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Bridesmaids: Etiquette Q&A

From fronting cash and choosing frocks to finding ways to smooth out tricky issues, managing your bridesmaids is no easy task. Whatever's eating you at the moment, these Q&As will help you figure out a plan of action.!!

Q. Most of my bridal party is from out of town. They will most likely need to stay in a hotel for two to three nights. Is it their responsibility to pay for their hotel rooms? Or is the onus on the bride's family? Also, would it be okay to split the cost with the attendants as a possible compromise?!!

A. Generally, the attendants are responsible for paying their own way, just like they pay for what they'll wear to your wedding and for getting there. And usually, if you have out-of-towners in for your wedding, you'll be able to reserve a block of rooms at a discount, which ought to help them save cash. Going halves is perfectly fine, but know that you and your family shouldn't be expected to pay.!!

Q. I'm scared to ask my sister to be in the bridal party because, come wedding time, she's going to be very pregnant. What is the proper way to handle a pregnant bridesmaid situation? !!

A. She can still be in the wedding party when she's pregnant! She can wear an empire-style dress: the waist hits right below the bustline and the dress falls from there, leaving lots of room for a pregnant tummy. Or, choose a maternity dress in the same color or fabric as the other bridesmaids' dresses. Then, on the wedding day itself, just make sure there's a chair she can use during the ceremony, so she won't have to stand the entire time. !!

Q. My friend, the bride, has gone berserk! I have never encountered a more selfish person in my life. I just broke up with my boyfriend and my parents are getting a divorce, yet every time I see her, she complains that I don't pay any attention to her (and this after I addressed all her invitations, went dress shopping with her six times, and threw two separate bridal showers). I'm starting to think that I should just tell her I don't want to be in her wedding anymore.!!

A. It's funny how slipping a ring on someone's finger can turn her into a fierce, self-centered creature from another planet. Weddings are unlike any other event in our lives. There's so much emotion and expectation inherent in the marriage process that sometimes brides can't see beyond themselves. It sounds like this particular gal could use a little perspective. However, dropping out of someone's bridal party is a very bold statement, devastating to the bride and sure to end the friendship. If you're not ready to give this friend up, you need to set her straight. If that doesn't work, she may not be worth having as a friend. If you want to keep her as a friend, be sensitive to her fragile emotional state and write the experience off. Once she returns from the honeymoon, she may be back to her old loveable self.!!

Q. Am I required to give my bridal team "thank you" gifts? How much do I spend?!!

A. Think of it this way -- your maids are majorly putting themselves out for you. To remain in their good graces, show your gratitude by gifting them properly. Many brides give out gifts at the rehearsal dinner. Sometimes it's something the girls can wear on the day of the wedding,

like a barrette or a bracelet. Other brides say thanks with a magazine subscription, wedding keepsakes, or special gifts handpicked with each attendant's interests/tastes in mind. As for a price range, it depends entirely on your budget. We think spending \$25-\$75 is a safe bet!!

Q. My 9-year-old daughter has asked to be the flower girl. She will be 10 (and almost as tall as I am!) at the time of the wedding. I would like her to be included in the ceremony, but I feel it may be more appropriate for her to participate in another way can she be a junior bridesmaid?!!

A. It makes more sense for your daughter to be a junior bridesmaid -- she'll feel too "little girly" as the flower girl. She can wear a dress similar to the other attendants. You might even consider having her serve as your maiden of honor. An adult will have to sign your marriage license as your witness, but your daughter can still be your honor attendant!!

Q. Help, help, help! I have four best friends and a sister and I am torn about who to ask to be in the wedding! It's not big enough to have them all (only 100 guests)!!!

A. Scrap the x amount of attendants to x amount of guests "rule." In your case, the proportion of five attendants to 100 guests is perfectly appropriate. And if these women are your best friends, that's reason enough to have them all in your wedding party!!

