

## Helpful Tips from Your Wedding Photographer

I've taken the liberty of compiling a few hints and tips that you might consider when planning your wedding. These tips provide a few considerations that you can think about but please don't think of them as requirements. Regardless of what happens on your wedding day, I'll create some awesome photographs!

### General Planning

Talk to me about your wedding day timeline before you finalize everything with your planners or venue. If you ask me to consult with you on the organization of your day, I can help you ensure that your schedule has enough time set aside for the photographs you've requested.

For photography, the quality of light improves as the day wanes and nears sunset. Just before the sun falls below the horizon is generally the very best time for taking photographs. If you want me to take your creative portraits during the last hour before sunset (the ideal time), you'll want to create your schedule with that idea in mind.

For family portraits, you'll want to budget about three (3) minutes per formal family grouping. Most couples typically ask for 10-15 groupings and thus reserve thirty (30) to forty-five minutes in their schedule for family portraits. That being said, I'm willing to photograph as many family groupings as you require—time permitting.

In regards to the time I'd like to have for your creative portraits (as in "oh my gosh these photos are amazing"), I'd love to have two (2) hours even though I'm often very happy with only ninety (90) minutes. The first half of the creative portraits are usually spent with your wedding party while the second half is usually spent with just you and your fiancé.

You'll probably want to designate someone who'll serve as your "event guide / coordinator" during the wedding. This person is responsible for making sure everyone is where they need when they're needed. This person is often different from a hired wedding coordinator since the wedding coordinator is often busy coordinating other details related to your wedding day.

When I speak to you a few weeks before your wedding day, I'll ask you to create your list for family portraits (e.g. "bride, groom, groom's parents, & groom's siblings"). For more information about assembling this list, please see the supplemental article on my web site titled [Wedding Photographs: The List](#).

Even though we live in Southern California, you should consider creating a set of alternate plan in case it rains. Although I'm not afraid of getting wet (and neither are my professional weather-sealed cameras), you'll want to stay dry. Therefore, you'll also want to consider alternate locations available for your photography. And you should also consider umbrellas (which can make for amazingly cool accessories on your wedding day).

You might want to think about including me on your mailing list for the save the date announcements and wedding invitations. I'll sometimes photograph those announcements and invitations on your wedding day and use those photos in your album. You'd be surprised how difficult it is to find someone with a pristine copy of your invitation on your wedding day!

## **Getting Ready**

Consider hiring a professional makeup artist. Although you, your friends, or family may do a great job at makeup, it's best to hire a professional. If you do decide to hire a professional, you'll need to give the makeup artist and hair stylist lots of time. If the makeup artist says they need an hour and the hair stylist says they need an hour, plan for three hours. In my experience, makeup and hair styling will almost always take longer than planned. In my experience, wedding schedules are most often impacted by delays related to hair and/or makeup. To make you're going to be happy with the makeup and hair style, I also recommend that you have a test done prior to the wedding day. And contrary to common makeup artist preferences, it's best if the brides makeup and hair are done first. This helps ensure that when I arrive to photograph the "getting ready" phase, the bride is going to be photo ready (minus the wedding dress).

When I arrive at the bride's getting ready location, it's best if the bridesmaids are already present (and dressed) and the bride is completely ready minus the wedding dress. When this is the case, the first thing I typically do when I arrive is photograph the dress and related accessories. Since those accessories also include flowers, please ask your florist to deliver the bouquets for both the bride and bridesmaids prior to my arrival.

Ask someone to bring a bottle of champagne and glasses to the bride's "getting ready" room. It makes for great photographs and more importantly relaxes the bride and bridesmaids. Someone should also be designated spoilsport for the groomsmen since they often have plenty of time on their hands while the bride and bridesmaids are getting ready and thus tend to drink a bit more than the girls. Remind me to tell you the story about the groom who fell in the lake. Luckily, I was only a witness and not the official photographer.

Try and keep the bride's "getting ready" room(s) uncluttered. You might want to mention this to your bridesmaids. If the room is cluttered, I'll just change my angles, but it sure helps when I can shoot from any corner. A tidy room also allows everyone to move freely which can really help keep everyone happy as friends and family gather around the bride.

Remove all tags or stickers from all clothing, accessories, and shoes prior to the wedding day. There are some occasions when shoe bottoms are photographed and you'd be surprised at how many times I've seen department store tags on the bottom of a bridesmaid's shoe!

