

## THE WEDDING MC – your guide to a painless, enjoyable event

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Being the MC at a friend or family member's wedding is an honour, and one which shouldn't be taken lightly. Too often, wedding MCs decide to "wing it", and this can, unfortunately, have a very negative effect on how enjoyable the wedding reception is for the guests, and how well it flows. This brief guide is intended to highlight some of the responsibilities of the wedding MC, and to give some guidelines about how to ensure that the reception is memorable for all the right reasons.

Your job as MC encompasses several areas. You must do some legwork prior to the day to ensure that the event is set up for success. On the wedding day, you will be responsible for making important announcements and introducing speakers, as well as possibly making a toast yourself. Finally, the way you approach your time behind the mic will largely determine the *zeitgeist* (spirit of the people) attending the reception.

### PRIOR TO THE WEDDING

If you are lucky, the bride and groom will have hired a professional wedding planner. It will be his or her responsibility to deal with the flow of the evening, create an itinerary, and ensure that all speeches, toasts and traditions happen in a timely fashion. If this is the case, you should try to sit down with the planner (or chat via phone or e-mail) about 2-4 weeks in advance of the wedding. At this meeting, you can discuss the itinerary, the way the event should flow, and you can nail down your particular responsibilities for the day. The planner will be able to guide you through every step of your responsibilities and give you a hard copy of the schedule for the evening. Following this meeting, you can get started on your personal preparation, which will be discussed shortly.

If there is no professional wedding planner, your responsibilities are slightly more in-depth. It is crucial that **someone** thinks about how the reception will flow, who should speak, how much time each event should take, and where each event should be placed throughout the evening. These jobs may fall to you, in coordination with the bride and groom, and you should be prepared to play a role in the creation of the evening's itinerary. Should you find yourself in this position, try to sit down with the bride and groom about six weeks in advance to talk about the timing for the reception (when is dinner served, when is the dance starting, etc.), which traditions they want to include, who will be speaking, and their general vision for the reception as a whole. You may also need to plan a meeting with the catering manager at the venue to nail down some of the fine details of the schedule.

Early preparation is the key to ensuring that the reception goes as well as possible. It will help you stay calm on the day, and will prevent you from unintentionally sabotaging the most expensive party your friends/family will ever throw. If you've been chosen for this job, it's probably because you have a personal connection to the bride and groom, and they feel you would be a good candidate to provide the necessary blend of humour, banter and utilitarian announcements. Treat your duties as both a job and an honour, and you will help ensure that a

good time is had by all. Regardless of whether or not there is a wedding planner, you should spend some time on the following items prior to the wedding:

1. Meet with decision makers – this could include the bride and groom, their parents, the professional wedding planner, the catering manager or the venue’s wedding coordinator, the DJ or band leader, and potentially the other members of the wedding party. The following are the questions you should ask of these people:
  - i. Who is providing the sound system? What kind of mic will I be using (wireless or wired)? Will there be a podium?
  - ii. (If the DJ/band leader is providing the sound system) What time will the DJ/band arrive to set up?
  - iii. (If the reception venue is providing the sound system) What time can I get into the hall prior to the guests’ arrival?
  - iv. Can I do a sound check/familiarize myself with the sound equipment prior to the arrival of the guests? What time?
  - v. What time will guests arrive at the reception venue? How will they be directed to the cocktail/reception area?
  - vi. What time is the cocktail hour? What food and drink are being served?
  - vii. Who will announce the end of cocktail hour and ask guests to find their seats for dinner?
  - viii. How will the wedding party enter/be announced?
  - ix. What announcements need to be made before dinner? [Kissing game, location of washrooms, which tables eat first at buffet, what happens to the centerpieces at the end of the evening, what time the bar closes (it’s illegal in Ontario to announce last call at 1am, so announce it earlier, and sometimes the bar is closed during speeches), location of smoking area, etc.]
  - x. How is dinner being served? (Buffet, family style, plated, stations)
  - xi. Where will I sit during dinner?
  - xii. Who will be giving speeches or toasts? [Traditionally, and in order: toast to Bride and Groom (often given by Best Man), Groom’s Response, parents of Bride (traditionally they paid for the reception)] These days, traditions aren’t upheld as stringently, and anyone the bride and groom would like to speak may. Most often, it’s the Best Man, Maid/Matron of Honour, both sets of parents, and the bride and groom. However, anyone may speak; just advise them to keep it under five minutes. Half an hour of speeches at once is really about all the guests can focus on at one time.
  - xiii. Will speeches occur between courses of the meal, during dessert, or all at once after dessert? (It may fall to you as MC to advise people on the appropriate length for their speech. If so, recommend not more than five minutes for “official” speakers (see above), and preferably shorter than that for “additional” speakers (extended family, friends not in the wedding party). \*As a note, if there are too many speakers to be practical at the reception, suggest to the bride and groom that some of them speak at the rehearsal dinner the night before.
  - xiv. Would you like me to make a toast?

