

WEDDING SKILLS HANDBOOK



THE WEDDING SCHOOL TEXTBOOK SERIES



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THE
WEDDING SCHOOL

WEDDING SKILLS HANDBOOK

TEACHER'S NOTE

When I first began as a wedding photographer back in 2002, there were not many educational opportunities for me. We had conventions and local camera clubs, but not many books or private workshops. The photography community now has so many extraordinary ways to learn. There are private mentorships, group workshops, online classes, conventions, and books galore. This is a wonderful thing because everyone learns in different ways. I have had the distinct pleasure of teaching photographers with my books, convention seminars, private workshops, and online courses.

I am thankful to everyone who has given me a platform to speak, listened to my words, and trusted me as an educator. I am more full of gratitude to you than you will ever know. Above all, I am thankful for my family and friends. In the wise words of Lin-Manuel Miranda, “How lucky we are to be alive right now.”

I love you all.

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EXTRA CREDIT

To Lin-Manuel Miranda,
for reminding me of what I'd forgotten.

WEDDING SKILLS HANDBOOK

"Creative thinking - in terms of idea creativity - is not a mystical talent. It is a skill that can be practised and nurtured."

Edward de Bono



PREPPING FOR THE WEDDING

Before you step into the actual wedding day, it's imperative that you arm yourself with information! So much of whether a wedding day succeeds or fails lies with managing client expectations, and preparing yourself for the day.

My favorite way to gather information is through my wedding day worksheet. I have this worksheet set up as a questionnaire template in 17 Hats, but you could create your own as a PDF or through another online survey source.

The purpose of this worksheet is to gather information about the day, the major players, and the intricacies of the event itself. I start off by asking for the basics. I ask for:

- ☒ The bride's cell phone number
- ☒ The groom's cell phone number
- ☒ An alternate wedding day contact person, and their phone number
- ☒ If they have an event coordinator, who are they and what is their contact information

This will enable me to contact any of the major players at the wedding. I don't need to contact anyone other than the bride, groom, and an emergency person. After that, I ask for the details of the day. I am looking for:

- ☒ The day-of timeline. This is important, because we often have to talk about timelines that are written by clients that won't always work out.
- ☒ What time the clients want their photography coverage to begin.
- ☒ What time the clients want their photography coverage to end.
- ☒ Whether or not they plan to add on overtime.
- ☒ Where we should report to on the wedding day. This is usually where the bride is getting ready
- ☒ Where the ceremony is, what time it starts, and if there are any rules pertaining to photography in the ceremony space.
- ☒ Where the reception is, what time it starts, and what time it ends.
- ☒ Whether there is anything at the wedding that would be helpful for me to know about. This could be anything that the client feels they need to tell me. Some clients let me know about their vintage car rental. Some let me know about a special relative that is coming from a long distance. I'm intentionally vague with this question, because I want to leave it open. It's a super helpful question, and I've learned some truly interesting things when clients answer this one.
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This section really lets us know more about the wedding day itself. Usually I have discussed the timeline with the clients several times before we get to the worksheet, so the timeline they respond with is often familiar to me. I send this questionnaire about six weeks before the wedding day, and sometimes it's surprising to see that the timeline has changed from what we'd discussed before. I never want to be surprised with a timeline change on the wedding day, especially one that doesn't work!

The next section of the worksheet deals with the important people on the wedding day. I am looking for the following details:



- ☑ How many people are in the bridal party? How many bridesmaids? How many groomsmen? How many flower girls and/or ring bearers?
- ☑ What are the bride's parents' names? Does she have siblings? What are their names?
- ☑ What are the groom's parents' names? Does he have siblings? What are their names?
- ☑ Who is in the bride's extended family?
- ☑ Who is in the groom's extended family?
- ☑ Are there any situations that we should know about, such as deaths or divorces, so that we can address everyone properly during the family formals? If the parents are divorced, we need to know if they want to be in pictures together, or if we should split up the family groups.

After we've established this information, I move on to asking about the portraits in particular. This is such a key part of the day, that we need to make sure we're all on the same page. What all am I looking for?

- ☑ I ask the clients what their vision is for their wedding images. I want to know what they're drawn to in my work, and things they'd like us to consider while documenting their day. This is another very open-ended question, where I'm just trying to hear what the clients' thoughts are.
- ☑ Will the bride and groom see each other before the ceremony for portraits? If so, do they have a preferred location?
- ☑ Will the family formals be before or after the ceremony?
- ☑ Do they have locations in mind for the portraits of the bride and groom?
- ☑ What family formals would they like taken? I provide them with a checklist of basics, and they can choose which from that list they'd like. The basics are just that : basics. They include bride with mom, bride with dad, bride with mom and dad, and so forth. I then leave a space for the bride and groom to write in any additional images they'd like taken at this time. This is important so that we know how much time to budget for family formals!

The only thing left to do now is obtain information about the other vendors. I asked the bride and groom to list their makeup artist, hairstylist, band, florist, dress designer, and caterer. I ask if they have any other vendors that they would like me to know about. This is especially useful when I post images on social media after the wedding. The more vendors that I know about, the more vendors I can tag in my posts.

I close by asking for contact information. I ask the bride and groom for their email addresses. I ask for their mailing address after the wedding, as sometimes this has changed



from the address they used when they signed their contract. I ask if they are on Instagram, and if they are planning to have a hashtag for the wedding.

As mentioned before, I send this worksheet out six weeks prior to the wedding day. I tell the bride and groom that I need it back within three weeks of the wedding date. This means that we have an additional three weeks to talk if anything on the worksheet is either unclear or needs more attention. This gives us ample time to iron out any difficulties with the timeline. It also gives us more than enough time to really nail down portrait locations. For example, if the bride and groom want to go to multiple locations for their wedding day portraits, we need to make sure that we have budgeted enough time for travel.

My assistant and I print out a copy of this worksheet, and tuck a copy in our camera bag before every wedding. We refer back to it often during the day. We take it out during family formals, and cross off each grouping as we photograph it. This worksheet has become a critical part of the pre-wedding process, and goes a very long way towards keeping everyone organized.

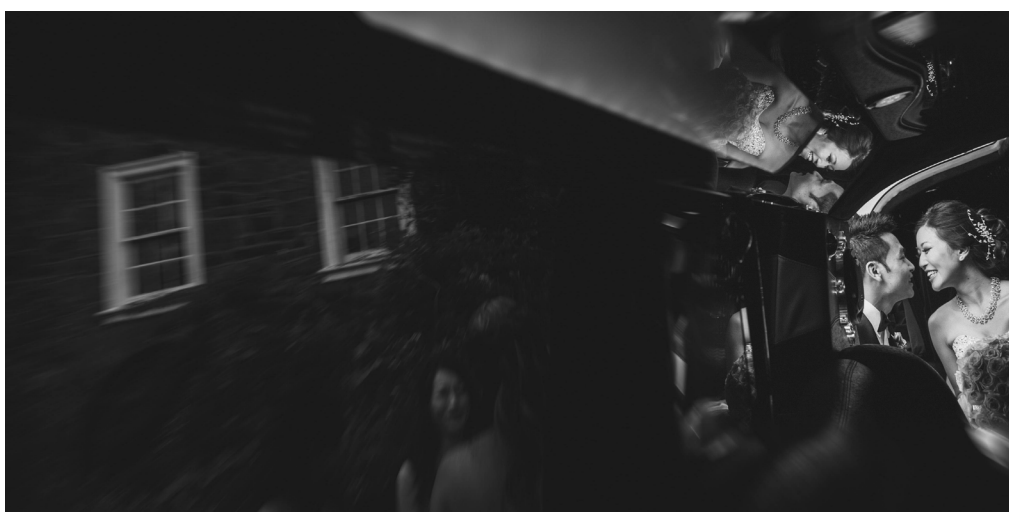
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TIMING THE TIMELINE

Sometimes it is very easy to create a wedding day timeline. The bride and groom are getting ready in a hotel, walking into a ballroom inside the hotel to have their ceremony, walking outside to take their portraits, and going right back indoors for their reception. It is easy to put together the timing for a day like this. Most weddings are not like this! You have a bride getting ready at her parents' house, the groom getting ready at a hotel, the ceremony in a church, portraits in another location, and then you head off to yet another location for the reception. You have to factor in the time for hair and makeup. You have to factor in the time it will take to drive from location to location. You have to figure out how long it will take to complete their family formal list. And so forth.



I start talking about the wedding day timeline as early as our first phone call or meeting. I tried to find out the times for the ceremony and reception as soon as possible. I reach out several times to clients before their wedding day in order to get a sense of how their timeline is coming along. I want to be heavily involved in this decision-making, because it is easier to make a change to a timeline at the beginning of the process. You have to begin managing the client's expectations at the very start of your relationship. It is crucial that you have input with regard to the timeline.

Oftentimes my clients have no idea where to even begin when it comes to crafting their timeline. They ask how much time I will need for each portion of the day. While every client is different, I do have some general guidelines that I am happy to share with them. I like anywhere from two to three hours to photograph the details of the day. This also includes the getting ready process. I prefer an hour with the bride and groom for portraits. I then need another half hour with the bridal party, and anywhere from thirty to sixty minutes with the family. I often stay until one hour before the end of the reception, but make very clear that I am glad to stay the entire time they would like. This is a good place to start, for me, and helps get the ball rolling.



If my clients hire a wedding coordinator, sometimes the first draft of the timeline will come from that coordinator. I work with many coordinators who get the timeline just right on the first draft. I also work with many coordinators who do not! You cannot be afraid to step up and tell a client (or a coordinator) when portions of the timeline will not work. For example, if a coordinator has given you twenty minutes to take a list of family formals that is fifty groupings long, you have to tell them that it won't work. You can't promise to "just try and hope it works out", because you know that there is simply no way to make it happen. You have to be very upfront and honest with both the coordinators and clients.

Don't let yourself get stuck in a bad timeline situation. If you manage expectations throughout the entire process of creating the timeline, you will be set up to succeed. You will also gain your clients trust. They will see that you care greatly about their day going well!

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THE FIRST LOOK: WILL THEY, OR WON'T THEY?

The “first look” trend has become very popular over the past several years. Whether my clients are going to see each other before the ceremony or not is something that we will have discussed long before the wedding day. Some clients know for sure whether they would like to do a first look or not. Some photographers pressure their client into making a decision one way or the other. I believe that it is my job to present a list of pros and cons to the client, and then let them make their own decision.

What are the pros of having a first look? The biggest reason to see each other before a wedding ceremony is simply to have more time for portraits. If clients wait until after the ceremony to take their portraits together, you will be limited to the time that you have in between family formals and the end of cocktail hour. That's not usually a lot of time, unless there is a huge break in between the ceremony and the reception. If you want to go to multiple locations throughout the city, you're either going to have to have that large break in between your ceremony and reception, or you're going to have to see each other beforehand. Another point to make is about cocktail hour itself. If the bride and groom wish to attend their cocktail hour, we cannot spend the cocktail hour taking family portraits and the portraits of the two of them together.