You may want to ask your bridesmaids to leave their personal jewelry at home. Some bridesmaids may wear lots of jewelry and some might not wear any at all. On the wedding day, some brides haven't liked what the bridesmaids selected for themselves and I've been asked (by the bride) to ask the bridesmaids to remove their jewelry. I'm happy to do that for any bride, but asking that of them often makes it hard for the bridesmaids to smile at me later. Mentioning personal jewelry to bridesmaids before the wedding day helps a ton!

The bride and bridesmaids should plan to wear strapless bras during the day leading up to event. Bras often cause indentations on shoulders that can sometimes take an hour or to fade. If the bride or bridesmaids plan to wear strapless dresses, this problem will become especially apparent since those indentations will often appear in "getting ready" photographs and during the ceremony. If the bride is wearing a backless dress, I recommend that she forego a bra entirely prior to donning the dress.

The bride and bridesmaids might consider picking out a cute outfit to wear when they're getting ready. Since I often arrive a bit early, the bridesmaids are often not yet dressed. If you want to give a great gift to your bridesmaids, you might want to present them with cute matching "getting ready" outfits.

It's easy for a bride to forget eating and drinking on her wedding day, but it's important that she eats and drinks something. However, when possible, I recommend that once the bride is dressed, there should be no more eating and or drinking around the bride (except for water). Nobody wants to scramble at the last minute in search of a stain remover.

Please consider taking your creative portraits prior to the ceremony. I know that it's a break from wedding tradition, but with pre-ceremony photos, you'll find yourself more relaxed and less rushed before, during, and after your ceremony. This one consideration is so important that I've written an entire article about it titled [Should We See Each Other before the Ceremony](#).

## **The Ceremony**

If you're holding an indoor ceremony, please consider leaving the lights set as high as is possible (while maintaining decorum). Although lowering the lights may create a more intimate mood, semi-darkness can make guests lethargic. It also makes it more difficult for the elderly to view your ceremony. As for the photography, it's much easier for me to capture exceptional photographs with more lighting rather than less--especially since I probably won't be using a flash for your ceremony.

During the ceremony, both during the processional and recessional, the wedding party, guests, and escorts should be encouraged to walk slowly. Remind the wedding party and family about this several times before the wedding. To ensure you have great photographs, I'll need to take multiple photographs of each couple as they come up or down the aisle. For the recessional, it's often a great idea to stop and kiss (and perform a dip if you have it in you). Your guests will love it!

If you're using an aisle carpet runner, your runner selection can be very important. Not only does it serve as a foreground element in many of your ceremony photographs, but it's also central to the décor of your ceremony space. When you select the aisle runner, make sure you ask to see it prior to the ceremony. You should ensure that the runner is thick enough so that it won't bunch when it's laid out over uneven or soft ground. You might even want to designate someone to adjust and straighten the carpet after the family members walk down the aisle. If you're using the runner at an indoor location, please consider purchasing double sided carpet tape that you can apply to the bottom of the runner. This will prevent industrious venue managers from using duct tape on the aisle runner (and I've seen it happen no fewer than 3 times). As a final note, I'd strongly recommend that you avoid using a paper aisle runner at all costs!

If you're using flower petals for your aisle, you might want to make sure that you'll have enough petals to cover the aisle, the runner, and/or the aisle edges. In other words, when you purchase your flower petals, you should consider moderate to heavy coverage rather than opting to purchase the bare minimum.

The beauty of your ceremony can be impacted if you don't pay special attention your audio setup. My biggest pet peeve (photographically) is a microphone stand in your ceremony photos. In cases where your audio person doesn't have wireless microphones, the photographs of you at the altar will feature a microphone stand. Check with the folks handling your ceremony audio and see if they can provide you with wireless microphones. In addition to your microphone considerations, you should certainly consider speaker placement. If I was in charge of audio, I'd ask the audio folks to make sure that the speakers are placed well outside the left and right boundaries of your congregation and wedding party. This is often not possible for some audio folks because their speaker cables aren't long enough. It seems like a trivial thing to ask your audio folks, but you don't really want to see speakers growing out of the heads of your bridesmaids or groomsmen.