Q. One of my bridesmaids has dropped out of our wedding party. Is it okay to have two groomsmen walk with one maid?!!

A. Having two groomsmen escort a bridesmaid, one on each arm, is completely acceptable!!

Q. Is it appropriate to inform my bridesmaids of their traditional roles so that they are not confused? Personally, I would find it helpful, but others might find it presumptuous. How can I offer this information to my wedding party without sounding ungrateful to any assistance they may offer?!!

A. A fun and unthreatening way to let everybody know what her duties are (and/or what you expect of each of them) is to send out a newsletter detailing all to-dos and other essential information. That way, everyone is privy to everyone else's duties, and no one will feel as though she's been directly targeted. You're probably right that most people will find it helpful to have their responsibilities explained, because they might be fully in the dark. Be sure to include a huge "thank you" to everyone for being a part of the wedding early on in your newsletter -- your team will be much more receptive to a grateful-sounding summons!!

Q. We have decided not to have attendants. Each of us would like to be escorted down the aisle by both our parents. His mother says this isn't appropriate. I know it's unusual, but is there really a reason why we must have attendants? We will have our parents sign as our witnesses!!

A. The only thing attendants must do is serve as witnesses and sign your marriage certificate, and your parents can fill those roles. So no, there's no other reason that you need attendants in addition to your parents!!

Q. Who should I seat next to whom at the head table? Is it boy/girl, or all the bridesmaids on one side and the groomsmen on the other? Do I include the flower girl and ring bearer?!!

A. Technically, the head table is boy/girl -- starting with the best man next to the bride and the maid of honor next to the groom. But you don't have to do it that way -- you could put the women on the bride's side and men on the groom's, or let everyone sit wherever they want. Young children in the wedding usually sit with their parents at another table!!

Q. I asked my future sister-in-law to be one of my bridesmaids, and she gave me a very vague answer. How can I nicely encourage her to answer now? How should I handle her saying "no"?!!

A. Sounds like your sister-in-law-to-be is not enthusiastic about the prospect of being in your wedding. This does not mean she's evil, and you shouldn't feel slighted. Maybe the two of you don't know each other very well yet, or maybe she would feel better being with her own family on the wedding day instead of with your close female friends and relatives. Just call her and tell her that you're ordering the dresses now, and if she's not comfortable with the idea of being a bridesmaid, you understand. She'll probably be relieved to know you're not angry.

Q. What is the proper order in which to line up your bridesmaids and groomsmen? I was under the impression that you have them in the order of who is important in your life. Someone else said you put them in order by height.!!

*A. This can get sticky. Do the height thing only if you care about that sort of thing for the pictures, etc. That might save you some grief. If you go the other route, though, handle the "you're important to me" approach with care. You don't want to ruffle anyone's feathers. Maybe arrange the girls in order of how long you have known each bridesmaid: family first, then friends, and so on. But you see how even this plan has the potential to hurt feelings. Maybe the best thing to do is let your attendants decide the order among themselves.!!
ATTIRE!!*

Q. When selecting bridesmaids' attire, what is the proper etiquette?!!

A. There's no real etiquette on how much a bride should involve her bridesmaids in the choosing of dresses, but the more input she allows them the better. It's important for your maids to like the dresses and to feel comfortable. She could round you guys up and try to collectively agree on a style and shade. Or each of you could talk to the bride separately, expressing your preferences. On the first shopping trip, the bride may want to take just her maid of honor along to scout things out. Then, when they narrow it down to a few styles, the rest of you can try on the dresses and give opinions. !!

Q. Is it okay for bridesmaids to wear a dress that's similar to the bride's?!!

*A. Not only is it okay, some people would argue that it's absolutely necessary. No matter what the bride and her bridesmaids wear, the dress designs and styles should complement each other. Bridesmaid dresses that are too different end up looking bizarre.!!
MONEY!*

Q. Do bridesmaids have to pay for their own dresses? !!A. Bridesmaids are generally expected to pay for their own wedding-day ensemble (shoes and jewelry included). If you think the cost is going to be an issue, voice your concerns to the bride. Hopefully she'll choose a dress that's reasonably priced, or consider letting you choose your own. She may give you some color/style requirements (i.e., black and ankle length), and then each of you would choose something that suits your standards. That way, you decide how much to spend. !!