The pros for a first look very easy to see. The cons however, are another story. Most clients don't consider the cons, and I feel that it's my job to educate them to those as well as the pros!

If the bride and groom decide to do a first look, and the getting ready process runs late, it cuts into your portrait time. I have gone to weddings thinking that I had three hours with the bride and groom, only to have less than twenty minutes because everything else ran so far behind! I have had those clients upset after the wedding, wondering where all of their portraits were! When I take the portraits of the bride and groom during cocktail hour, at least I know exactly how much time I am working with. With a first look, I only have that amount of time if things run precisely on schedule.

Another thing the clients don't love about the idea of a first look is that they won't see each other for the first time when the bride comes down the aisle. I can absolutely understand the sentiment. If seeing each other in the aisle during their wedding ceremony is something that is of great importance to my client, I will never push them to do a first look. Even if it makes the timeline easier. Even if it makes my job easier. I want to do what is best for them, and I feel very strongly that a first look is not something that should be mandatory at every wedding.

One final con when it comes to considering the first look is the timing of the day. Most of my clients who opt for first looks also have to opt for overtime. To look at an example



timeline, let's pretend that we are shooting a wedding that has a 3:00 ceremony. If the bride and groom are not doing a first look, I can begin my getting ready coverage as late as 1:00. If they have chosen to see each other before the ceremony, they are going to need to begin their portraits around 1:00. That would mean that I would need to begin my coverage at 11:00. I am perfectly fine with that, but the clients have to be all right with it as well. They have to know that a first look will mean that they have to get ready early.

Once I have laid out the list of pros and cons to my clients, the choice is theirs. I will help them craft a timeline that honors whatever decision they would like to make.

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LEARNING ABOUT RELIGION AND TRADITION BEFORE THE WEDDING DAY

Another way to manage your client's expectations and prepare for the wedding day is to talk to your brides and grooms about any religious traditions that might be taking place during their wedding. The answers might range from something as simple as a hora during the wedding reception, to an elaborate set of traditions during the wedding ceremony. I have learned so much over the past fifteen years about wedding day traditions, and I knew none of it before I shot my first wedding!

This is where the wedding day worksheet will help you out. I have that open ended question where I ask my clients if there are any important traditions that I need to know about. The answers that they give me to this section usually open up a dialogue that continues via email or phone calls. For example, when I shot my first Indian wedding, I knew nothing about how the ceremonies worked. I did not know how elaborate they were. I was unprepared when the venue started serving food to the guests during the ceremony. I was shocked when the ceremony was two hours long. After that happened, I vowed to never go to a wedding unprepared again!

Sometimes these religious or cultural traditions will affect the timing of the day. At many of the Jewish weddings I photograph, the bride and groom sign a ketubah before the wedding ceremony. This can take anywhere from five minutes to half an hour, sometimes longer. If I do not know if this is happening, I cannot plan for it on the timeline. Talking to your clients about the traditions and religious aspects of their day will not only help you understand them better, it will help you craft an efficient timeline with no surprises!

TAILOR TO BELIEFS

- 📌 Engage your clients and inquire via your worksheet to determine if there are specific religious traditions
- 📌 Prepare your timeline based on the selected traditions and ceremonies - this may affect your lighting and collections

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DO I NEED A SECOND SHOOTER?



Many photographers work with second photographers. Many photographers do not. For many years I was a solo shooter, only adding a second photographer into my packages mere weeks ago.

There are two things to consider when you're looking at adding a second photographer. The first is whether or not you need a second photographer to cover a wedding. The second is whether your clients feel that you need one.

I never really needed a second photographer's help. I trained myself to shoot weddings on my own, and for years the weddings I shot were simple. Brides and grooms got ready within walking distance of each other. Ceremonies and receptions were in the same location. Covering a wedding solo was not only possible, it was easy. After I moved to New York, the weddings I started shooting changed. Sometimes brides and grooms got ready nowhere near each other. Ceremonies and receptions required transportation to get from one place to the other. So did portrait session locations. I could still cover a wedding solo, but it was getting harder.

There are only a few times of the day that I feel a second shooter is truly beneficial. It's nice to have someone who can shoot the guys getting ready while I'm with the bride. Even if they're in the same hotel, it's exhausting to run back and forth. It's nice to have a person dedicated to staying with the men. It helps to have a second angle during ceremonies. While I am in the aisle waiting for the processional to start, a second photographer can be in the back with the bride and her dad. A second can get wide angle shots from the back of the church for the entire ceremony. A second photographer can cover cocktail hour

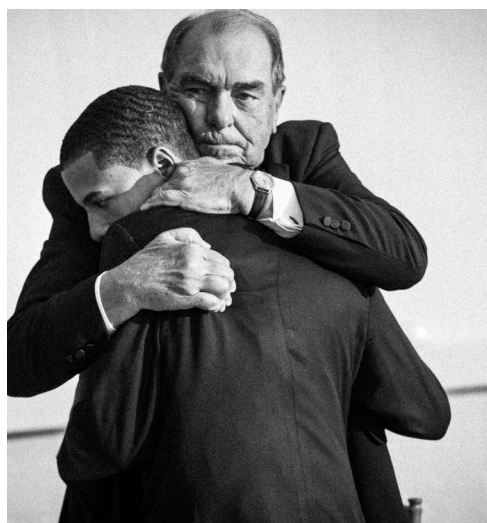


while I'm shooting portraits, or shooting the reception room. A second can be dedicated to shooting guests during the reception while I stick by the bride, groom, and their families. While I can still do most of this myself, I found myself drawn to having the help. It didn't have anything to do with my ability to cover the day, but I found myself much less exhausted the morning after when I had help! It's comforting to not have the entire burden of the day's coverage on you and only you.

More and more, clients believe that wedding photographers should be a two-person team. I have many potential clients insist on a second shooter, even when their day doesn't really require one. Oftentimes they've met with other photographers who assure them that the day can only be captured by two shooters, no less. Sometimes they read it on a wedding blog, or in a wedding magazine. I've noticed that modern clients always want more, be it more images or more shooters. I've tried for years to convince them when they do or don't need a second shooter, but sometimes what I say doesn't matter.

I used to have a second shooter as an add-on, but now I include one in all of my collections. It's an experiment, and who knows how it will go. Maybe I'll end up removing the second, putting it back into the add-ons list. Maybe it will be a wonderful success. There is only one way to find out!

I partly decided to add a second shooter because I finally found one. I have worked with freelance second shooters in the past, when clients added them to their collection, and it was always a tricky prospect. Sometimes that shooter would shoot more than I needed, or less. They would sometimes



shoot in a different style than mine, or look for moments and poses that were not quite like the rest of my work. My assistant, who worked for me for seven years, had slowly transitioned into shooting more on the wedding day. I had taught her how to take guests pictures during cocktail hour, and the reception. I showed her what I needed during the ceremony. She had been with me for years before she ever picked up a camera on a wedding day.

If I were hiring a second shooter now, I'd have them work for me as an assistant first. I'd want to make sure they knew how I approached a wedding day, how I worked with my clients, and how I talked to my clients. I'd want them to be very, very familiar with my shooting style before representing my business as a photographer. I would train them intensely before letting them shoot at a wedding. It might take six months to train a second shooter, even a year. I'd rather wait and do it right, then send an inexperienced shooter out at a wedding under my name.

What will your second shooter's responsibilities be? What will they be expected to shoot? You need to know these things before you start the training process. How will you pay them? I pay a base rate for an eight hour day, with an additional hourly rate for any time past those eight hours.

If you choose to work without a second shooter, you'll have to learn to sell your solo services to clients. I used to share full galleries with potential brides and grooms, telling them that the weddings were all shot by myself alone. Once they saw the full galleries, most were reassured that I really could do it on my own!

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DO I NEED AN ASSISTANT?

I have always worked with an assistant. I do not know how I could shoot a wedding without one. My assistant helps me with basics like driving, parking the car, carrying my bags, and managing our gear. She also helps with any off-camera lighting I need, whether it's during family portraits or first dances. Her job is to make sure the behind-the-scenes aspects of shooting a wedding run smoothly, so that I can focus all of my effort on the actual photography.

I pay my assistant in the same way I pay a second shooter. It's a flat rate for an eight hour day, with additional pay per hour over that. I pay her after every single wedding, by check. Because she isn't a full-time employee, she's paid as casual labor. I do not have to take payroll taxes out of her check. I issue her a 1099 at the end of each year, and she pays her own payroll taxes on her personal tax returns.

I have hired several assistants over the course of my business. Each time, I was looking for a specific type of person. I have a very strict rule about hiring someone who aspires to be a wedding photographer. That's not what I want. I've been burned by that in the past. I've hired aspiring wedding photographers, only to have them work for me for awhile, quit, and start their own businesses based on everything they'd seen me do. The entire time they were working for me, it was about what they could get out of the job. While I understand that being an assistant is a great way to enter the world of wedding photography, it's not the type of assistant I'm looking for. I need someone bright, capable, willing to work on the weekends, and utterly uninterested in being a photographer!

I could never shoot a wedding without an assistant because I need help with off-camera flash. I could put that flash on a stand, moving it around with me, but it's not effective. It's very time-consuming to both shoot and move your own flash around! While a second shooter is something I think back and forth on, an assistant is never something I've considered removing from my collections.

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THE WEDDING SCHOOL





SHOOTING DETAILS

Every wedding, at least for me, almost always begins with photographing the details of the day. This includes the bride's dress, her shoes, and her jewelry. It might include the wedding rings or wedding bands (if we can get them from the groom), any heirloom handkerchiefs, lockets, letters, or small things that are important to the bride. This is how I usually begin my coverage before I even start documenting any moments or interactions.

You have to remember that every wedding, and every photographer, are different. Maybe shooting details aren't important to you - or more importantly, maybe they're not important to your clients. Maybe these images don't resonate with you with regard to the way that you like to document a wedding day. Maybe there are things that your clients don't even want you to shoot.

Just because it's something that I do, and it's important to me, doesn't mean that you have to change the way that you shoot. I just think it's important that when you have to document large and small details that you have the technical skills to do them beautifully and easily!

The location that I'm going to be in to photograph these detail images changes wedding to wedding. Sometimes, you will find yourself in a hotel. Sometimes, you will be in the bride's home, or the bride's parents' home. Sometimes you'll be shooting in a friend's apartment. Sometimes, you're in the basement of a church nursery, or the windowless-getting-ready room at a venue.

I talk to my clients before their wedding to try to find out where they're getting ready. I offer some suggestions and recommendations of places that will work well, but to be honest, you're really at the mercy of the location that they choose. You need to be able to make beautiful images no matter where you find yourself. If your situation is less than ideal when you start shooting these images, don't be afraid to move somewhere else. As long as your clients are okay with you taking their dress, their shoes, or their jewelry to another location, go look, and see if you can find a better scenario.