If you plan on any special events during the ceremony (candle lighting, sand ceremony, presentation of flowers to parents, special readers, presentation of gifts), it's best to let me know about those mini events before the wedding day. If your wedding follows special traditions (Traditional Pilipino, Coptic, Roman Catholic), just let me know what traditions you follow and I'll often know what to expect for those kinds of ceremonies.

Consider providing bubble bottles or flower petals for your guests, especially those sitting on the aisle. If you ask your guests to blow bubbles or throw petals during the recessional, it can make for some really amazing photos. It is also an excellent idea to put a little note on each aisle seat to remind the guest sitting in that seat to blow the bubbles (or throw the petals) during the recessional. Many times, without the reminder and with the excitement of the recessional, the guests will not remember the bubbles / petals.

If you haven't yet selected your Officiant, please remember that he or she will be prominently featured in almost every ceremony photograph. Therefore, if you have a choice, consider selecting an Officiant who is relatively attractive and about the same height as the groom. A more experienced Officiant will often step slightly to the side before asking you to kiss your fiancé for the first time as man and wife. If the Officiant makes this slight move, his or her action will help me with an unobstructed view of just the bride and groom during that kiss. If you are working with someone, it wouldn't hurt to ask them if they would do that for you. And if they agree, you might want to remind them of that preference on your wedding day.

If you are hiring an Officiant or if you've asked a friend to officiate, you might want to ask them how he or she plans to hold/carry the notes or text related to the ceremony. In some past weddings I've photographed, I've seen the Officiant use loose papers, oversized binders, colorful books, and plain manila folders. Since those items are often visually distracting, I recommend that you ask the Officiant to use a black book or binder without significant decoration..

During the ring exchange, the bride and groom should take special care to not hide each other's hands. This is most often a problem for the groom since the bride's hand is on the side farthest from the congregation. Your guests want to see those rings exchanged, so don't hide those hands!

Make sure you personally view and approve the guest chairs for your ceremony. In my experience, white wooden chairs often work best. If white wooden chairs aren't available, ensure that they are all the same. I've been to some wedding venues where the ceremony chairs were uncovered and unattractive banquet chairs! Ugly chairs should always be avoided!

Unless you have a ton of time available after your ceremony, most folks would recommend that the wedding party adjourn to a location not accessible to guests. If you don't, as long as the bride and groom are visible, guests will tend to stay on hand to offer congratulations instead of leaving for the cocktail hour at the reception. It's often important to quickly clear the ceremony location if that's where you plan to take your family portraits. I know that you'll be tempted to greet your guests after the ceremony, but it's often best to reserve that reunion for the reception. I often recommend that the Officiant make a general announcement to the congregation that the bride and groom will meet them at the reception soon. For schedule planning, you'll want to remember that it can often take as long as fifteen (15) minutes to twenty (20) minutes for your guests to clear the ceremony location!

If at all possible, I recommend that you schedule formal family portraits immediately after and at the same location as your ceremony. It's been my experience that if you don't schedule these photographs immediately after the ceremony, then there is a high likelihood that some individuals you'd like to have in your photographs won't be present when they're needed. These family members and guests may fail to appear for a variety of reasons. If those folks are unavailable, many of your planned groupings may be impacted--particularly if the individual is an immediate family member like a mother, father, and/or grandparent. One sure way to minimize these issues is to begin your formal / family portraits immediately after the ceremony. Since the guest or family member is typically present at your ceremony, it's much easier to ensure they will also be present and available for your formal / family photographs.

Some couples ask me to photograph them at sunset. I'm happy to accommodate those requests, but there are a few things you might want to consider. First, the sunset you expect may not occur. A typical beautiful sunset frequently requires clouds or atmospheric disturbance. And since Southern California isn't known for its cloud cover, many "sunset" simply involve the light changing to a warm golden color as the sun drops below the horizon. This sunset light is certainly complementary for your photography, but in many cases a "storybook" sunset simply doesn't happen here in Southern California. Please take that into consideration when planning sunset photos.