Q. Who pays for the bridal shower? Just the maid of honor? Can we ask for contributions?!!

A. Whomever is hosting the shower (it's usually the maid of honor with help from the bridesmaids) should handle footing the bill. So no, you shouldn't ask for contributions from guests, even if the soiree is at a restaurant. That said, there are many budget-friendly ways to plan, and maybe the bride's Mom or Grandma will slip you a \$20 or two.!

Q. Is it okay to charge per head at a bachelorette party, or does the maid of honor (and bridesmaids) foot the bill for all?!!

A. Unlike a shower, at which the hostess(es) pays for the party (that may mean the maid of honor or the MOH and all the bridesmaids), it's completely cool to ask everyone who comes to chip in for the bachelorette bash. But make it clear before the festivities begin. Inform all invitees what the plan is and how much the suggested contribution will be. No one should have a problem with it -- everyone wants to feel like she's showing the bride a good time.!

Q. I, along with a few of the other bridesmaids, will be coming to the wedding from out of town, and will need to stay in a hotel for two to three nights. I know that the bride's family has reserved some rooms, but whose responsibility is it to pay? Also, is there any way to split the cost as a possible compromise?

A. Generally, attendants are responsible for paying their own way for accommodations, just as they pay for their attire and transportation. The bride's family may have been able to reserve a block of rooms at a discount, which ought to help save you some cash. Going halves is perfectly fine if her family is game; just know that they shouldn't be expected to pay. Bunking with one (or two) of the other bridesmaids is another way to cut costs.!!

Q. Who pays for bridesmaids' hair and makeup?

A. If the bride wants her attendants to have their hair and makeup done professionally, it's a nice gesture for her to offer to pay for these services on the morning of the wedding. The attendants are already paying for their dresses and -- if they don't live in the wedding city -- for travel and accommodations. They should not be expected to pay for professional hair and makeup as well.

Cakes: Etiquette Q&A

In finished form, wedding cakes can have a dreamy quality, like something out of The Nutcracker Suite. Yum...but did you ever think dessert could get so complicated? If you're a little fuzzy on cutting and serving etiquette, read on as we clear up cake-related confusion.!!

Q. When should we cut the cake?!

A. Traditionally, the ritual takes place near the end of the reception, after guests have danced-off dinner. In fact, it's often a signal that the reception is coming to an end (usually there's 45 minutes left of dancing after the cake has been cut). Like other reception events, cutting the cake can be a clean, choreographed moment or a giggly, goofy one, depending on your preference. Customarily, the groom puts his hand over the bride's, and they slice through the cake's bottom layer with a fancy knife. After photos are taken, you two might want to serve slices to your in-laws before the rest of the cake is cut for all other guests. Knot Note: We do not recommend smashing cakes into each other's faces. If you feel so inclined to serve each other cake, please do so gracefully.!!

Q. How do we announce cake-cutting time and get everyone to focus their attention on the moment?!

A. Enlist your DJ or band leader to make a friendly, casual announcement between songs at a designated time, or have a family member alert the masses. Guests will certainly clear the dance floor to gawk at you -- they won't want to miss this sweet ritual. Sometimes guests take this moment as a cue to say good-bye by giving their "thank you for coming to our wedding" speech. To make sure guests keep on partying, confirm that the band will crank out more dance tunes immediately after the event.!!

Q. My future mother-in-law thinks a separate cake should be served for dessert in lieu of the wedding cake. She says it is a custom -- people like to take a piece of the wedding cake home with them as favors. What's the proper thing to do?!

A. The confection that is sliced up and taken home is more often the groom's cake. Superstition holds that if single women sleep with the slice under their pillow that night, they'll dream of their own weddings. The bride's cake -- the one the couple cuts at the reception -- is traditionally eaten as dessert. But bend the rules however they best suit your needs: You can serve both cakes as dessert so your guests have options; you can have your baker design mini versions of your wedding cake to be boxed as favors; or you can serve no cake at all (only other desserts such as pies and tarts and cookies).