FOCUS ON DETAILS

- 💬 Consider your client, what is important to them in documenting their day
- 💬 Consider your light source and background
- 💬 Different locations mean tailoring your detail shooting to the situation
- 💬 Converse with your clients, perhaps make suggestions that can enhance these moments



Maybe it means that you leave the getting-ready room and go into another room completely, with a beautiful window. Perhaps you take her dress from the getting-ready room at the venue to the reception room that has some really great light. Don't be afraid to get out, explore, and see what your other options might be!

The first thing that I look for when I'm shooting details, whether they're large or small, is my light source. My ideal light source is a large open window with sheers that I can draw. This will help me control the intensity of the light. It's also helpful if there are drapes on the window. As I open and close the drapes, I can change the direction and intensity of the light.

If I don't have access to a window, I can use an open door. I can use a video light. I can use the flashlight on my iPhone, if the detail is small enough! A very last resort will be using a speedlight, or another type of flash. I don't generally like using a speedlight or flash for ring and small detail images. Why? Because I find that I like the quality of light better from something like a window, an open door, or a simple video light.

If the light source that you're working with for the smaller details is a window, you have to determine how much, or how little, light you want to let in. If the day is cloudy and very overcast, closing the sheers might cut out too much light. If the day is very bright and you have a lot of light pouring in through those windows, you're going to want to pull the sheers. This is going to act as a light softener. It's going to diffuse and modify the light as it spills into the room. It's going to soften out the hard edges, and be a much more flattering light source for your image. You also want to consider the drapes. How much will you leave them open? How much will you close them? Those decisions are going to determine not only the direction, but the intensity of the light.

After I find my light source, the next thing I need to look for is my background. The background is going to differ depending on the type of detail that I'm shooting. If I am shooting something large, such as a dress, I need a decent amount of background space. When you're working with a smaller detail than a dress, you obviously need a smaller background. If I'm working with a macro lens, I only need about twelve square inches of interesting background.

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SHOOTING THE DRESS

My ideal place to hang the dress is in a window. It's a nice simple spot, and the light from the blinds or sheers will create a beautiful backlight around the dress. I'm not looking for anything fancy or elaborate, since I need to get this shot quickly and move on.

FAVORITE SETTING

Shutter speed :

1/80 sec or faster

F-Stop : f/1.4 or more

Focal length:

Anywhere from 24mm +

Highest ISO : 10,000

If I can't find a window, I'll look for something similar, possibly a doorway. If I find myself in a space where there's absolutely nowhere interesting to put it whatsoever (which happens more often than you think), I am going to hang it on the back of a door or a wardrobe. I'm really just hunting for anywhere I can put the dress where the background is clean, uncluttered, and not distracting.

Since I usually have less than fifteen minutes to shoot all of the details, I have to work fast. I can't stress and overthink the situation. If there is nowhere to put the dress, I lie it flat on the bed and shoot it simply. Sometimes I feel that making perfect detail shots can de-rail even the most experienced of photographers.

SHOOTING THE SHOES

As with the dress, I try to photograph the bride's shoes as quickly and efficiently as possible. I always ask if the bride would like pictures of her shoes, as some brides don't care about this image. I can completely understand that, just as I can understand wanting a beautifully done image of a detail that they put great thought into choosing.

In terms of background, I try to find something clean and simple. I'm looking for a pretty chair or table, something near a window. If I find a great background but it's not near good light, I'll move it across the room to get it closer to my light source. As with the dress, my ideal light source is the window. If there is no window, I'll look for an open door, a patch of light outside, or light from my video light. There are no rules in terms of lighting a shoe shot. I'll use back light, side light, or even direct light if it's impactful.

FAVORITE SETTING

Shutter speed :

1/80 sec or faster

F-Stop : f/1.4 or more

Focal length:

Anywhere from 24mm +

Highest ISO : 10,000







SHOOTING THE RINGS

I will spend the longest time shooting the rings, but only because there are variables. You have the bride's engagement ring. You have the groom's band (if it's available to you at this time). You have all three rings together. There are several combinations of shots that you can make here, so take your time. You do have to be mindful of the time, and not spend half an hour with the rings, but it's okay to slow down and make sure each image is compelling.

When it comes to background, you can really choose anything. As mentioned before, because you'll be shooting rings with a macro lens, you only need about twelve inches of background space. Some photographers advocate bringing a "shot kit" of decorative elements, but I don't do that. I prefer to choose backgrounds that are meaningful to the client, such as their purse, material from their rehearsal dinner dress, and so forth.

I almost always want my light source to be a window, and I try to keep it at my back. I want flat light on the rings. If there is no window, I'll find an open door or use my video light.

FAVORITE SETTING

Shutter speed :
1/80 sec or faster

F-Stop : f/9 or more

Focal length:
Anywhere from 105mm

Highest ISO : 10,000



When shooting the rings, there are several common problems that I see photographers face on a regular basis.

When you're looking at the front of the ring and you see a hazy, flat, opaque surface, what do you do? This problem seems to really stress photographers out, but the solution could not be more simple. All you have to do is adjust your level, and the problem will be solved! Simply raise or lower yourself by a millimeter or two, and you'll see the haze go away!

What happens when you're shooting details, and the rings are out of focus? If your rings aren't in focus, the first thing I want you to check is your shutter speed. Are you holding it at such a slow shutter speed that it's motion blur? Do you think that it's out of focus but really it's just shaky hands at a slow shutter speed?

If your shutter speed is working, and that's not the problem, check your aperture. Look at your f-stop. If you're shooting at $f/3.5$, that's your problem right there. Change over to $f/9$, $f/11$, even all the way up to $f/22$! Remember the magnification of the macro lens, and I promise, you're not going to have that problem anymore.

Now, if you've done both of those things and you're still having problems, consider manually focusing your lens. I manually focus my macro lens every single time I shoot because I can manually focus faster than I can use the auto focus. I've got glittery things on top of glittery things, and sometimes the auto focus doesn't know what glittery thing I want in focus! Switch over to manual and practice it before a wedding day. Once you put those three things together: the correct F-stop, the correct shutter speed, and manually focusing with some nice steady

What if you've set up a ring shot, and your foreground or background doesn't look right? You might have too much of your foreground in focus. Or, you might have too much of your background in focus. Or, your background is too out of focus, or your foreground is too out of focus. If you're having a problem with your foreground- background relationship, try two things.

First, start moving them. Back your background further away or bring your foreground closer to you. You could also bring your background closer or push your foreground closer to your subject. When you move those elements in and out, you'll start to find where your sweet spots are. My personal sweet spot is having a background about twelve inches away from my subject, and a foreground about six inches away from my subject.

The look of your foreground and background are going to change based on what f-stop you use, so that's the second thing I want you to try. After you manually move your foreground and background around, try changing your f-stop. Start at $f/9$ and move upwards to $f/11$, $f/16$, and even $f/22$. With every single one of those changes, see how they change the look of the photograph.



PHOTOGRAPHING THE INVITATION SUITE

FAVORITE SETTING

Shutter speed :
1/80 sec or faster

F-Stop : f/5.6 or more

Focal length:
Anywhere from 24mm +

Highest ISO : 10,000

While I am almost always given the invitations at the start of the day, I don't always shoot them then. Because the getting-ready process is so fast-paced, I almost always tuck the invitations in my bag to shoot later. I'd rather prop them up against a reception centerpiece when shooting the room later, than hurriedly try to create something when time is really precious.

If I can shoot the invitations in the prep room, I'll either lay them all out in a pretty tableau on the ground, or prop the pieces up one at a time and shoot them individually. It all depends on how much space I have, what the light is like, and how much time I have. If I shoot them at this part of the day, I prefer indirect window light. If I shoot them during the reception detail phase, I use a video light.

NOTES



THE GETTING-DRESSED PROCESS

After I've worked my way through the details, it's time to shoot the actual getting-ready process. I usually have anywhere from an hour to three hours with the bride during this time. Sometimes I'll be leaving for a few minutes to shoot fifteen minutes of groom prep, and sometimes I won't be. It all depends on the timing of the day, and the priorities of the clients.

I spend my time before the bride gets dressed documenting the hair and makeup process. I take unposed, unscripted images of the bride hanging out with her bridesmaids. I don't direct. I just hang back and document. I don't step in and direct until the bride starts to get dressed.



When it's time for the bride to put her dress on, I'll let her know where I'd like her to stand. Usually it's by a window, or an open door. If there is no light in the room, I'll choose a flattering background and provide light via video light. I make sure that whoever is helping her get dressed is already dressed themselves. This means that about fifteen minutes before the bride goes to get dressed, I alert the mother and/or bridesmaids that it's time for them to get dressed!

If everything is on-time, this part of the day is very easy and pleasant. Everyone is hanging out, enjoying each other's company. The bride is full of anticipation. As we all know, not all days run according to schedule. I've shown up to many weddings only to find that we're an hour or more behind. Often, this is because hair and makeup are running late. I do my best to tell my clients that hair and makeup must be finished half an hour before they plan to get dressed. Despite this, it almost never happens on time. What do you do





then? What if everyone is stressed, the room is small and crowded, and everyone is freaking out? What if you find yourself in a terrible room?

It happens to the best of us. You show up at a beautiful venue with a lovely rolling lawn and gorgeously appointed interiors, and then you head to the bridal getting ready room only to find out that it is a tiny windowless closet that can fit about two people comfortably. And into that two-person closet they have crammed a bridal party of twelve people, a huge bridal gown, twenty-two suitcases, a hair person, a makeup person, and the flower girl, whose sole intention appears to be mass destruction of the entire room. What are you supposed to do,⁹ How are you supposed to fit your body into the room, much less take a picture? How in the world are you supposed to make a picture that's beautiful?

When something like this happens to me I go about solving the problem by completing several steps. First of all, I ask if there is any way they can get ready in another location other than the one we are in. Sometimes they can open up a conference room, or another unused suite for bridesmaids to put their things and get into their dresses. If we're in a hotel, I ask if the bride can get dressed in her parents' suite. If that's not possible I at least try to clear the room of as many things as I can. I'll ask if I can move suitcases into the hallway, move things to the perimeter of the room, and do the best that I can to de-clutter the situation.

If there is simply nothing at all that can be done while the bride and bridesmaids are in the hair and makeup phase of the day I will simply shoot around the mess as best I can. Remember that you're there to document, not be the wedding planner. The bride knows that the room that she is in is cluttered and crowded, and if the pictures are cluttered and crowded it shouldn't come as a surprise to her. There are parts of the day that I can have control over, and parts that I can't. Moving the entire hair and makeup operation somewhere else, or clearing out the room while everybody is in the pre-dressing part of the day, falls under the "no control" umbrella.

When it's time for the bride to get ready I first again ask if there's anywhere else that she can put her dress on. I would rather move her into a conference room with a massive table in the center if it has a window in it that I can use for lighting. The venues don't understand that the window is crucial for lighting a bride getting ready - they think that the small room that they've appointed just for her is fantastic, as long as it has a sofa and a mirror in it. If we can't move to another room I will at least attempt to once again clear the room from clutter and try to ask as many non-crucial people as possible to leave the room.

