

How to find the perfect person to officiate your big day!

I'm not saying I'm perfect, but when it comes to finding a good wedding officiant, it's like they say, 'It takes one to know one.'

By Rev. Tom Schwendler

Officiant and Author of Love in a Suitcase, tips for long-term relationships and marriage.

Why hire a wedding officiant?

I'm sure my wife could give me a haircut and I'd save some money. But, I'd rather go to a stylist – someone with experience. It's the same with an officiant. He/she knows the latest styles and can add some 'color' to your ceremony if you wish. Many couples don't know what kind of ceremony they want. A friend or relative can get an online certificate and make your union legal as well as special and that's fine. It does put a lot of pressure on that person. But, a good officiant can offer you so much more than the "Do It Yourself" option.

What will an officiant do?

An officiant will work with you to design a ceremony, rehearse and perform it, and complete and process the marriage license to make your marriage official. Some officiants might offer or suggest pre-marital counseling if they are trained to do so.

How to choose a good wedding officiant?

It depends on the kind of ceremony. A town clerk or justice might be a good fit for a civil ceremony, but you'll need a priest for a Catholic ceremony or rabbi if you're Jewish.

As an interfaith minister, I view marriage is a sacred ceremony. That said, find someone who will reflect the hearts, the power and glory of the couple back to them as well as everyone who is present. That someone will channel the divine and bring the light to every person there.

You might find this person by referral or online. Like any vendor, you'll want to schedule an interview to see if he/she is a good fit. You'll know pretty quickly if the officiant is authentic and has the right balance of being gentle while charismatic. You want someone, above all else, who is a good listener and someone you're truly comfortable with.

What should we expect?

Lots of questions. How did you meet? When did he/she propose? What's your vision for this marriage? What are your thoughts on kids, managing finances and in-laws? You have to get personal if you want more than a cookie-cutter ceremony.

I send a questionnaire to couples. Our first meeting is a chance for me to know them and for them to 'kick the tires' as well. We talk about their histories together, their families, and the kind of ceremony they'd like – religious/spiritual or not much of either. We talk about traditions or practices they've seen which interest them like hand-binding.

I send the couple a simple written agreement that calls-out my deliverables and I request a deposit. From there, we meet again to discuss vows, music, prayers, rituals and the framework of the ceremony. Then, I start drafting the ceremony as many times as necessary until finalizing it at least one week prior to the wedding. This is a partnership between you and the officiant, but the couple always has the final say. I'm at the rehearsal and wedding itself where we sign the marriage certificate.

What should we watch out for?

If it's an outdoor wedding, then make sure you have a Plan B in case of bad weather. Have a contact sheet so everyone knows how to reach each other. Stay away from incorporating pets or really young children as part of the ceremony. Avoid caffeine or alcohol or both the day of the wedding. Set a reminder for the day of to bring the marriage license with you to the ceremony. Figure out when you and your witnesses will sign the certificate.

Legally you are not to sign until AFTER the ceremony. If the bride and groom will be seeing each other before the ceremony, taking photos, or signing a ketubah as in a Jewish interfaith wedding, you can sign the marriage license before. If not, you can do it afterwards. Personally, I like to do the signing afterwards/officially/ privately with champagne and cheers! However, many couples prefer to do it before the ceremony as it gives them an additional 10-15 more minutes for them to spend at their cocktail hour.

Have a checklist of things you need for the wedding like candles, rings, etc. Ask your officiant when he will arrive and ask him to get there early. Ask the officiant to check in with the musicians and wedding planner with regard to cues and instructions.

You might want to ask the officiant what he is planning to wear? Robe or no robe? Is the audience, conservative or progressive or somewhere in between? Related to this, you might want to keep your parents or grandparents in mind in terms of their expectations. Adding a Gospel reading to a wedding outside a church might appease a religious relative.

How much does a wedding officiant charge?

In many cases, that's a grey area. Fees might depend on the travel and time required. If the officiant has to drive 2 hours to the venue, he/she will charge you more. And the fee will likely be more if your ceremony is at the Plaza versus a Red Roof kind of place or if it's in Manhattan, NY versus Madison, WI. Officiants can charge from \$150 to \$1,000 depending on the going rate for that location.

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