Q. My fiance and I are planning a morning wedding with a brunch reception -- we are early birds, and it cuts costs. We're planning to serve scones, muffins, eggs, and bacon (the reception will be at 11:30) -- but I still want a cake! Could you suggest something light, so people won't be consuming massive amounts of sugar that early?!

A. Your guests won't mind consuming massive amounts of sugar around noon, no worries! Granted, you may not want a fudge-covered, dense chocolate ganache, but try a carrot, lemon, or angel-food cake, coffee cake, or even a cheesecake. Instead of sugar flower adornments, consider topping your cake with fresh fruit, which is both elegant and light.!!

Q. My mother insists that we serve dessert in addition to the wedding cake. But I think extra dessert is overkill -- and a waste of money. What do you think?!

A. There is no strict rule. Many couples do serve dessert in addition to their cake, especially if they've been fantasizing about lemon squares or make-your-own sundae stations. But extra dessert is in no way mandatory. These days, wedding cakes are scrumptious -- they're not often just for show. Most cake designers and couples fully expect them to be the primary dessert. However, you could meet your mother halfway by having the caterer serve a light dessert in addition to the wedding cake; perhaps even something that complements the cake flavors. Consider things like sorbet, chocolate-covered strawberries, or even a plate of cookies or various chocolates and mints.!!

Q. A friend of mine who recently married told me she got burned by a steep "cutting fee." We're on a tight budget and now I am worried -- what is she talking about? Will I have this fee?!

A. Some banquet halls and caterers tack a cutting fee onto the bill to account for the labor of serving a large confection, setting out special forks, and other wedding cake duties. An extra fee is standard if an outside source provides the cake, although it's somewhat unfair. The going rate? About \$1 per slice. Since you'll shell out a substantial amount for your cake in the first place, check to see if a cutting fee is itemized in your contract (read it carefully!). Try to have this fee removed: Argue that you're already paying big bucks for wait service. Besides, with all the requisite tips, everyone should be handsomely compensated.!!

Q. We're having a groom's cake, and I want my guests to take pieces home with them, but wrapping slices in napkins seems so tacky. I'd like to package them in a classy way. Any thoughts?!

A. Some couples package slices in personalized boxes and arrange them on the cake table after the cutting ceremony. Ask about bags or pouches; even colored cellophane with ribbon can look nice. Talk to your baker or cake designer -- he or she may be able to recommend vendors, quote prices, and maybe score you a discount. Make sure whoever is cutting the slices knows to tuck them into the little transports rather than serve them.

Flower Girls: Etiquette Q&A

Flower girls are adorable, but they do come with a wee bit of fine print. Who pays for her outfit? Where does she sit? Do the bridesmaids have to baby-sit her? For solutions to your flower girl dilemmas, read our roundup of etiquette Q&As.!!

Q. Can I have flower girls in lieu of bridesmaids?!

A. How sweet! In Victorian England, having child attendants was all the rage, and it's still a popular British custom. Your only problem? Making sure that the women (or men) close to you are still on board to help out with pre-wedding tasks, throwing a shower, and much more. Even the cutest flower girls in the world can't provide you with the help you'll need. So if you go the flower girl route, make sure to publicly thank the fairy godmothers who help to make your wedding happen (in the program or at the reception) and throw in a nice gift, too.!!

Q. My daughter is a flower girl in my brother's wedding. We've had conversations about her attire, but it's unclear who's paying. I want her to look picture perfect, too, but what's the deal?!!

A. Usually, child attendants' parents pay for their clothes, but the bride and groom will sometimes purchase a flower girl's dress (or a ring bearer's adorable little suit) as a gift. Ask your brother in plain terms, so that there are no misunderstandings. If they're receptive, maybe you can split it, or, you pay for dress, they pay for hat, shoes, etc. Just keep in mind that, like bridesmaids and groomsmen, agreeing to be in the wedding generally means you're willing to purchase an outfit. So, we say go for a multi-purpose gown (the wedding, birthday parties, holidays, etc.)!!

