



## Your ceremony your way: Tips to prepare for your best day

A complimentary guide to get you thinking about what a ceremony that is 'just right for you' will look like with some tips and answers to these questions:

- ? *What elements **must** be included in my ceremony?*
- ? *What **other** elements can I include in my ceremony?*
- ? *What **order** do things happen in a ceremony?*
- ? *What is the ceremony planning **process**?*
- ? *How do I decide on a **celebrant**?*

As your celebrant, I will provide you with more guidance, support and ceremony tips!

Make planning your ceremony easy:

1. First, connect with me for an obligation-free chat.
2. Second, once you've decided I'm a great fit for you, we'll work together to create a ceremony where everything is included because you want it to be.
3. Third, on your wedding day, you can relax and focus on each other, confident that your ceremony will be personal, memorable and just right for you.

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## Contents

Congrats.....	3
What elements must be included in my ceremony? .....	4
Marriage Legislation .....	4
Key terms and scope.....	4
Who can get married in Australia? .....	4
Legal elements to be included in the ceremony.....	5
Myth Busters.....	6
What other elements can I include in my ceremony?.....	7
Couple or Unity Rituals .....	7
Guest Involvement.....	7
Blending family .....	8
Disrupting tradition .....	8
Amazing experience .....	8
What order do things happen in a ceremony?.....	9
Sample Order for a Wedding Ceremony.....	9
What is the ceremony planning process?.....	11
How do I decide on a celebrant? .....	12
What next? .....	13

## ***Congrats***

***Your ceremony your way, means less stress for your best day!***

Hi, I'm Jacqui Retford of Canberra Civil Ceremonies.

Your wedding ceremony is too important to let uncertainty, indecisiveness or 'people-pleasing' dictate what it should be like.

I have put together these tips to answer some burning questions that I hope will help you start thinking about what a ceremony that is 'just right for you' will look like.

I believe that your wedding ceremony should include everything you want and nothing that you don't. As your celebrant, I will guide you and your partner with information about what legally needs to be included and I will help you to figure out what else has meaning for you both.

The problem is there are so many decisions to make, and so much information to sift through in limited time when you are planning a wedding which is confusing, stressful and overwhelming. It can make you feel reluctant to invest more time and energy into really working out what you want the ceremony itself to be like.

***Sometimes it's easy to lose focus on the fact that it is the marriage ceremony that is the difference between a wedding and a party!***

I have three wedding packages that offer services that differ based on the type of ceremony, level of detail and personalisation you want:

### **Completely customised celebration**

The "*we want a customised, creative, celebratory ceremony with loads of family, friends and maybe our pets*" type of wedding.

### **Intimate I Do's**

The "*we want a personal, intimate ceremony- maybe with some family and friends*" type of wedding.

### **Marriage Express**

The "*we just want to be legally married*" type of wedding.

To find out more about me, check out my services and fees on my [website](https://jacqui@canberracivilceremonies.com.au), email [jacqui@canberracivilceremonies.com.au](mailto:jacqui@canberracivilceremonies.com.au) or call me on 0414 798 898 to arrange an obligation free chat.



## *What elements must be included in my ceremony?*

Before you think too much about your vision for your ceremony, it's pretty important that you are clear on what needs to be included for it to be legal in Australia. The following aims to give you some information to help you understand the legal requirements to help inform your decisions about your ceremony.

### **Marriage Legislation**

The two main pieces of legislation that relate to marriage in Australia are the Marriage Act 1961 and Marriage Regulations 2017. It is the celebrant's job to ensure that your marriage is legal and that the requirements set out in this legislation is complied with.



### **Key terms and scope**

- **Solemnisation-** The Act and Regulations deal with the “solemnisation” of marriages. A most appropriate definition for this term in relation to marriages is from the Webster’s Dictionary: *“to celebrate or observe with dignity and gravity; to perform with ceremony”*.
- **Marriage-** Marriage, according to Australian law (set out in the Interpretation section of the Marriage Act 1961, *“is the union of two people, to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life”*).
- **Authorised celebrants-** There are four types of authorised celebrants that can solemnise marriages in Australia: Ministers of religion, State and Territory Officers, Religious Marriage Celebrants, and *Marriage Celebrants- which is what I am*.