With regard to the timeline, sometimes it just falls apart. If hair and makeup take too long, you're going to run late. If someone shows up late, you're going to be late. If the bride takes time to have lunch, to run over the seating chart again, or to do any of the million things a bride could do on a wedding day, you'll run late. What do you do when this happens and everyone starts to stress out? Just smile. Stay calm. Make the best of it. Take deep breaths. Be glad that you know your gear inside and out, and just shoot. Do your



best. Understand that the situation is not ideal. Hold the bride's hand and tell her that you'll hurry, it will be fine, and do just that. You are the professional here, be professional!

Another thing that might happen is a disconnect between what the bridesmaids expect wedding photography to be like, and what the bride hired you to do. I've shot many weddings where the bridesmaids were very camera aware, wondering why I didn't want them to smile at me every time I pointed the camera in their direction. I try to remind them that they don't have to look at me, and that they should just enjoy the day without worrying about how they look in pictures. Sometimes that works, sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes they're just going to look at you, and there isn't much you can do about it! Keeping your mood light and your presence invisible will really help.

NOTES



THE FIRST LOOK

If your clients have opted to have a first look before their wedding ceremony, sometimes the logistics are very easy. Sometimes they're tricky. It depends how many vendors are around for this part of the day. If we have a wedding coordinator, they can help move the groom into place and then go get the bride. That is immensely helpful!

I almost always have the bride walk towards the groom, unless they've asked to do it otherwise. I find a nice, clean area for this moment to unfold. While I love working in bright

sunlight, I look for flat light for this part of the day. I can't control how they'll turn and look at each other, and if we're in bright sun I run the risk of them moving out of the light that I like. If the light is flat, I can shoot from any direction. I need to make sure we're out of the path of foot traffic. I want to make sure there are no cars or distracting elements in the background. I prefer clean, unfussy backgrounds such as a building or foliage. I also need room for the bride to walk to the groom, and enough room for me to get back with a long lens.



If we have wedding coordinators to work with, I go with the groom to our pre-chosen spot. I make sure the coordinator knows where we're headed. I set him up exactly where I want him to be, and instruct him to not turn around until he feels a touch on his shoulder. This will ensure that he isn't turning around and looking everywhere for his approaching bride. The coordinator will then bring the bride to the site, and let her walk alone towards him. If we don't have a coordinator, I'll take the groom and my assistant will go get the bride.

I don't direct the first look. However it happens, it happens. I don't want to ruin the moment with direction. It can get difficult when I work with videographers who insist on stop-starting the first look, directing every single movement. I know that first looks are staged, I don't in any way believe that set up situations are all that realistic. That said, the moments can still be real. You just have to let them happen! I document her walking to him, him seeing her, her seeing him, and the moments that follow. I don't stop shooting until it's over, completely over. I wait for the bride and groom to look for me, instead of stopping their interaction to direct.



I've talked already in this book about my feelings with regard to the first look. I'm not a huge fan, because if the getting ready process runs late, you lose time. There isn't anything you can do to make a schedule that's fallen apart get back together. You can't rush hair and makeup. You can't physically make a bride get dressed. The only thing you can do is manage those expectations before the actual wedding itself. You have to talk to you clients about what will happen if the first look is last. You have to tell them how it will impact their portraits. If things do run late, the results cannot be a surprise to the clients.

The client expectations of what the first look will actually look like can also be difficult to manage. Grooms are literally put on the spot while their bride walks up to them, and they know they have to react emotionally - or vice versa if the groom walks to the bride. First looks used to be something that were sweet, and elicited genuine emotional reactions, but since they've been made so popular it's just another staged part of the day. I hate to sound like a downer but I've seen too many "Why aren't you crying? Aren't you happy?" reactions, and too many over-the-top insincere reactions that are playing to the camera to genuinely love this new wedding trend. I absolutely do understand why people might love the first look and I understand what a wonderful thing it is schedule wise but emotionally I'm not a fan. I've delivered images to clients only to have brides say "I thought he would look happier" or "We wanted pictures of us crying during the first look, why aren't there any?" I cannot manufacture their emotions, and they need to know that beforehand. I think many clients feel that it's the photographer's job to make the emotions that they want in their pictures actually happen, and we can't do that. That's something that needs to be made clear before the wedding day itself.

Done simply, a first look can be great. It can really give you more time in a tight schedule, and it can be a series of amazing moments. It can also be stressful in many ways. You have to be prepared for that, and act accordingly if anything off-schedule does happen!

NOTES



THE WEDDING SCHOOL







PHOTOGRAPHING THE BRIDE ALONE

One of the formal, must-take images of the day is always of the bride alone. I always strive to make the following three images : a classic headshot, a solid 3/4 shot from the waist/hips up, and one full-length shot. This way I have all of my bases covered, and Mom will always be happy. Sometimes I get two of the three, sometimes all three, sometimes only one. It really depends on the client, how much posing they want to do, the desires of the parents for these specific images, and the timing in the day to make the images. Sometimes it is virtually impossible to get any of these images done when the timeline falls apart, but “bride alone” is number one on my list of most-requested formals, so I at least try to get something passable. It’s crucial, even if it’s just a few frames.

The classic headshot is very quick and easy to accomplish. I usually take this image right after she’s gotten dressed, and right before she leaves for the ceremony or to see the groom for the first time. As soon as she’s dressed with her veil on, jewelry on, shoes on, and makeup touched up, I ask her if I can have just a few quick minutes to take a handful of images of her alone. I stress that this will be quick and easy, because at this time we’re either usually in a hurry or emotions are flying high. I don’t want her to feel like this is going to take a lot of time, or be stressful.

The next thing I do is gently request that everyone else leave the room. I want the bride to feel comfortable, and it’s hard to pose for a portrait when your bridesmaids are squealing at you. Often they’re constantly adjusting the bride, taking pictures with their cell phones, and this makes the bride feel self-conscious. I’m also going to ask the bride to sit on the ground, and if her mother is in the room she is going to hyperventilate and refuse. No matter how much you try to explain that sitting on a perfectly clean carpeted floor will not wrinkle, ruin, smudge, crumple, destroy, or even mar the dress, the mother of the bride will gasp like you have suggested that her daughter sit in a mud puddle. If you ask the client in a calmly authoritative voice that you’d like her to sit on the ground, she’ll do it. If even one person expresses a shred of doubt, she won’t. I can assure you of that.

I ask the bride to sit on one hip on the ground, almost like a cheerleader would. Her legs are to one side, knees tucked inwards, weight on one hip. I want her to gently lean on one arm. She will either drape the other arm around her own waist, or hold the veil, whichever will make her more comfortable. I want her seated near a window so that the flat, easy window light falls evenly on her face. If I’m using an open front door instead of a window, I want her near enough to the doorway to light her face, but not so close that the direct sun is hitting her. For this type of image, the gentleness of the indirect light is key. If I’m using a window, I’ll often close the sheers so that it diffuses the light even more. From here, all the bride has to do is look up at me. I’ll guide her to raise or lower her chin based on how highly I’m standing above her. I’m always above her, since I’m going to shoot down on her with my 85mm lens. I need the room to be able to focus that 85mm and have all of her head and torso in the frame. The reason that I want to shoot at $f/1.4$ or $f/1.2$ (if you’re a Canon shooter) here is because I want just her eyes in focus, and for the rest of





her face to be out of focus. This is a flattering pose and takes all of two minutes to set up, and less than a minute to quickly shoot.

Be aware of your background. I prefer a nice, even background so nothing is distracting. The darker the background the better, so that the eye of the viewer goes straight to the bride's face. I also often turn off the rest of the ambient lights in the room, so that the only light source is coming from that window or door. Practice makes perfect. If you're working on this particular image, make a friend, child, pet, or inanimate object sit for you as you observe how the light falls when the subject moves. Eventually, you'll become comfortable enough with the setup to try it with a client. Then it will become second nature to you, and hopefully another portrait tool in your arsenal.

What about the other two portraits of the bride alone? First, I try to get a nice formal portrait of the bride alone when we're done with the family formals. This doesn't al-

ways happen due to time constraints, but I do my best to make it work. All I do is simply place the bride on the altar, or wherever we shot the family formals, and have her hold her bouquet and smile at the camera. This is the time for her mother to mess with the train, her bridesmaids to obsessively lay out her veil, and her grandmother to cry, because this is the picture that her grandmother wants. No matter how modern and photojournalism-loving the clients are, someone will be really touched by that one formal portrait. It will be the pick for some relative to display on their piano or fireplace mantle. The setup for the lighting is already there from the family formals, so this is a quick and easy addition before we

📌 Bride alone, crucial shot - most popular: headshot, 3/4 and full length

📌 Help bride feel comfortable and not rushed via the timeline

📌 Be aware of your background - darker is better

📌 Gently suggest poses to help flatter her frame and give the best compositions



THE WEDDING SCHOOL

move on. I try to keep my aperture to $f/4$ to make sure she's 100% entirely in focus. Sometimes I'll drop to $f/3.5$, but really no more than that, this isn't the time for me to be "artsy," but to create a clean, simple portrait.

I will also attempt to photograph the bride alone when I'm photographing the bride and groom together, whenever that may be. I'll use the same lighting setup as I do when photographing the bride and groom.

NOTES





POSING THE BRIDE

It's easy when you've got a professional model in front of the camera to finesse your poses and make them perfect. When you're working with regular people on a regular wedding day, you have to understand they are going to start off pretty uncomfortable in front of the camera. If I start by overly posing them, I tend to lose a lot of the naturalness of the moment. This is true whether it's one person or two people in front of the camera. For that reason, I try to keep to a very simple list of poses that are very natural and very believable.

I used to be a dancer when I was younger. I took ballet all through my childhood, all up through high school and even in college. A lot of the things that I know about posing women come from those years of classical ballet training. I also have a degree in theatre, and posing went hand in hand with finding your light. What better training for later posing clients in front of the camera?

Posing tip number one is very simple. All you'll want to do is turn the body away from the light, and the face into the light. Now, while that's not a pose per se, that's the first thing that I started finessing when I was working with making women comfortable and looking beautiful in front of the camera. It's very simple, and it works exactly how it sounds.

Next, you're going to set about slimming the torso and placing the arms in a flattering way. This something that I actually picked up in the weight room of the gym! Before you



set and start any weight work, you want to stand up straight, pin your shoulders back, and push your shoulders down. Does it feel ridiculous? Yes it does! When I start any pose, I start by teaching the clients to do the same thing. I call it setting the shoulders. Tell your bride to stand up straight, push their shoulders back, and pin them down. The movement originates from the muscles in their back, so if they are pulling their back muscles together and then pulling those back muscles down, it's going to get rid of any hunching or slouching. It's going to automatically make them stand up straight.

The next thing you want to do is specially for women. This isn't a pose that I would do with men. You're going to have them pin their elbows behind their body. After the shoulders go back, the shoulders go down and the elbows come behind the body. What that does is creates flawless, wonderful posture. It also gives a slight hourglass grace to the movement of the arms. It doesn't take any ballerina to make this pose work, and it's not necessarily a pose so much as it is proper body alignment.