Q. There's some concern about inviting our 6-year-old flower girl (a cousin) to the rehearsal dinner, especially since the reservation is for 8pm. My fiance's mother does not want to invite her to the dinner because she is so young; my parents disagree -- she's part of the wedding party. I can understand both points of view, but I don't know what we would do with her after the rehearsal. Who makes the call? The host (my fiance's mom) or the couple?!!

A. There's no strict etiquette -- whether or not child attendants are invited to the rehearsal dinner is up to you ("you" meaning the couple and the hosts of the party, often the groom's parents). It's perfectly appropriate to invite her to the dinner, since she will be at the rehearsal -- especially if her parents will be there, too! Perhaps you and your fiance should try to broach this issue with his mom to see if you can change her mind. It might be a money thing or maybe she thinks the flower girl's a brat, who knows? Check in with the little girl's parents, too. Maybe they already have a plan (i.e., a babysitter is coming to pick her up at 9:30).

Q. I'm a bridesmaid, and the bride's having her baby sister as the flower girl. I mean, she's cute, but I really don't want to have to be in charge of policing a 4-year-old's every move. Is "babysitting" her one of my duties?!!

A. Yes and no. For the day of the wedding, the bride may ask you to check her sister's appearance before she goes down the aisle, smooth her braids, fix her hair ribbon, etc. You might also have to take her to the restroom a couple of times. You can handle this, we know you can! As for the reception, we think you're off the hook. Parents will probably take charge, anyway. When it comes to partying, you're free to run with an older crowd.!!

Q. Does the flower girl stand in the receiving line?!!

A. Not usually, but if she's daughter to one of the newlyweds, then she should definitely be included. This is a big day for her, too.!

Invitations: Etiquette Q&A

Wording, addressing, sending, and replying to invitations can be a tough nut to crack, but eventually you'll have to ignore the headache and confront these issues. The concerns and confusion may seem beyond escape, but we've got your back big time. Scan these etiquette Q&As for solutions to your most pressing paper-related problems.!!

JUST BEGINNING!

Q. How far in advance should you send invitations? What is the proper date to ask for the reply card?!

A. Ideally, invitations should go out six weeks before the wedding -- that gives guests plenty of time to clear their schedules for the day and make travel arrangements if they are out-of-towners. It also lets you make the RSVP date a little earlier -- say three weeks before the wedding date -- so you can get a final head count and start making a seating chart (if you'll have one) before the final-week-before-the-wedding crunch begins. At the very latest, guests should receive invitations six weeks in advance, and you should get responses back two weeks before the big day.

Q. We're in a tizzy over announcements versus invitations. The groom grew up in a very small town 2,000 miles away from the wedding city. We're afraid that feelings will be hurt if we don't invite everyone from his hometown, but we know the trip will be impossible for 95 percent of them. Help!!

A. Even if you're pretty sure certain guests won't be able to attend the wedding, it's a nice gesture to invite them -- who knows, they might decide to attend. And if not, they'll feel good knowing that they were invited. Announcements should be used to let friends, family, and possibly professional colleagues who were not invited to the wedding for whatever reason -- budget constraints, etc. -- know that the wedding took place. Invitations are sent to those people whom the families want at the wedding. Let the recipients decide on their own whether they can attend or not. If you're right and most of them can't come, you might consider having a second reception or party in the groom's hometown after the couple returns from their honeymoon.!!

PROPER WORDING!

Q. We are paying for our own wedding, and both of the families are giving us some money to help. We would like our invitation to show that both sets of parents (with their names mentioned) along with the bride and groom are hosting the wedding. Is there a way to word this?!

A. Sure, try this: !Tina Maria Smith !and !John Michael Douglass !together with their parents ! Barbara and Robert Smith! and !Bob and Jane Douglass !request the honor of your presence!!. This wording suggests that you two are hosting in conjunction with your parents. Also, keep in mind that "hosting" can have flexible meaning. Parents can be official hosts -- they planned the party, they invited the guests, they paid -- or honorary hosts.!!