To become a registered marriage celebrant, I needed to satisfy the Registrar of Marriage Celebrants (a formal APS position that sits within the Attorney-General’s Department) that I am not only over 18 (very much so!) and that I have the qualification (a Certificate IV in Celebrancy) and skills (extensive life and professional experience) and am a fit and proper person (as evidenced by police and reference checks).

A list of all marriage celebrants authorised to solemnise marriages is available on the Attorney-General’s Department website at:

<https://marriage.ag.gov.au/commonwealthcelebrants/other>

- **Where and when can you get married?-** You can be married on any day, at any time and at any place in Australia or within Australian territorial waters. Note there are some locations (e.g. ships and aircraft) that a celebrant will need to check and confirm for you to make sure your marriage is legal.

### **Who can get married in Australia?**

- You do not have to be an Australian citizen to be legally married in Australia, however there are some criteria that you must satisfy before a celebrant can marry you. Note that the fact that you are married **does not** give permission to immigrate nor confer Australian citizenship.

- Your celebrant will be able to provide you with some guidance but for specific advice regarding immigration law you should contact the Department of Home Affairs.
- To be legally married you must:
  - Not be lawfully married to somebody else.
  - Be of legal age (that is over 18 unless with a court order and parents' consent if one of the parties is between 16 and 18 and the other is over 18).
  - Not be in a prohibited relationship (these are set out in the Marriage Act s 23b (2)). Basically, it prohibits people marrying an ancestor, descendant or brother or sister (including adoptive relationships). However, marriage between first cousins is permitted. Your celebrant is responsible for ascertaining whether you can legally be married.
  - Both be granting real consent (that is not under duress or fraud or misunderstanding of the type of ceremony).
- The celebrant must also be satisfied that the marrying couple and the two witnesses are sober and understand the "nature and effect" of the ceremony. Another reason why it's smart to avoid or minimise any alcohol intake until after the ceremony!

### Legal elements to be included in the ceremony

The following is not negotiable, they must be performed for your marriage to be legal.

- **Monitum.** The celebrant must introduce themselves and use specific wording to describe the nature of the marriage relationship. This will sound like the following:

*My name is Jacqueline Retford, and as a Commonwealth-registered celebrant, I am duly authorised by law to solemnise marriages according to the law.*

*Before you are joined in marriage in my presence and in the presence of everybody here, I am to remind you of the formal and permanent nature of the relationship into which you are now about to enter. Marriage, according to law in Australia, is the union of two people to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life.*

- **Legal Vows.** The couple must say the following legal vows to one another in the presence of the celebrant and the witnesses. Although couples usually choose to say heartfelt personal vows, the following words are the only ones they are legally required to say in order to become married. You will note there are some very limited wording choices you can make:

*"I ask/call upon everybody here/ to witness that I, (name)/ take you, (name) to be my lawful wedded husband/wife/spouse/partner in marriage."*

- **Signing the paperwork.** There are three legal documents that require signatures by the couple, two people who have witnessed the monitum and legal vows, and the celebrant. This documentation is best completed either during the ceremony or immediately after so it can be submitted to the local Births, Deaths and Marriages department for formal registration of the marriage.

*That is literally it! For couples looking for a legal only wedding (my "Marriage Express" wedding ceremony package) these are the only elements that will be included.*

## Myth Busters

There are a whole lot of myths about what needs to be included in a marriage ceremony as a result of overseas television, tradition and lack of awareness.

Here are some ceremony elements that **DO NOT** need to be included *unless you want them*:

- **Exchange of rings**- this is completely up to the couple. If you choose to include it, a celebrant may combine a ring exchange with the legal vows, but it is not necessary. So, you can choose not to have rings at all, one party may receive a ring, or you can exchange something completely different and meaningful to you.
- **I Do**- this is known as “The Asking” in a ceremony and is often the part depicted as the central element for traditional ceremonies. Again, it’s up to you if you want to include this or not. And you can commit to whatever you want. For example, “Do you promise to never leave dirty dishes in the sink/always wait to finish your latest Netflix binge together/always share your chocolate chip ice cream”...you get the idea!
- **Personal Vows**- as indicated earlier, the only vows that must be made are the legal ones. If you would prefer not to have personal vows, you don’t have to!
- **“The pronouncement, the kiss and the presentation”**- these are not necessary parts of the ceremony, although many couples like the theatrics that come from the celebrant’s announcements like “I now pronounce you...married”, or “you may now kiss!” or “I present to you for the very first time...” it’s up to you whether and how these will be said, or choose not to include them at all.