- xv. Are there any guests who've come from a long distance who should be acknowledged? Will there be any messages from guests unable to attend that should be read?
  - xvi. What will you do for a kissing game? (Does the venue prohibit clinking of glasses? If so, think about a trivia game, donation to a charity, guest demonstration of how they'd like the couple to kiss, etc.)
  - xvii. What ceremonies will be happening, and when? (Cake cutting, first dance, father-daughter dance, mother-son dance, wedding party dance, bouquet/garter toss, etc.)
  - xviii. Will there be a late-night meal? What time?
  - xix. Will the DJ/band leader take over as MC at some point? When?
  - xx. Is there a safe transportation option for inebriated guests? When will that be announced?
2. Create an Itinerary – if this job falls to you, not a wedding planner, create a clear, concise list of the order of events for the evening. Try to include appropriate timings for each major reception event. For instance, each course of a formal, plated dinner usually takes about half an hour, whereas people can move through a buffet much more quickly (depending on how the buffet is set up, and how easy it is for many guests to access at once). Weddings NEVER run precisely on time, but a general estimate of when events will happen and an attempt to stay **reasonably** close to this timeline will ensure that speeches don't run so late that there's no time for the guests to dance! Your list should include:
- i. start and end times of the cocktail hour
  - ii. the time guests are expected to move to the dinner space
  - iii. how and when the wedding party will enter
  - iv. dinner timings
  - v. when the cake will be cut
  - vi. time, order, and placement of each speech or toast
  - vii. first dance and other special dances
  - viii. bouquet and garter toss
  - ix. late night buffet
  - x. bar closing/last dance

When creating your itinerary, include your responsibilities, and be sure to make a note of each time you will speak or make an announcement. Leave space in the margin for last-minute scribbled notes to keep yourself organized. Make copies of the itinerary for the bride and groom to approve, and for anyone else who is an essential player in the progress of the reception.

If a wedding planner is creating the itinerary, be sure to get a copy in advance of the wedding, and highlight every point at which you'll need to make an announcement or keep the evening moving. Keep the itinerary on you all evening and refer to it regularly to ensure that things move on time.

3. Meet with or talk to members of the wedding party – you'll be introducing the wedding party as they make their entrance to the hall, so getting to know a bit about each of them

(including how to correctly pronounce their names!!) will help make your introductions more personal and interesting to the guests.

4. Go to the venue to check it out/test sound system/practice – being able to visualize the venue will be helpful when you’re imagining how the evening will go. Find the washrooms, determine where the bridal party will enter, locate the bar, the kitchen, the cocktail space, and any other areas that will be important to your duties during the reception. If possible, and if the venue is providing the sound system, test it out. Learn how to turn it on and off, and speak through it to get used to how your voice travels through the space. You may have to instruct other speakers at the wedding as to how the system works, so be sure you’re familiar.
5. Write out your “shtick”. This can include stories, anecdotes, and memorable moments in your relationship with the couple, advice for a long and happy marriage, poems, song lyrics or short readings about love and marriage, or tasteful jokes. If you are a genuinely funny person, inject some humour into your portion of the evening’s events. Guests will appreciate some levity, and it will help to move the evening’s events along smoothly and quickly. However, **please** keep the humour tasteful and consider your audience. The bride’s grandparents probably have very different sensitivities than the younger guests, and may be more easily offended. Keep any jokes appropriate to **all** of the guests, and avoid telling any stories that would be unduly embarrassing to any members of the wedding party. Certain stories might be better suited to the rehearsal dinner, or the party afterward, not in front of all the wedding attendees. If, however, you are not an up-and-coming comedian (be honest with yourself!), don’t try to become one for the reception. The best MCs are genuine and honest, so play to your strengths. If you’ve been asked to be the MC, it’s probably because the bride and groom feel that you could bring something special to the job. Perhaps it’s because of your close relationship with the bride, and that she’s always been able to turn to you for strength and advice, or maybe you’ve been a special role model in the groom’s life. Feel free to be honest and sincere about these relationships, rather than putting on a fake comedy show – your role will flow much better, and you’ll relate better with the guests, if you make an effort to be genuine and natural.
6. Attend rehearsal if you don’t know the wedding party – this will help you feel more comfortable, and you’ll have a chance to talk over the itinerary with the people who are making speeches and toasts.