Pose number three is a tip about intent, not so much about pose. It's very, very important when I'm shooting portraits. I need an intent to the movement of my clients. Now, you might be thinking "how do you pose intent?" Intent is about the soul of the pose. You can pose the body in a absolute perfect way, but if there's no light in the eyes, and there's no intention to the movement, there's going to be an almost static stiffness to the pose itself. This is something that you can't teach our client how to do. You have to elicit it out of them.

Get them in to the pose you want, no matter what it is, and then start talking to them. Get them to think about something that makes them happy, makes them feel serene, or elicits an emotional response. A fake laugh is never going to look as good as a real laugh. Telling a bride to put her hands in a veil and hold them in a certain way is never going to look as good as her doing it naturally. Once you have that pose exactly where you want it, you need to give intention and meaning to the pose itself.

My next tip for you is very simple ballet 101 "s curve" of the body. This is a pose for the women only. It looks a little weird when men do it! All you have to do is tell the bride to put one foot behind them. Put their weight on that foot, and push their hip towards that back foot. Then they're going to turn their upper body towards whichever foot is backwards, pulling their shoulders back around. Putting all of that weight on the back foot is going to intentionally push an s curve into the body. Then tell them to settle into the s curve, because if they are doing it really stiffly it's going to look awkward. What that's going to do is give them a very feminine, hourglass shape to all body types.

My last tip for you is my personal favorite tip. I call it ballet arms. Awkward arms are my personal pet peeve in all photographs of women, and it's something that I'm always striving to improve. What I mean by ballet arms is really simple. Let's say you're working with a bride outside, maybe in front of a fountain, and she has an incredible veil on. You want pictures of her playing with the veil, but what does she do with her arms? What I



want you to do is tell your client, "Put your arm out straight and move it, starting with the shoulders to the elbows." The first thing that happens is the shoulder goes down, then the elbow goes down, then your wrist goes down, finally your fingers go down. What you're going to get when you move through the joints like that, is a gently fluttering arm that moves fluidly.

It's crucial that you understand all lighting scenarios you could find yourself in. What if you have to take these portraits outside in full sun? What about outside in flat light? What about inside with one window? Inside with no lights? It's important that you study the lighting section of this book until you know it inside and out. This will prepare you to take beautiful portraits in any location!



NOTES



PORTRAITS OF THE BRIDE AND GROOM

he portrait session of the bride and groom together is something that I get asked about quite a bit. How long do I get? What do I do with my time? How do I pose the bride and groom together?

It may come as a shock, but I don't want a lot of time to photograph the portraits of the bride and groom together. The most important thing to me when photographing a wedding are the relationships and the moments that occur between them, not spending hours taking fashion-based portraits of my clients all over the city. I ask my clients for an hour of time and in reality all I really want is about thirty minutes. I want a good half hour in some lovely light, nothing more, nothing less. Just enough time to document their relationship when they're alone. Some time to make some lovely images, and then move on with the rest of the day. I truly believe that the day is about the marriage and not the pictures. It's about the joining of two families, and not how much time I can pretend that the day is a fashion shoot of a bride and groom.

The portraits of the bride and groom are not about me. They're not about my vision of how the clients should look. I'm not trying to force something that isn't there, find a bizarre way to shoot just to be creative, or to shoot to impress other photographers with my intelligence. I am striving to make my clients look beautiful, feel beautiful, and accurately represent their relationship.

These portraits happen either before the ceremony, if they opt for a "first look", or after the ceremony during cocktail hour. Whichever they choose will affect the amount of time we have. If they choose to see each other before the ceremony, we can have as much time as they'd like to allot for their portraits. If we wait until cocktail hour, we only have sixty or ninety minutes to accomplish family formals, bridal party formals, and images of the bride and groom together. The third option is to have a huge break in between the ceremony and reception, which happens a few times per year. It's certainly not the norm, but it's actually my favorite. We have a great deal of time, my schedule isn't affected if hair and makeup run late, and no one has to get ready early. It's a win all around!

NOTES



CHOOSING YOUR LOCATIONS

If you're doing a first look, and you're getting about an hour or more before the ceremony to photograph the bride and groom together, you have more options. You can leave the venue. You can leave the hotel, and go somewhere else. You can plan to go to their favorite park, their favorite street, or their favorite café. You have the time to make these decisions. If they're not going to see each other until the ceremony, oftentimes they're going to have to do a lot in a quick amount of time. Chances are, you're going to have to stay either where the ceremony took place, or where the reception is going to take place.

If the whole day is taking place all in one location, it's just as simple as walking outside, taking some portraits and coming back inside. What if you have a ceremony that's in a church, and a reception that's at a completely different venue? You're going to want to talk to your client, and ascertain where they like to take these portraits. Do they want to

WHERE TO SHOOT?

- 📌 Check with your client, perhaps they have earmarked some places
- 📌 Manage expectations based on timeline, traffic and lighting
- 📌 Research, make sure there aren't logistical surprises or permits needed
- 📌 Explore, be innovative to highlight your clients

do the family pictures at the church immediately following the ceremony, then do some pictures of the two of them outside the church? That's one option. They might actually opt to go to their reception location instead. You would finish the family formals at the church, transport over to the reception venue, and shoot outside or inside there.

This is where you really need to step in and start talking to your clients. Whether they're doing a first look, or whether they're doing portraits during cocktail hour, you need to talk about the locations they want to go, and their expectations with those locations. You have to manage expectations for this part of day. You have to talk about things like traffic. How long is it going to take to get from one location to another? How long will it take to get from this ceremony to the reception location? How long do you plan on being in each of these spaces? Will you be transporting between locations during rush hour? How long could it really take?

You can't let your clients dictate what's going to happen to you on a wedding day, because they're not wedding photographers. They might have a great idea about where they'd like to go, or a place they'd like to see, but if it's not going to work with their timeline you're going to want to talk about it. You're also going to want to get on the internet and do a little bit of research. The last thing you want is a logistical surprise on the wedding day. Imagine you've planned to take wedding portraits at a popular local park. Check it out online. What if there's a street festival there that day? What if there's a farmer's market?

This might not happen to you so much where you are located, but you need to check on the locations your clients want to go to for portraits. You must make sure that you don't need a permit. You want to research the locations, find out if you need a permit, and then



pass on the responsibility of getting that permit to your clients.

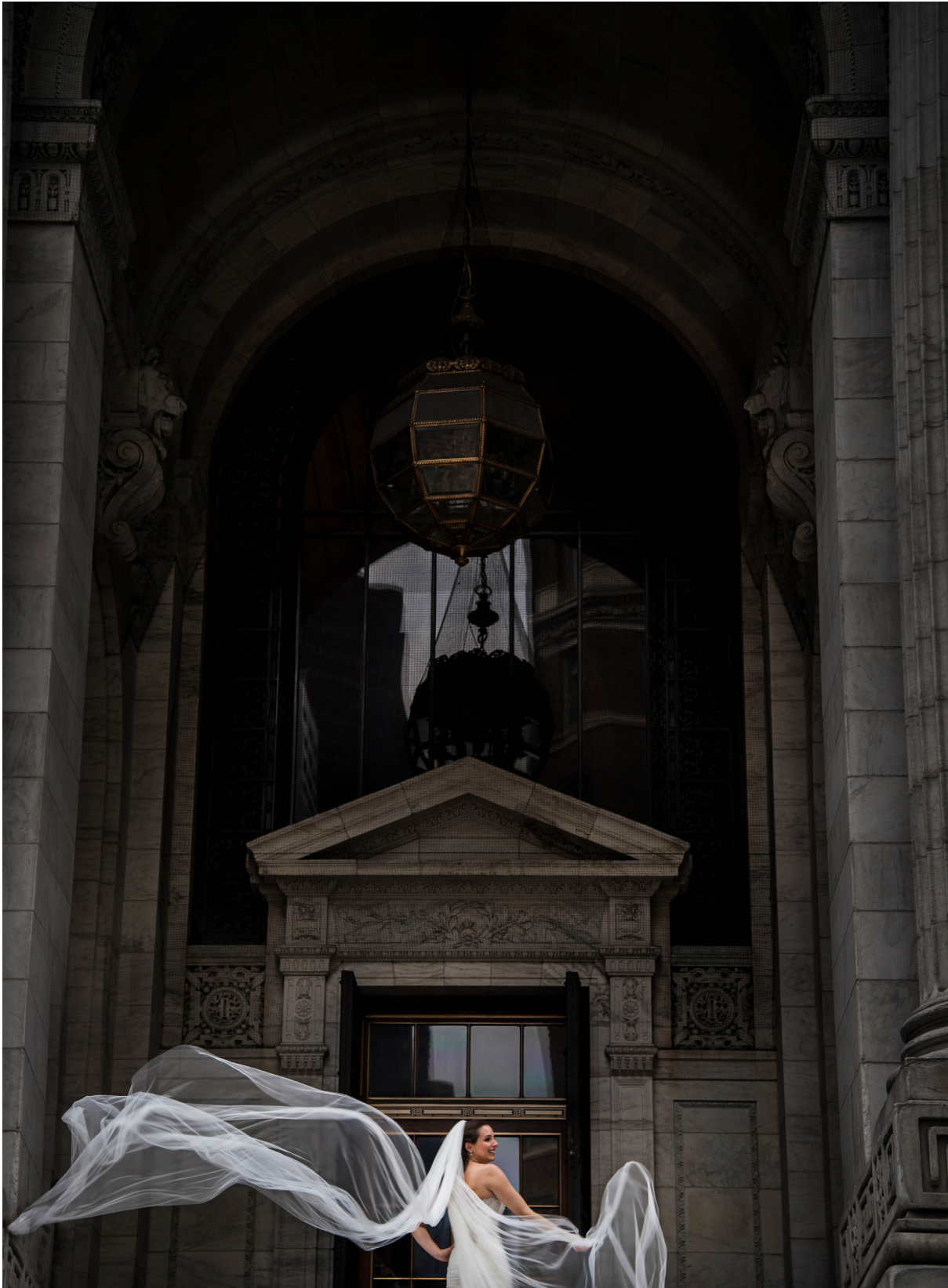
What happens when a client has no idea where they'd like to go for their portraits? This can be a wonderful thing, and I do everything I can to provide information to those clients. On my website, I have a list of recommendations for New York portrait locations and recommendations for Philadelphia portrait locations. Scattered in there are some recommendations for areas in between and around those spaces. It's really helpful to have a list of places that you like to go to where you know you're going to be able to make really good pictures. Also listed is contact information for each of the locations, permit information if applicable, and reasons why I like them. I love sending these lists of recommendations to the clients. They have time to visit the spaces that they might like. They can think about what they want out of their pictures, and then choose.



When I'm picking a location, I don't necessarily just want a beautiful building that we can go stand in front of. I want a place that I can explore. I would rather find a city park, a beautiful archway, or a location where I can work with a lot of different types of light. I'm looking for multiple scenarios lighting-wise, and multiple scenarios compositionally, within a very short area. If you don't know your area all that well, or if you're new and you haven't shot in many locations, get to know your city impeccably. This way you can advise your clients as to some really wonderful spaces to go. If a client suggests a location that I've never been to before, I'll look it up online. At this point, I don't feel like I have to do a site visit or a test shoot if I'm shooting somewhere new. If you are a newer photorgapher, and you are unsure, there is nothing wrong with visiting a location beforehand and getting to know the area.