As you work towards creating your ceremony, you will probably come across a whole lot of other myths.

Remember, if you like them- include them and if you don’t, then don’t!

## *What other elements can I include in my ceremony?*

It's all very well to believe that it's important for you to have "*your wedding ceremony your way*", but what if you don't know what that looks like for you?

Once you are clear on what you must have legally include in your ceremony, you can think about what else you would like to do. This is your chance to create a ceremony where everything is there because you want it to be. Not because it's tradition, or because someone else says you should, or because it is expected!

Following are some suggestions and ideas to get the creative juices flowing.

### **Couple or Unity Rituals**

Unity rituals symbolise the inseparable nature of marriage. They involve the couple each taking a separate ingredient and then merging them together to signify the blending of their two lives together. There are heaps of different symbols you can choose from:

- **Sand**- each member of the couple has a container filled with different coloured sand which is combined and mixed in a central vase or jar. This ritual can be expanded to include extended family like children or parents. The central jar can be sealed with wax after the ceremony as a keepsake. Alternatives can include water, wine, gin, whiskey or tea!
- **Candles**- the couple each take a tapered lit candle and simultaneously light what is known as the "unity candle". Variations can include significant others (maybe children, mums or a grandparent) lighting the tapered candles at the beginning of the ceremony.
- **Time capsule**- Meaningful items like love letters, keepsakes (e.g. shells or cards), and/or a bottle of wine are enclosed in a box at a point in the ceremony to be opened at a future anniversary. Especially appropriate for a ceremony at a vineyard!

### **Guest Involvement**

Your guests can participate and be included in aspects of your ceremony to add fun and engagement. There are so many opportunities to do this, some ideas to start you thinking are:

- **Ring warming**- The wedding rings are placed in a bag and passed around to the guests. When they receive the bag, the guests take a moment to make a wish/bless/send positive thoughts for the couple's future. They are then returned to the celebrant prior to the ring exchange.
- **Flexible crew**- If one or both parties are not fussed on having "attendants" they could provide roses/flowers at the end of the aisle and invite anybody to take a flower and proceed one of the couple down the aisle or join them at the front if they choose. For a more casual and fun ceremony!
- **Heads and tails to choose witnesses**- Traditionally the witnesses are identified by the couple well in advance of the ceremony. But if you are concerned that could put noses out of joint, you can make it a game of heads and tails during the ceremony so it's a matter of luck! All of the guests are invited to stand and the celebrant reads out questions previously prepared in consultations with the couple. For example. the couple met at (heads) a bar or (tails) online. The guests select an option and those who select the incorrect one sit down. Ultimately you have two guests standing who are your witnesses.





## Blending family

There are loads of ways you can acknowledge and include family members in the ceremony if that is important to you. Here are some ideas:

- **Vows**- Children, parents or even the community (all the guests) can be included by the celebrant asking them to pledge a vow of support to the couple by responding to a question with "We will".
- **Gift exchange**- The couple can give children a small present after the ring exchange. For example, a piece of jewellery, heirloom, book, compass, watch, necklace.
- **Family certificate**- The celebrant can create a separate "family" presentation certificate that the children (if old enough) can sign after the legal signing.

## Disrupting tradition

The beauty of having a "completely customised celebration" is that you choose what bits of tradition you like, and which you don't.

- **Arrivals**- There's no reason why both couples can't "walk down the aisle" together, or why multiple people can't accompany one or both, or decide not to have an aisle at all.
- **Gather round/Seating Circle**- Perfect for smaller, intimate weddings where the guests form a circle together with the couple rather than the traditional two sides of an aisle with couple out the front formation. You can even ask guests to share their thoughts on the couple (give them a heads up so they can prepare if you plan to use this option)
- **Vow order**- To add some spontaneity, the celebrant can flip a coin or get the couple to play scissor, paper rock to work out who says their vows first.