Q. I am coordinating a friend's wedding and have been asked to do the wording for her invitations. She and her fiancé are sponsoring their own wedding, but both want to honor their parents. The bride's mother is deceased; however, she wants her mother's name to appear on the invitation. What is the proper way to do this? Is it proper to mention a deceased parent in this way?!

A. The invitation is issued by those who are hosting the wedding -- someone who has passed away unfortunately can't do so. Perhaps you can suggest that she write a tribute to her mom to include in her ceremony program. Or maybe a candle is lit for her, her favorite

song is played, or her favorite piece of scripture is read, and the significance is noted in the program. The bride may even want to give a toast at the reception, during which she remembers her mother. Try to explain to her that including her mom's name on the invite will seem awkward to guests; it's better to remember her mother on the occasion of the wedding, when the gesture will seem beautiful and moving, instead!! As for honoring parents on the invitation (assuming her dad is still alive), you might suggest this:!
Jane Marie Darling ! and !John Michael Rooney! together with their parents!. This way, all the parents are honored (you could even argue that the spirit of mom is included in that simple sentence), but you don't get into specifics.!!

Q. We are having a Saturday afternoon reception that includes a cocktail hour and a full dinner. How do I let guests know that it's not just an afternoon informal brunch? I would like it to be formal attire but not black tie.!

A. One of the best ways to let guests in on the fact that the wedding is formal is with the invitations. Get ultra-formal, traditional ones -- on white, ivory, or ecru paper, with the wording done in black script, maybe even with a gold or silver border -- and that should do the trick. Give your guests the benefit of the doubt, too -- if they receive a formal invite from you and read where your wedding is being held, you can probably trust them to dress appropriately.!!

Q. We are getting married at a local hotel located on the beach. The ceremony will be held outside, with the reception following in a banquet room inside. It seems almost silly to have a separate reception card with the same location, but I have no idea how to put it all on the wedding invitation. Any ideas?!

A. All you have to do is add a single line to the bottom of your ceremony invitation:
"Reception to follow." It's invitation parlance for "The reception is in the same place." Just make sure your ushers know where to direct guests after the ceremony, so they're all taking the most convenient route to the reception area.!!

ADDRESSING THE INVITE

Q. Do couples who live together but aren't married receive a single invitation or separate invitations?!

A. Unmarried couples who live together receive a single invitation because they are a couple. Address it the same way you'd address the invitation of a married couple with different last names -- alphabetically, on separate lines on the outer envelope:!
Ms. Janine Myers! Mr. Richard Stevenson! The inner envelope would read:!
Ms. Myers and Mr. Stevenson! or!
Janine & Richard!

Q. How should you address an invitation to a widow? What about a divorced woman who has retained her married name? And what about those who are bringing significant others who do not live with them? Can I send just one invitation or do I have to send one to each of them?!

A. A widow is traditionally addressed as "Mrs. John Jones," but if you feel the guest may not want to be addressed that way, it's totally okay to ask her how she prefers to be addressed. A divorced woman who has kept her married name should be addressed as you suggested -- "Ms. Jane Johnson." As far as a couple who does not live together, technically you should send each their own invitation, but it's not horrible to simply send the invite to one of them -- say, the person you're closer to -- with both names listed alphabetically (each on its own line) on the outer envelope.!!

Q. How do you address an invitation to a married couple, both of whom are doctors?!

A. If a wife and husband are both doctors, the outer and inner envelopes should be addressed to: "The Doctors Rosenthal." It's that simple! If they're married, but have different

last names, list both names, in alphabetical order (on separate lines): "Dr. Rosenthal" and on the next line, "Dr. Schwartz".!!

