—to play supporting roles.

1. MAKE INTROS

Kick off the program by introducing and recognizing your parents, says officiant Annie Davis.

2. HONOR FAMILY

Have your officiant offer a remembrance of relatives on both sides who have passed away.

3. DRESS UP A PUP

A well-behaved four-legged friend could be a ring bearer. Have a maid or groomsman walk her down the aisle.

4. INCLUDE FRIENDS

Think beyond the wedding party. Pals can also pass programs, do readings, sing, or lend Grandma an arm.



LAURA MEMORY PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEOGRAPHY (MUSICIANS); CAROLINE LIMA PHOTOGRAPHY (WATER STATION); HALEY RICHTER PHOTOGRAPHY (COUPLE WITH DOGS); ALEXANDRA GRACE PHOTOGRAPHY (HANDFASTING); JOHNNY MILLER (CEREMONY BACKDROP)

PERSONALIZE YOUR VOWS

These words are the heart of the ceremony. Your officiant will guide you, but what you say is entirely up to you. Tanya Pushkine, founder of the Vow Whisperer, offers this advice: **Don't make promises you can't keep.** "Even something as small as 'I pledge to never go to bed angry,'" Pushkine says. "You can't promise that! Avoid the words *always* and *never*." **Show, don't tell:** Rather than saying your partner is sweet, tell a story about the time he took your mom to get her hair done. Stay mostly serious, but **sprinkle in humor.** Skip inside stories or jokes. And keep it forward-looking—this is the moment to **talk about your future.** Traditionally, the groom goes first, but do what feels right to you. To prepare, Pushkine suggests writing your vows by hand and saying them aloud to yourself or a friend a few times, to get familiar with your words and phrasing. That way, you'll know precisely when to breathe, look up, lock eyes, and smile.

CONSIDER THE BACKDROP

In a church, the altar is the built-in focal point. In other spaces or outside, you may need to create one. A ceremony marker—like an arch of flowers behind you—will draw all eyes to the front and appear in many important photos.



PLAN THE PACING

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

SPEAK YOUR TRUTH

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

MAKE IT LEGAL

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

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

SOURCES

Annie Davis, a Maui, Hawaii-based officiant. **Tanya Pushkine**, a New York City-based officiant and founder of vow-consulting service the Vow Whisperer. **Alisa Tongg**, a Pocono Mountains, Pennsylvania-based celebrant. **Leora Willis**, an Alexandria, Virginia-based celebrant.