NOTES





POSING THE BRIDE AND GROOM

When photographing the bride and groom, there are two types of portraits that I do. The portraits are either camera aware, or not camera aware. I need to get a full-length, three-quarters, and close-up portrait of them smiling directly at the camera. I also need to capture them interacting, laughing, kissing, and just being together. During their portrait session, only a handful of the images are going to be camera aware, unless I have specifically been asked to do more that way.

I will almost always do the camera aware images first because they're easiest. All you have to do is stand the bride and groom together, instruct them laughingly to "stand like you're at prom", instruct them to tilt their heads together, and we're ready to go. I always joke that I know they hate smiling directly at me for portraits, but we have to make their parents happy. They always understand, and the acknowledgement that it's awkward always breaks the ice. We get those images done easily, and then I promise we can move on. I promise that they can stop staring directly at me soon, which also usually elicits a laugh. Usually they're loosening up around me by now!

When it comes to the more formal images of the bride and groom together, I will tell the bride and groom to put their inside arms around each other's waists. I will then ask them to hold the bride's bouquet together between themselves. Asking the groom to help her support the bouquet gives him something to do with his spare hand, and rounds the pose. I ask them to tilt the tops of their heads together, and lower their chins. The pose is quick, easy, and very comfortable for the clients.



I find that by excessively posing my clients I start to lose any real interaction, and any realness to their expressions. That is why most of my poses aren't really poses, but suggested interactions. For example, if a client is uncomfortable around the camera, I'll give them a long laundry list of things to do that they can't possibly remember. "Okay guys, you're going to walk out past the third lamp post and then I want you to give her a huge kiss and maybe a twirl or a dip and then kiss her again and walk past and stop at the second lamp post." The clients always nod gamely, and somewhere between counting lamp posts and remember to kiss, they almost always laugh because they've forgotten what I've told them to do! That is what I'm waiting for. I'm waiting for the moment that something I've told them to do becomes a real interaction between the two of them. The direction that I give the most is this: "Okay guys, I'm going to go way over there to photograph you so I won't hear a word you say....so just take some time to be together. Talk about whatever you want. Just enjoy each other because soon we're about to go to your family formals/your ceremony/your reception and you're going to be swarmed with people all night so take a few minutes alone and I'll come back for you when I need you!" Then I step back with my long lens and just let them be and see what develops.



The laughter you see in my images, the clients talking and enjoying each other, it's all them. I'm just laying the groundwork for that to happen. I'm putting them in the right light, so that when the moments do naturally occur they're in the right setting for a great photograph.

If I'm really stuck, and need to actually direct some poses, I'll step in and help out. The first thing I'll do is ask the bride and groom to get really close together, hold each other in their arms, and kiss. I'm not looking for the kiss itself, but the moment before or after the kiss. I love the moments of anticipation, and the post-kiss expressions. From there,



sometimes I'll ask them to stand practically nose to nose, as close as possible without kissing. Sometimes this makes them laugh. Sometimes it makes them kiss again. It always elicits a reaction, and is a great stepping stone to other moments.

Another thing I'll ask them to do is hold each other at arms' length. I'll tell them to pull each other in for a kiss, and then push back out at arms' length. This gives me a series of images to work with, and hopefully a series of actions and reactions.

One of my favorite pose suggestions we call the "movie musical" pose, because it always looks like they're going to break into song when they are in the pose. I have the bride stand with her back to the groom's chest. He puts his arms around her waist, and under her arms. She wraps her arms over his arms. Then I tell them to lean out in opposite directions, allowing them to look at each other. It feels almost hilariously awkward, which almost always makes clients laugh. It looks wonderful. It also allows for a series of images, where the clients interact with each other. It's one of my favorite go-to poses, and something I use often.

NOTES



DEALING WITH DIFFICULT CONDITIONS

What do you do when you want to shoot in the bright sun, but it's cloudy? What if your clients have expressly mentioned wanting brightly lit sunshine images, but it's raining? What if it's just flat and dead outside? Or your clients are awkward and won't stop staring at you? Or the groom is uncomfortable? Or the bride and groom had a wicked bad fight the night before, and now are bickering during their portraits? Or the bridesmaids insist on being there to fluff the bride's dress? Or the venue's "bridal attendant" hyperventilates every time you suggest the bride walk on grass?

You smile, breathe, and deal with it.

I am very clear with my clients at multiple points in our communications that I can only shoot in bright sunlight if, in fact, the sun is out and it is bright. I can supplement my images with flash and video light as much as possible, but it will never match the look of natural sunlight. One of my sample albums was shot on a cloudy day, and one was shot on a sunny day. I make sure that I point out the differences. I mention the limitations of a cloudy day, so that there are no surprises when they see their images.

A cloudy day is different from a rainy day. On a cloudy day we can at least still go outside, but on a rainy day we're either banished under an umbrella (a look that I do not prefer), or stuck indoors. If the clients are truly disappointed about not being able to shoot outside, I'll suggest a post-wedding session. This would enable them to get the images that they wanted, on a day that I have a bit more control over the shoot.

Even if the rain is pouring down outside, hopefully you are at least in a venue with windows. You can use those windows for beautiful side or indirect light, the same way you could on any other day. Even when it's raining outside there should be a bit of light coming through the windows. The rainy outside is still brighter than the indoors with all of the lights turned off, so I will put my clients near an open door or a tall window, turn off the lights in the room so there will be no distracting ambient light elements, and proceed as normal! If this doesn't work, look for beautiful backgrounds and work with your video light to illuminate the couple.

What if your clients truly are very awkward in front of the camera? What if they're mad at each other? What if they're just not having a great day, and are disgruntled about other wedding things? No matter what, I just proceed like nothing is wrong. I proceed as if they're totally comfortable in front of the camera. The more cheerful I am, and more insistent that they are doing fantastically in front of my lens, the more they will loosen up and feel comfortable. In this instance I'll really rely on the trick of having them accomplish a lot of tasks. This helps take their mind off of how awkward they feel, and hopefully break through to them a bit. However, some clients simply are more reserved than others. Some



are much more shy in front of the camera. If I get this sense from them, I won't have them kiss or snuggle up super close together. The last thing I want is to make someone who doesn't like public displays of affection super uncomfortable. I let the clients lead me with how close, or not close, they want to be in their images.

I do my absolute best to be alone with the clients during their portrait session. Sometimes you get a well-meaning bridesmaid or "bridal attendant" tagging along, despite telling them over and over that no really, this session is private. What do you do about that? You just do it. Just work around the distraction, and make the best of the situation. Keep reminding yourself that this is not about you! This is about pleasing your clients. If it makes the bride happy to have a bridal attendant fluffing her train after each shutter click, and refreshing her lipstick after every pose, then so be it!

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BRIDAL PARTY PORTRAITS

After photographing the bride and groom together, I usually photograph the bridal party. Some photographers spend a great deal of time with the bridal party, but I try to keep this part of the day easy and quick. I am looking to accomplish three specific groupings here. I want to shoot the bride with her bridesmaids, the groom with his groomsmen, and the bride and groom with their whole wedding party. If the bride and groom want more images during this time, we have to make sure that we have enough time in the schedule. For example, sometimes the bride wants images with each of her bridesmaids alone. Sometimes they want to go to different locations and create bridal party portraits in each location. I'm absolutely willing to do any portrait images that my clients want, provided that we have enough time in the timeline!



If the bride and groom do a first look, sometimes we can accomplish these bridal party images before the ceremony. Even if I do get to shoot the bridal party pre-ceremony, I often re-take the major three groupings post-ceremony at the same time as the family formal images. Most of my clients prefer to have church images of the bridal party, if we're also doing church family formals.

FAMILY FORMAL PORTRAITS

Many wedding photographers like to complain about how much they dislike shooting family formals. They say that they're not creative, that they're boring, that they take up a lot of time, and that no one likes posing for them. Some of these things are true. Some of these things get better with time, and with experience. Hopefully my approach to family formals will help you out with yours!

Are family formals the most “creative” part of wedding photography? No, not really. You can't really go way out of the box by doing something super different with each set of family formals. They're formals. Documenting these portraits of the families at this stage in their lives is a crucial and important part of the wedding day. They can't be ignored, and they have to be respected. Family formals are important to your clients. They need to be important to you.

I was with my husband at a family reunion when he found a family formal of his grandparents' wedding day. I saw the look on his face, and the faces of his family members, when they gathered around that portrait. It was important to them. It meant something. Yes, capturing moments means a great deal, but those family formals are also important in their own way. So stop groaning about that part of the day and start embracing it!

It is true that family formals are no one's favorite part of the day, and that includes the clients. Standing in a line and smiling directly at the camera feels awkward. This part of the day takes up time that people would rather be partying. Everyone has an “oh I had this awful experience with a photographer at my cousin's/sister's/best friend from college's wedding” story that makes them dread the formal time. How can you combat that? By being very well-organized, having a list that you've worked on with the couple beforehand, and by being efficient in your workflow on the day of the event.

I have mentioned before the importance of the wedding day worksheet. This worksheet includes a huge section about family formals. I give the clients the list of formals that I usually complete on a wedding day, and ask them to check off the ones they want. I also ask them to list the others they want on top of that. I warn them that each formal grouping takes four to five minutes to set up and shoot, so to bear that in mind when adding extra images to the list. The groupings don't really each take that long, but I want to pad the time in case we have to go find a stray family member who wandered into cocktail



hour! Next I talk to them about the list, making sure they know to tell everyone where and when to report for the formals. Finally, I let them know how long the list will take to accomplish. I make sure I've padded the timing even more for when things inevitably run behind. This way the clients and I are both prepared for the time it will take to complete the portraits, the people involved, and what time and where these images will take place. When it's time to actually take the formals, my assistant and I work together to make it as quick and painless as possible. My assistant holds the list, gets the groupings together, and makes sure everyone looks crisp and clean. I stand back to watch. I step in if I see heads blocking heads, awkward positions, etc. This means that I don't have to arrange the group, run back and check, run in and make adjustments, etc. Lastly, my assistant holds the light and I shoot. I usually take three to ten frames per grouping, depending on how much the group blinks or looks around.

If we have large family groupings we begin with those first, because that will allow us to dismiss a large group of people before moving on. I always save immediate family and the bridal party for last!

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WHEN FAMILY FORMAL CONDITIONS ARE NOT IDEAL

There are many things that can make the photographing of the family formals range from difficult, to nearly impossible. Some of those things you can circumvent by better pre-planning but some things you can't.

CONSIDERATIONS

- What do you do when client ideas won't translate?
- What if the weather or lighting isn't ideal?
- What if your clients won't take your professional advice?