Q. What if the woman is a doctor and the man is not? Does the woman's name come first because of her title?!

A. Yes, the spouse with the professional title is listed first. Outer envelope: "Dr. Kate Randolph Mr. Brian Randolph." Or, "Dr. Kate Randolph and Mr. Brian Randolph" (if it fits on one line). The inner envelope would read: "Dr. Randolph and Mr. Randolph" or "Dr. and Mr. Randolph."

Q. How do I address an invitation envelope to a lesbian couple? I want to invite my sister and her partner, who had an exchange of vows ceremony a few years ago, where my sister took her partner's last name.!

A. You have a couple of options, depending on how formally you want to address the envelopes. Because you won't be saying "Mr. and Mrs.", for a formal invite you'll probably want to address it this way: "Ms. Joan McDermott Ms. Theresa McDermott." This way, you're not saying "Ms. and Ms.", which would sound awkward. Joan comes before Theresa alphabetically. Another option, if you don't want to use titles or put the two on separate lines, since they are, in effect, married: "Joan and Theresa McDermott." No matter which way you address the outer envelope, the inner envelope should read: "The McDermotts."!!

Q. We're having a small wedding. Do we have to invite Mr. Smith "and Guest"? One friend told me that if a guest is not seriously dating someone, I can just address the invite to Mr. Smith, and he'll know he's not supposed to invite someone. Is that true? What do I do if such guests reply for two anyway?!

A. Most guests will understand that without "and Guest" or another name on the invitation, it's meant for them alone. Especially if you are having a small wedding, you probably aren't going to invite everyone to bring an escort, unless it's a fiancée and/or a serious significant other. Technically, you're never supposed to write "and Guest"; instead, you should find out the name of the significant other. What to do if some clueless souls reply for two? Call them up and explain that you're having an intimate wedding and, unfortunately, you were not able to invite everyone with a guest. They should understand that.!!

Q. Is it improper to have the outside envelope addresses printed in a fancy font on the printer, or should they be handwritten?!

A. Some will say a font that looks amazingly like cursive writing is acceptable, but we don't necessarily agree. Etiquette does say that you should never print addresses with a computer, but always handwrite them. Remember, a wedding is an extremely intimate and personal event, and your invitations should reflect that. If it's a matter of time -- or you've got 500 invitations to address -- enlist the help of your mom, your sisters, your bridesmaids, and anyone else who's got nice handwriting to plow through them. It's just one of those polite, personal, I'm-a-great- hostess touches that isn't totally obvious -- unless such touches are absent, in which case they're glaringly obvious.

Q. Do you put a return address on the wedding invitations?!

A. You don't necessarily have to have one printed on your outer envelopes (that would probably up your invitation costs), but it's a good idea to handwrite a return address on the back flap. Just in case you get a guest's address wrong, the post office will know where to return the invitation. The return address should be that of the person whom you've designated to receive response cards -- be it the bride's mother, the groom's mother, or the couple themselves. The response card envelope or postcard should be printed with this address.!!

RESPONDING TO AN INVITE!

Q. What do RSVP and "Regrets Only" mean? Also, do you have to respond if not attending?!

A. RSVP is short for the French phrase, "Repondez, s'il vous plait," which means, simply, "Please respond." That means you should respond either way, whether you're able to make it or not. If the couple has included a response card or postcard with the invitation, it's easy -- just send the card back saying you will or will not attend. (If there's no response card included, you should send a note letting the couple know whether you'll be there.) If you don't respond, the couple will be forced to call you to verify your attendance. Don't give them more to do -- just send your card back. "Regrets" or "Regrets Only" means that only guests who can't make it need to respond. This way, the couple assumes that if you don't respond, you are coming.!!

Q. What are the etiquette rules on response cards?!

A. The first thing you should do after receiving a wedding invitation is respond promptly -- everything, from seating arrangements to placing the liquor order, is riding on your response. If an RSVP card is enclosed, feel free to add a more personal note of congratulations or explanation of regret. If a blank reply card is enclosed, you must write a response on the card in language that mirrors that of the invitation. A response to a formal invitation would read:!
Mr. and Mrs. Robert Block! accept with pleasure !the invitation of! Mr. and Mrs. Joel Smith! or Saturday, the second of June! at six o'clock!! For an informal invitation, the response could read something like this:!
Dear Anne,! Zack and I can't wait until the big day!! We look forward to seeing you on June 2.!Congratulations!!!