## Amazing experience

If you're feeling adventurous, the sky is the limit for what else you can include in your ceremony. Ideally you want to think of something that iconically represents you!

- **Bring your pet**- You can involve your fur baby/babies in the ceremony as ring bearers, other attendants or special guests.
- **Flash mob**- Create a magnificent choreographed "moment" during the ceremony- this could be singing, dancing or something else. For example, the attendants arriving, a song from the guests, the couple leaving.
- **Surprise wedding**- In Australia, you need to fill out legal paperwork at least one month before, so the surprise in this wedding is for the guests, not the couple! You could get them along on the pretence of it being an "engagement party", birthday or some other gathering. However, be mindful that the risk is that some people who might not have prioritised an engagement party might be devastated to miss your wedding!





## *What order do things happen in a ceremony?*

This can vary significantly depending on your wedding ceremony package. For a Canberra Civil Ceremonies “completely customised celebration” I will create the ceremony with you, so we can be very flexible about how we design your ceremony.

To give you a bit of an idea, we can base it on the following more traditional order of ceremony but remember we can delete items, move things around, or add elements (bearing in mind those legal bits explained earlier).

### **Sample Order for a Wedding Ceremony**

**Pre-ceremony housekeeping-** celebrant introduces themselves, advises any housekeeping like whether or not it is to be an “unplugged” ceremony (i.e. no phones or devices) and generally gets the audience warmed up and excited.

**Entrance-** also known as the processional. This will depend on the couple’s choice; if one or both parties are arriving this is when they do it (usually to some meaningful music- that could be anything from classical to punk rock!)

**Introduction-** celebrant provides a more formal introduction to the couple, welcome to the guests and if desired an acknowledgement of country.

**Personal story-** this is the opportunity for the couple’s personal story to be shared. It will be based on conversations held between the couple and the celebrant and usually includes a range of emotions from laughter to happy tears. The craft of the celebrant in bringing this story together is what makes the difference between a scripted cookie cutter ceremony and one that you and your guests will remember fondly for years to come.

**Ritual and/or Reading-** these can occur at various times throughout the ceremony. Examples of elements or rituals have been covered in the previous section. Some couples like to include readings, usually presented by a close family member or guest. Although there are numerous readings that you could use for your ceremony, the best ones are those that you select because they have some sort of special meaning or memory for you. Your celebrant can give you more guidance on this, as well as some considerations for skills to look for when selecting who might deliver a reading.

**The Asking-** this is another optional aspect of your ceremony but loads of couples want to do it. It makes you feel “more married”! This is the one where both parties respond with “I Do”. It can be to any question, commitment or promise. Traditionally it would be something like “do you, (partner A) take (partner B) to be your partner in life and your wife/husband?” To which A would reply “I do”, and then the same question would be asked of B to which they would reply “I do”.

**Monitum-** Now we get to the legally required bit! As discussed in *1. What elements must be included in my ceremony?* above, there is basically no wiggle room in what the celebrant must say in the monitum (see the script in *red* in the previous section).

**Exchange of Rings and Legal Vows-** In the same way as the words are scripted for the monitum, the “legal vows” are scripted too. You can choose between a couple of word options (also indicated in *red* in the previous section) but these vows must be said out loud (and heard) in the presence of at least the celebrant and two witnesses. You are not expected to learn the vows off by heart (in fact

it's not recommended- in a moment of stress you might miss a word and because it's the legal bit the celebrant will make you say it again!). Probably the easiest way is for the celebrant to ask you to repeat after them (and they should break it down so that you can do so).

Some couples like to combine this with the exchange of rings if they are having them, but it's not required. Rings are a symbol but the verbal vows are the only thing that are legally required. The celebrant can add some information about the history and meaning of the rings (or any other gifts the couple may choose to give each other) and then progress to the legal vows.

**Personal Vows-** this is the fun bit! You can choose to say some heartfelt personal vows, or not. Your celebrant should be able to give you some guidance and help on how to create these (you'll usually keep them a secret from your partner) and will make sure they are both about the same length and similar format.

**Pronouncement-** The exciting moment when the celebrant "pronounces" you, whatever you want them to! Partner for life, husband and wife, married (or other options you decide on).