## **The Reception**

I often recommend a certain order of reception events to my clients. Here's the order of events that I find works best for most weddings: 1) grand entrance; 2) first dance; 3) father / daughter dance; 4) mother / son dance; 4) toasts; 5) salad; 6) dinner; 7) cake cutting; 8) bouquet toss; 9) garter removal; 10) garter toss; 11) money dance, and 12) general dancing. The first item on this schedule deals with first dances and the toasts. The reason why I recommend that those events occur immediately after the grand entrance is so you can ensure that guests are paying attention to the dance floor and/or the speeches. If your guests have already started eating when these events occur, guests will invariably talk among themselves or clank silverware or be at the bar or be in the restroom when the first dances and speeches occur. If you have the first dances and

speeches prior to dinner, you'll have the guests' undivided attention. As for the cake cutting, you might be aware that many cultures believe it's impolite to leave the reception before cake has been cut. If you decide to cut the cake later in your evening, many guests who may need leave early will be forced to remain. Or, if they can't remain, the guest may sneak out without saying goodbye and feel guilty about contacting you after the wedding. In addition to guest considerations, you might also want to remember that dessert typically follows dinner. If your cake cutting immediately follows dinner, you know that your guests are going to be ready for the sweet taste of wedding cake. But if you wait until the late evening to serve the cake, some of your guests will have left while others will no longer be hungry for dessert--especially if they have started drinking! In reference to the timing of the bouquet and garter toss, although some planners may want to spread those events out across the evening, I recommend that they occur immediately after the cake cutting. I make this recommendation because it's sometimes difficult to get people on the dance floor at a reception. If the DJ or band has worked hard to get people dancing, and then your guests are asked to sit during the bouquet and garter toss, many guests won't return to the dance floor. However, if you have the bouquet and garter toss immediately following the cake cutting, then your guests can start dancing and continue dancing through the rest of the night. And since it will still be relatively early, more of your guests will remain for the "party" phase of your reception. Beyond impacting the flow of your reception, there's another important reason why I mention this schedule. If you follow this schedule, you won't need me for as many hours of coverage over the course of your reception. And since most couples are typically happy with just a few minutes of dancing guest coverage, this compressed schedule allows me to finish your wedding photography coverage within two or three hours from the start of your reception. In other words, with this timing we can spend more of our time with you earlier in the day, covering the many details leading up to the reception. That being said, if coverage of your dancing guests and grand exit are super important to you, then rest assured that I'm happy to work under any schedule you might devise. I'm certainly willing to stay at your reception as long as you need me!

When photographing a wedding and reception, some enemies to any photographer are poles and other electrical components. Nothing will detract from a perfect photograph more than a pole or wire in the background. Although I'll avoid composing photographs where the background scenery is unattractive, it's sometimes unavoidable when speakers, wires, heaters, signs, poles, screens, and projectors are placed near prominent locations including the aisle, altar, head table, dance floor, or suspended from the ceiling. When you're hiring your music, electrical, or lighting specialists, make sure they're aware of your concern. Ask them what they plan to do in order to minimize the visual impact of their service at your wedding. For projectors and screens, I recommend that you keep them hidden and don't set them up until moments before it's time to project your slideshow (if you're having a slideshow). If that's impossible, make sure you keep the screens far away from the head table! If you have a floor plan with these components, please feel free to send it to me prior to your wedding day and I'll review it for any potential gotchas.

When working on your reception floor plan, try and ensure that you have included an aisle wide enough for you and your fiancé (and your wedding party couples) to enter together--side by side—during the introductions. I've seen many situations where little or no aisle exists and wedding party members are forced through a slalom course between tables and chairs in order to reach the dance floor or head table.

Where you decide to place your cake(s) is important. At many weddings I've seen the cake placed on a small table in an unattractive corner of the room. The cake will be featured in many photographs; therefore an attractive background will help me create great photographs.

When it's time for your first dance, you might want to ask your bridesmaids and groomsmen to line one side of the dance floor. This will help create an environment conducive for great photographs as I often feature those folks in the backgrounds of your photographs while you're moving through your first dances.

Make sure that the DJ has a wireless handheld microphone when it's time for the toasts. It doesn't make for very good photos when your family and friends are forced to stand near the DJ stand when giving their speeches. As for the toasts themselves, I recommend that that speaker stand to the left or right of the bride and groom while speaking. When the speaker giving the toast is in that position, your guests can see both the speaker and your expressions at the same time. And of course it makes for some really great photographs when I can feature all three of you in a single photograph.

Check to see if the DJ or lighting supplier plans on using any special lighting. You should be aware that when multicolor "disco" lights are used -- especially on the first dances -- your faces (and those of your guests) may feature technicolor skin tones based on the lights being employed. You might want to mention to the DJ that you would prefer that they refrain from that type of lighting until the general dancing starts.