What do you do when the clients request a location for family formals that is, simply put, awful? My personal favorite is "the staircase." How many times have you had clients request that their wedding formals take place on the venue's "grand staircase?" I get all excited, thinking it's going to be a gloriously *Gone With The Wind* style sweeping staircase, only to arrive at the venue and find it's six steps buried in a corner with a low-hanging ceiling. What if they want pictures "by the gazebo," but "by the gazebo" is in dappled light, at noon, outdoors, and it's a hundred degrees in the sun? What do you do when following your clients' request means that you're setting yourself up to fail?

When that happens, all you can do is offer your professional opinion. You have to remember that telling a client "no" can be a very good thing. Your clients have hired you because they trust you. They want the work that they've seen you produce. You owe it to them to tell them when the conditions are not ideal to produce those images.

So what if your clients want to do family formals outside by that gazebo, at high noon, in July? You must gently remind them of how hot it is at noon and how the sun will be beating right down on their heads. You can suggest finding a shaded location nearby, or a better indoor location. I promise you that most of the time they will thank you for the input. In this circumstance I'll often hear them say, "I hadn't even thought of that!" in regard to the sun, the heat, or the timing. They want that hideously hideous staircase? Gently tell them that there is no way you can fit their extended family on the staircase in a comfortable manner, and suggest an alternative. If they are dead set on loving these locations, I will often tell them that we can go back to the location and photograph them there. It's a lot easier to deal with a couple outdoors at noon than a whole family, and much easier to light two people on a staircase than twenty people!

What do you do if the clients listen to you, yet still insist on shooting at those locations? If it's at all possible, I do it, and do the best I can. Shadows cast behind the family on the stairs when you attempt to light it beautifully? Bail on that and bounce flash off the ceiling. Ideal? Of course not. Yet, it will do. Outdoors at noon? Maybe it's time to abandon the flash and do the best you can with natural light. All I can suggest in this rare occur-



rence is to convey to the client that you will not be able to produce the results they want in these conditions. Warn them. Then do your best. Chances are you'll be fine, but if they end up unhappy with the location later you can reference the number of times you told them that it wouldn't work. It's not great, but at least you've covered your bases.

What happens if the clients don't give you enough time to complete the formal list they want? This happens often. Sometimes I'll get a timeline from a wonderful couple, and I'll see that I've been given twenty minutes to photograph thirty-two family groupings. I know that this is never going to work. However, the client doesn't know. How could they? Many have never planned or been in a wedding before, so they have no frame of reference as to how long this will take. You have to educate your clients on how long these things take.

What if your clients want to take their formals outside? This is a great idea, as there are many great outdoor situations that you can find yourself in. If you do choose to shoot your formals outside, please also have a rain plan! You don't want to find yourself having to choose an indoor location at the last minute. The clients need to know what the rain plan is, so that everyone is on the same page.

What if your clients assure you that they're organized, quick, will totally be on time for formals and no really, they will be the people who can cram thirty-two groupings into a twenty minute time slot? You have to tell them no. You have to tell them as firmly as you possibly can that it will not work. I prefer to say it both over the phone, and to follow it up by e-mail so that you have it in writing. Tell them firmly how many minutes it will take to complete the list they want to accomplish. Be honest. Tell them that, in your experience, it won't ever work the way they say it will. If they insist? At some point you have to say, "I can tell you that this is not going to work, and I've offered you alternatives, but you don't want to take them. Therefore we can try this list, but I hope you won't be upset when we are out of time and the list is not complete." This way, if they insist you try to complete the list, you're covered if you can't finish it. I highly suggest starting with the largest groups possible, and then dismissing them so that you're left with fewer people. Then rearrange that list before the wedding day to get the "priority" shots first. In a pinch, I'll shoot the bride with her parents together and not the following two shots which are "bride with mom" and "bride with dad." If you run out of time to do the individual shots, at least you've got one of them together. This scenario makes me so uncomfortable, and I really dislike being set up to fail. Sometimes all you can do is the best you can do in the situation.

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WHEN TO TAKE THE FORMAL FAMILY PORTRAITS

When I take the family formal portraits depends on whether or not the clients opt for a first look. If they choose to do a first look, we will often take family formals before the ceremony. If they choose to do a first look, but we don't have much time with the bride and groom after that, we might still do family formals during cocktail hour. Perhaps we'll do some family formals beforehand, and some larger family groups during cocktail hour. If they opt to not do a first look, family formals can only take place during cocktail hour. If the clients have chosen to have a large break in between the ceremony and reception, we can do all of their formals then. This is not something that happens often, but it's great when it does!

The great thing about doing formals pre-ceremony is that they're done and out of the way. After the ceremony, everyone can immediately go to cocktail hour. We also might be able to change locations for the family formals, which can be wonderful. Post-ceremony formals have advantages, too. This is the time that everyone expects to have their pictures taken. No one has to get ready early before the ceremony. You're limited on time, post-



ceremony, so the formals list has to stay fairly short. The biggest disadvantage to doing the family formal shots during cocktail hour is that the clients, and you, lose out on that time. They can't mingle, and you don't have much time to shoot cocktail hour or the reception room.

You have to discuss all of these things with your clients. Then you can work together to make the decision that is best for everyone!

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THE CEREMONY

There are many times on the wedding day where you have some control. The ceremony is not one of those times. You cannot tell the clients where to stand. You cannot control the light in the churches. You can't move the chuppah to a better angle during sunset. You have to learn how to deal with whatever scenario you find yourself in.

Outdoor locations are a bit easier to handle. You have the opportunity to move around, sometimes even going behind the ceremony location and shooting straight towards the bride and groom. You can get back with a long lens, getting viewpoints that you can't always find during indoor ceremonies. Outdoor locations almost never have rules, because you're not in a church. I've never had anyone tell me that I could or couldn't do anything during an outdoor ceremony. I get rules in churches about vantage points all the time!

I always ask my clients before the wedding if their church has any rules. I want to be able to talk through them with my clients. I've had churches not let me in the aisle at all, and it absolutely affects the processional images. The clients need to be aware of that. Dealing with rules before the wedding means that no one is surprised on the day of the event!

Sometimes you'll find yourself in venues that have wonderful angles, vantage points and light. Sometimes you won't. As with all parts of the wedding day, all you can do is the best you can do.

During the processional, I crouch in the aisle next to the mother of the bride's seat. I never stand. I never position myself on the groom's side. I want to be able to turn and see the groom, and I can't really do that if I'm in front of him. My assistant stays in the back of the church or processional location with the bride and whoever is walking her down the aisle. I stay crouched down until the bride passes me, and then I stand and walk backwards down the aisle. I never want to block the aisle during the ceremony! From there, I move around as unobtrusively as I can. I try to get as many angles as possible without disrupting the guests, or drawing attention to myself. During the recessional, I stay at the back of the aisle with a long lens and photograph everyone as they walk towards me.

The ceremony is a great time to have an assistant who shoots, or a second shooter. They can stay in the back with the bride before she comes down the aisle. They can shoot wide-angle shots from the back of the ceremony. They can also shoot a different focal length than you do when the recessional takes place. Having someone else with a camera during the ceremony means that I don't have to run around as much. This means that I draw less attention myself, which is very important to me.



How creative can you be during a ceremony? It's a difficult situation. Sometimes you'll find yourself in venues that have wonderful angles, vantage points, and light. Sometimes you won't. As with all parts of the wedding day, all you can do is the best you can do! Don't worry if all you can accomplish is simple coverage of the ceremony itself. Some ceremonies are just more difficult than others! Learn about the ceremony, make sure you understand any religious traditions that will be happening, and wait for moments.

Sometimes clients will opt to have a receiving line after the ceremony. This is also something that I need to know about before the wedding day! Receiving lines can take anywhere from five minutes to over an hour, and we have to figure that into the timeline of the day. Receiving lines always take longer than the clients think they will!

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CHAPTER NOTES





COCKTAIL HOUR

Whether or not cocktail hour is documented depends on several things.

If the clients have opted for a first look, and to take family formals before the ceremony, everyone gets to go to cocktail hour. There is ample time to document both cocktail hour and the reception room, even if you're a solo shooter.

Cocktail hour is a difficult thing to shoot. People are just standing in groups, holding drinks and plates of food. Nothing is really happening, other than conversation. My goal at this time is to shoot groups and couples. I go from gathering to gathering, asking if I can take a picture of them. I say "Can I get a picture of you guys?" dozens and dozens of times! Cocktail hour is a great time for these images, because the reception will get busy and hectic.

If we're short on time, my assistant will go to cocktail hour while I shoot the reception room. I've taught her how to shoot these portraits the way I like them, and she does a great job. While she's in the cocktail hour space, I'm documenting the reception decor. If I have a second shooter, that's their job and my assistant stays with me. I often need help lighting the reception room decor. It's helpful to have my assistant doing that, while a second shooter is with the cocktail groups. If my assistant shoots cocktail hour and I don't have a second shooter, I do what I can solo and light the space when she comes back to help me.

Since I adore shooting the pre-ceremony details, it should come as no surprise that I absolutely love photographing the reception room. Clients love these images. So do the venues, coordinators, caterers, bakers, and florists! Not only is this part of the day a chance to create images to please my client, but it's a chance to create images to please the other vendors you're collaborating with. First and foremost, my aim is to please the clients. Never lose focus of that. All the blog posts and editorials in the world will mean nothing to you and your business if you have unhappy clients! Referrals are the key to my continued business longevity, which is why everything I do is with the client first in my mind.



KEEP IN MIND

- 📌 Cocktail Hour is perfect for shoot groups and couples
- 📌 Check in with DJ or bandleader about event flow
- 📌 Keep in mind, aim is to please clients and capture images they will love
- 📌 Work around videographers as best you can if they are in your way



INTRODUCTIONS

At most weddings, cocktail hour lasts an hour or ninety minutes. Once it's over, the guests are moved into the reception room. Once seated, the bridal party, family, and couple are announced into the room.

Before the reception even begins, take a second to talk to the DJ, bandleader, or maitre'd about the flow of events. Is the entire bridal party being introduced? All of the parents? Just the bride and groom? It's helpful to know who is going to be walking through that door, and how large the groups will be. Sometimes the bridal party is announced all at once, and a large group is going to be lit differently than one or two people. You also need to know where they'll be introduced from, and where everyone will be sent once they walk into the room. Sometimes the bridal party lines up on the dance floor, and sometimes they're sent directly to their seats.

After the introductions, what happens next? Will the couple go straight into their first dance? Will they sit, and have a blessing? No matter what timeline you've worked out with your clients, always talk to the DJ or bandleader. Sometimes reception timelines change at the last minute and no one lets you know!

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FIRST DANCE AND PARENT DANCES

No two first dances are created equal! Some are elaborately choreographed. Some are not. Some last five minutes. Some last thirty seconds. Some couples take up the entire dance floor with their moves. Some stay in one spot, moving in a lopsided circle. I don't always know what the first dance will be like, and that's okay.

Sometimes the couple will sneak away during cocktail hour to practice their first dance. If they do, I always like to watch them practice while I shoot the reception room. I'm looking to see if their dance is choreographed, and most importantly, if they're going to dip at the end of the dance. If the couple has a dip choreographed, they're going to want it documented. I need to know which direction they're going to be facing when they dip, and at what point in the song it happens.