There is an option here for a "kiss", but again you don't have to if you don't want to!

**Signing of Register-** There are documents that need to be signed by the couple, two witnesses and the celebrant for the marriage to be registered. These three documents are the two official marriage certificate forms and the presentation certificate that the couple take away (or give to someone responsible to look after for the rest of the celebration).

Most couples take a short pause in the ceremony to do this signing (it only takes a few minutes) when music can be played, the guests can chat and the couple gets a precious moment together before the whirlwind of congratulations begin. Some couples prefer to do this directly after the ceremony so as not to hold up the flow; however it is much trickier to get these key people back together to do this task afterwards. Have a chat to your celebrant about the pros and cons for each option.

**Closing Remarks-** The celebrant will gain the guests attention and provide some information about what's happening next (are the couple leaving or staying, will there be group photos, when and where will the reception or other activities be etc.) They will thank everyone for coming and wrap up the ceremony.

**Presentation-** If the signing has just been done, the celebrant may present the marriage certificate to the couple (again, optional). They will then say a couple of words like "A and B, on behalf of your family and friends, we wish you love and joy as you continue your lives together...please stand and join me in congratulating..." whatever way you want to be presented: Mr and Mrs, Misters or Mrs and Mrs, or the (surnames)- completely up to you.

**Recessional-** Couple leaves together to an upbeat song amidst cheers, claps and possibly bubbles or petals.

And that's it! A sample order of ceremony that you can use as a starting point for discussions between yourself and your partner and your chosen marriage celebrant, which leads to the next topic...

## What is the ceremony planning process?



## *How do I decide on a celebrant?*

Obviously, there is no right answer to this question. Your criteria for choosing your celebrant will be unique to you both. I suggest you consider the following when making this important decision:

- Don't lose sight of the fact that it is the marriage ceremony itself that is the difference between a wedding and a party- and your celebrant is the one who plays a major role in creating this for you.
- Don't just go for the cheapest option. It takes time (many, many hours!) for a celebrant to understand what is important to you and then to create a personal ceremony that is just right for you as a couple.
- Think about what attributes are important for you in a celebrant and then assess celebrants that you meet against that criteria. Some examples of celebrant characteristics you might consider are:

professional	organised	helpful
flexible	client focused	available/accessible
sensitive	knowledgeable	good vibes
supportive	sense of humour	connection
positive	punctual	Something else?

- What "style" of celebrant are you after? This is different from the attributes, it can relate to how they present themselves, how they speak, the messages you get from their face to face, telephone and/or online presence.
- Do they seem to know what they're talking about? If what you're after is some guidance and support you want someone who is clear on the process and can help you navigate it.
- Do they have the transferrable skills that they can apply to every aspect of your ceremony creation and delivery? A great celebrant will build a relationship with you and your partner; provide coaching, support and guidance; be organised and able to manage administrative and legal compliance; write accurately and creatively; and finally deliver a confident, engaging and well-presented ceremony- that's quite a list of skills to look out for!
- Often celebrants will advise you to find a celebrant who you "click" with. How do you feel when you meet up with them? Would you be comfortable telling them stories about yourselves? Do you think their personality and sense of humour is appealing? How confident are you they can carry out your plans and deliver your ceremony, your way?

There are plenty of registered celebrants because there are plenty of couples who want to get married. People are different, and it's completely okay to think that a particular celebrant is not the right celebrant for you.

By the same token, a celebrant might feel like you are not the right couple for them! If you receive this feedback from a celebrant, take it as an indication of their authenticity and genuine desire for you to get the right celebrant for your special moment.

## *What next?*

I hope that the information in this guide has answered some questions and got you thinking about your ceremony.

I am confident that with me as your celebrant, you will feel:

- empowered and supported as we plan and create your ceremony together
- relaxed and confident on your wedding day knowing the ceremony is everything you want
- delighted when you hear your guests raving about your personal and 'completely you' ceremony

I am always happy to chat with you about how I can help you create your ceremony, so if you want to stop stressing and start enjoying this really exciting time with your partner- looking forward to one of the most significant moments of your life- contact me now!

*Jacqui.*



*"I feel privileged to be part of the beautiful and powerful messaging that comes from two people in love who are making this personal, legal and public commitment to each other for life."*

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