## **AT THE RECEPTION**

It’s important that you arrive to the reception in a timely fashion. You don’t want to be running in at the last second, and then have to make an announcement to get the guests to find their seats. Give yourself adequate time to find your own seat, where you can leave your purse or anything else you may be carrying. Visit the washroom, have a quick walk around to make sure everything is in order, and look over your notes to ensure that you are prepared and calm. You should also do the following:

1. Speak to the DJ/bandleader – ensure that he/she has a copy of the itinerary, and that he/she is prepared to play the special songs requested by the couple for the entrance of the wedding party, the first dance, the bouquet and garter toss, and any other particular songs the couple have requested.
2. Ensure you're familiar with the sound system – if you haven't done this already, touch base with the hall's manager (if it's an internal system) or the DJ/bandleader (if he/she is providing it) to ensure that you know how to operate the system. You'll probably also have to instruct the people giving speeches as to how it works, so give some thought to how you'll do that.
3. Communicate with the bride, groom, caterers, and speakers – it's very important that everyone is on the same page throughout the reception. If, for instance, you announce that it is 8:23, and therefore time for the groom's parents to speak, but his father is in the washroom at the time, you will have just created an uncomfortable moment which you will then have to cover. Your job will be easier if you double check with the parties involved (usually the bride and groom) prior to announcing any big event. Have a look around and visually account for all VIPs before beginning each event, such as the first dance. If the bride's parents have stepped out for a moment, you'll probably want to delay the dance until they're back. Wedding guests have a habit of disappearing at inopportune times, and it's important that you try to keep track of them before proceeding with the reception events.
4. Communicate with the wedding planner – if you're lucky enough to have a professional planner on board, he or she will keep track of people for you, and tell you when it's time to proceed with speeches, or to the cake cutting. Be sure that you never make an announcement before clearing it with the wedding planner; he or she will have a sense of the overall picture, and will ensure that it is indeed the right time to make each announcement.

## **SPEAKING SUCCESSFULLY**

You've done all your preparation, you've learned how to say the names of the wedding party correctly, you've tested the sound system, and the reception has begun. In order to ensure that the reception runs smoothly and is enjoyable for all, keep the following in mind:

1. Be prepared! Have your itinerary with you, and ensure that you are prepared for each announcement you'll have to make. Do your homework about the venue and the wedding party, and things will probably run smoothly. However, there will be inevitable snags that nobody foresees. In your pre-wedding preparation, write out some "filler" in case you need to cover an unexpected situation, or wait for the groom to come back from the bar before making his speech! Prepare anecdotes, cute and personal (but appropriate!) stories about the couple, or a few tasteful jokes to be used to fill time if a snag arises. Unless you are very gifted at speaking off the cuff, a little preparation beforehand will help smooth out otherwise uncomfortable situations.
2. Stay calm – you're prepared, you're ready, and you'll be great. Breathe deeply, visualize your role going perfectly, and roll with the punches. If things don't go according to schedule, calmly try to get them back on schedule, and use your "safety" material to cover any unexpected moments. Find a friendly and supportive face in the audience (this could be your partner, friend, or anyone smiling), and speak to them until you feel more

comfortable making eye contact with the crowd as a whole. Smile, breathe, have a drink of water, and remember that you're special to the couple, and that's why you're here.

3. Speak clearly and slowly – practicing with the sound system will be helpful, in that not all microphones are built the same. Some require the speaker to be very close to the mic, and some will pick up your voice from farther away. Pace yourself, and don't let your nerves cause you to speak quickly or quietly. Take a deep breath and a drink of water, and be sure to enunciate each word carefully so that the guests can understand the words you spent so much time preparing.
4. Be careful with alcohol – you know yourself, and you know your limits. Don't feel you have to avoid alcohol all evening, but **please** moderate your intake. If you know that you tend to get tipsy after one cocktail, wait to have that cocktail until after your official duties are over. If, however, you are a bit more relaxed after one beer, have one beer, and wait until the DJ has taken over later in the evening to really let loose. Nothing is worse than drunken wedding speakers who become incoherent, obnoxious and inappropriate. Because you have been trusted with the job of helping the “official” part of the reception move along smoothly, take your responsibilities seriously and remain sober until your job is done. Everyone, guest and wedding party alike, will be thankful you did.
5. Be yourself – if you are genuine, honest, and sincere, you will ease for the guests to identify with, and they'll be supportive and receptive. Enjoy yourself; you'll be great!