When documenting the first dance, I also look for reactions from the crowd. If I have a second shooter, that's their job. They don't shoot the dance, since we really only need one person covering it. They focus on reactions from parents, bridal party members, and guests. If I'm shooting with just an assistant, she's helping me with light, not shooting. I will always try to get a reaction shot of the parents, at least. This depends heavily on how long the actual dance is. If it's a quick dance, there isn't much you can do beyond documenting the couple and their interaction.

If you're shooting a Jewish wedding, the first dance is almost always followed by a hora. Will there be any traditional dances at the wedding you're shooting? Talking to your clients before the wedding will help clue you in to these things. Having a well-written timeline will accomplish the same thing.



THE WEDDING SCHOOL

I approach parent dances in the same way I do the couples' dance. The main difference is that the parent dances usually aren't choreographed. I also try to get reaction shots of the couple during the parent dances! Like with the couples' dance, I talk to the bandleader or DJ to make sure that I know precisely when these dances will take place during the reception. I don't ever want to miss a parent dance!

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TOASTS AND BLESSINGS

Most weddings will, at some point during the reception, have toasts. Some weddings will also have a blessing before the meal is served. Some weddings will only have one or two toasts, some will have many. Most events have the maid of honor and best man speak. Sometimes the parents will speak, sometimes both sets of parents. Sometimes more members of the bridal party will speak, or other family members entirely. Speeches may be brief, or they may be very long. Every wedding is different.

I've already talked to the bandleader or DJ earlier in the night about the introductions. I also talk to him/her about the speeches. Partly it's to make sure that the timeline that I have matches the timeline that they have! Partly it's to talk about where the person giving the toast will stand in relation to the bride and groom. Oftentimes, coordinators, DJ's, bandleaders, and so forth will want the person giving the toast to stand behind the bride and groom. I can understand why they'd want that. It makes a nice tableau, but it makes for difficult pictures. If the person giving the toast is facing you, the bride and groom are not. If you move to photograph the bride and groom, you're shooting the back of the person giving the toast. I prefer to have the person giving the toast standing in the middle of the dance floor. This way, the guests can see the reactions of the bride and groom. I can see them, as well. Sometimes you don't get your wish, but it can't hurt to ask!

The biggest problem that I have during toasts and speeches are the videographers. I absolutely understand that we are all there to work together for the benefit of the bride and groom. Usually we can work side by side, but toasts always seem to derail that fragile relationship. I don't understand why videographers have to stand so very close to their subjects during the toasts and blessings. It can make things very difficult for us. I do my best to work around them, but sometimes it affects the photography. There isn't much you can do here. You can ask them to move, but understand that they probably won't!

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THE PARTY

Most wedding receptions follow a fairly formulaic timeline. There are introductions, followed by a first dance. There is a brief dance set. Everyone sits down, and there is a blessing. Salads are served. There are several, or many toasts. Dinner is served. There is another dance set. There are parent dances, followed by cake cutting, and more dancing. Not every reception follows that formula. Sometimes no dancing takes place until dinner is over. Sometimes there is no cake cutting. Sometimes there are no parent dances. No two weddings are the same. It's important that you find out the timing of the event, as well as be prepared for anything that might occur.

For the most part, I'm completely hands off during the reception. If the clients are cutting the cake, I let them cut it without direction. If they're tossing a bouquet, they just toss it without needing to find me and smile at me! There are only two times that I'd ever ask anyone to look directly at me, and that's during portraits of groups and night portraits of the couple. Portraits of groups are the same as during cocktail hour. Either I, my assistant, or my second shooter make sure that we scour the room for people not on the dance floor! It's really easy to miss people who sit at their tables during the reception, and often those are very important people!



At some weddings I shoot, we take night portraits. This only happens if it's something that the bride and groom want to do. If they do, we will either go outside during dinner, or later during the dancing. I prefer to step out during dinner, because they'll be sweaty and disheveled if we wait until they've been dancing for awhile! I never take more than ten or fifteen minutes for these night portraits, because I want to return them to their party as quickly as I can!

If there are going to be two hours of dancing, that does not mean I spend two hours on the dance floor with the guests. The last thing that I want is for the guests to feel like I'm not giving them any time to enjoy the evening. I don't want them to associate dancing on





the dance floor with my flash constantly firing in their faces. I will spend a solid fifteen to twenty minutes making my way around the dance floor, and then I will take a ten minute break and find something else to shoot. Maybe it's the cake. Maybe I will borrow the bride and groom's rings and photograph them together if I didn't get a chance to do so before the ceremony. Maybe I will set my camera up in the corner and do a long exposure of the room so that all of the motion on the dance floor becomes a beautiful abstract blur. Maybe I will go back out into the cocktail hour space and re-photograph some of the details that might have gotten lost in the crowd earlier in the night. Whatever I am photographing, I am always staying busy unless I am taking a break to go to the bathroom or grab a quick bite to eat. I don't ever want my clients to look around and see me standing in a corner, looking bored, photographing nothing, texting my husband, or gossiping with my assistant.

NOTES



WHAT DO YOU DO WHILE THE GUESTS ARE EATING?

I've covered what I do when the client spends hours on the dance floor, but what about that incredibly awkward time when all they are doing is sitting at their tables and eating? No one wants photographs of themselves putting food in their mouths, and if nobody is standing up and mingling then there isn't much to shoot. Usually this is the point in the evening when we will approach the catering manager and inquire when or if the vendor meals are going to be served.



Many photographers like to have meal clauses in their contract that dictates that they are to be served a hot meal. I don't do that. I don't have any meal clause in my contract. At all. Yes, I'm working a long day. Yes, it's often hours between meals. No, it's not my clients' job to feed me. My assistant and I always bring food with us to a wedding and we're prepared in case there is either no vendor meal, it's food we don't eat, or it just never materializes despite being told it was coming.



I don't want to pester the catering manager for food, so I'll ask once if it's going to be provided and then back off. I don't want to be remembered as the vendor that wouldn't stop whining for food! We are prepared in case we don't get fed, or more likely, we don't like what's being fed. I don't like meat sandwiches or wraps. I always bring a cooler with chicken, protein bars, yogurt, and other things that I can eat throughout the day.

I also never eat the food at cocktail hour, unless we are invited to by the clients. I know that in some geographic areas it's acceptable, and even expected, to eat during cocktail hour. A lot of venues here really frown upon that, some going so far as to notify us before the event that the food and the bar are off limits.

I'm sure it goes without saying but we never, ever, ever, ever drink any alcohol from the bar. At all.

When the clients are eating, as I've mentioned, we take a break for a quick snack and also just to breathe and regroup. My days are very long, usually eight to twelve hours, and a break during the reception is always well-received. If we are going to sit and take a break we always leave the reception room. I don't want my clients to see me eating, or sitting down. We always check with the bandleader or the catering manager if there are any formalities coming up, since we don't want the parent dances to take place while we're eating!

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UNEXPECTED RECEPTION SITUATIONS

As with every part of a wedding day, things happen that you won't see coming!

What do you do when the mother of the bride, out of nowhere, asks for table shots? Table shots are something that I almost always address in the planning period. I want my clients to know that if they want table shots they have to plan to take a large amount of time away from their reception, usually thirty minutes to a whole hour. They'll need that time to walk from table to table, wait for the one person who went to the bar or the bathroom, and then pose for a picture. When I explain that it's not a ten minute quick process, most people decide that they don't want to do table shots.

To be clear, I'm not against table shots. I will gladly and happily do them if they're important to my clients, and I'll do them without a single word of complaint. My issue is more

that if they're going to take my time for an hour walking from table to table for one grip and grin per grouping, that is an hour that I can't be focusing on documenting the event in a way consistent with the online galleries and albums the client saw before booking me. If table shots for their four hundred person wedding is a huge deal, then I will suggest opting to choose another photographer add-on. This would allow that person to simply accomplish the table shots during the reception while I'm photographing the dancing and guest interactions. My additional photographer add-on is not inexpensive. It's \$1,500 for a photographer

to be there at the same coverage times that I am. This keeps clients from trying to start my additional shooter at 8:00 am, but not having me start until noon. They start when I start; they leave when I leave.

This allows me to pay a well-qualified photographer to spend the day working for me, handing over their images, not using them for their own portfolio, and leaves a bit left over to pay for the additional time spent culling and processing their images. I'm not making a profit on the additional photographer, but I keep it on my price list to satisfy those rare clients who simply must have a third or fourth photographer for whatever reason.

If a guest or family member asks, "when are we doing the table shots?" I'll kindly explain that the client has requested no table shots. I explain that I'm more than glad to photograph any family groupings, or pictures of them with their friends, that they want. This almost always satisfies them. After all, they're usually just asking because they want to make sure they get a picture of the people they're with. A handful of images later, they're happy



and I'm happy. I always make it very clear to the parents of the bride and groom that I'm glad to take any groupings they'd like during the reception as well. I usually mention this after the family formals, saying something like "Thank you so much for your time, Mrs. and Mr. Smith, please remember that I'll be here during the reception as well if you'd like any photographs with anyone who wasn't here at this time." That way the bride's mom knows she can approach me for a picture with her old friends, or the groom's dad knows that I can get that picture with his extended family that weren't invited to the formal session.



What do you do if the bride and groom ask for more "formals" during the reception? I tell them that I prefer to not be given a reception "shot list" of the bride's roommates from college and everyone who went to middle school with the groom. I tell them that if those images are important to them to designate a person from each group to make sure it happens during the reception. That takes the pressure and responsibility off of me. How can I be documenting the reception if I'm trying to round up fifteen middle school friends who are all at different tables, half of whom are at the bar, and the other half of whom are in the restroom? It shows the client that I am very willing to take those images, but puts the responsibility of getting them together onto someone else.

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CHAPTER NOTES





THE WEDDING SCHOOL

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THE
WEDDING SCHOOL

A GUIDE FOR WEDDING PHOTOGRAPHERS

We believe that wedding photography is important. We believe in the craft, the business, and the joy that wedding photography brings both photographer and client. Our long-term mission is to provide the education, community, support, and clarity of purpose that raises the standards of what it means to be a professional wedding photographer today. We want The Wedding School to become the industry benchmark for the type of honest, real-world education that the wedding industry needs.

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"Susan's writings have become the text book of my professional life. Your videos and other resources get right to the meat of the tools and techniques of wedding photography without all the unnecessary fluff. I'm a better and more confident wedding professional because of your dedication to this industry. Thank you!"

— KARENA DIXON



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan has been photographing weddings for almost fifteen years. She's won multiple awards at the WPPI 16x20 print competition including the Grand Award in Wedding Photojournalism. She's currently only a few points away from reaching Triple Master status, something she is quite proud of. Susan has been an educator for Photo Plus, WPPI, PPA, and Creative Live. Susan likes reading, annoying people by talking about crossfit, trying to persuade everyone in the world to listen to Hamilton, watching horror movies, sleeping with the lights on, and spending time with her husband, stepkids, daughters, and Chloe the dog.

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