STICKY SITUATIONS!

Q. My parents' friend called to say that her daughters and their husbands have not received invitations to the wedding. They didn't receive invitations because we didn't invite them. Should we? We invited them both to the engagement party and the shower. Are we obligated to invite them to the wedding even if we aren't close to either daughter?!

A. If they were present at your shower, you really should invite them. Shower guests should always be only people you're planning on inviting to the wedding. Here's why: The s hower is, by definition, a gift-giving party -- an opportunity for your closest friends and relatives to help outfit you for your new home and life. If you invite someone to the shower but not to the wedding, they may feel as though they were only invited to the shower (and engagement party, for that matter) because you wanted gifts from them. These are your parents' friends' family, so these guests probably should have been on your parents' section of the guest list. This decision is now up to you -- if you don't invite them, you (or more likely, your parents) may face conflict with them.!!

Q. Although my brother is marrying out of my family's faith, my parents (and family) have tried to be very supportive. My grandmother has just received the invitation and it says, "Bride's parents invite you to the wedding of bride and groom," with no mention of my parents. My parents are very hurt. The only thing we can think of is that in the bride's faith it isn't customary to include the groom's parents' names. Is that true?!

A. A "traditional" Christian wedding invitation does not include the groom's parents' names. This harks back to the concept of the bride's parents "giving her away." These days that's no longer the case, and many couples include all of their parents' names on the invites, but it sounds like your brother's fiance's family went the traditional route and were not aware that it would offend your parents. Since not much can be done now, hopefully your parents will see that it was probably an oversight due to your families' different backgrounds, and not more than that. Encourage your brother and his fiance to make a special toast to honor your parents as well.

Maid of Honor: Etiquette Q&A

She's head honcho, leader of the bridesmaid pack, and official right-hand-woman to the bride. But it's never as simple as that. Here, we address all maid-of-honor matters, from fronting cash to handling those feelings of frustration.!

Q. I'm pleased to be the maid of honor, but I'm stressed about paying for the shower and bachelorette party on top of the Italian satin gowns she wants us to wear! Am I on my own in terms of footing the bill?

A. The bridesmaids are definitely expected to chip in, and if you need to make this explicitly clear to them, do so. Why not send out a cheery, cute email listing everyone's contact info and important events. Explain that expenses will be shared equally among the girls. Instruct them to save all receipts for decorations, gag gifts, shower invites, etc. (you do the same). You'll be in charge of tallying totals and hashing out who owes what. Just think, once it's a given that everyone's paying, you'll be in a better position to enjoy the experience. If moola is an issue for all of you, commit to a budget and work from there. It's just a matter of getting everyone on the same page. !!

Q. My best friend is a guy, and frankly, he's the only person I want to stand up for me as my honor attendant. Is this outrageous? I can't very well put him in a bridesmaid dress. How do I handle this?!!

A. Call him your honor attendant, your man of honor, or best person. More and more brides and grooms are having close friends of the opposite sex stand up for them. The nitty gritty? He should wear whatever the groomsmen are wearing (no, he doesn't have to don a dress), and don't make him throw you an ultra-girly shower -- i.e., make sure his role makes him comfortable. Also let your photographer know that he should be photographed as one of your attendants in group wedding-party pictures, so he doesn't get shoved in with all the groom's guys. !!

Q: My future daughter-in-law has chosen her mother to be the matron of honor. Is this an acceptable choice?!!

A: Absolutely. The honor attendant is the woman the bride feels closest to, and many women have been heard to say that their best friend is their mom. What a lovely honor to give her on the wedding day. We've heard of grandmother honor attendants, too. Sometimes blood really is thicker than water.!!

Q: My 10-year-old daughter is in my wedding as a junior bridesmaid, but I was wondering if there is such a thing as a junior maid of honor? My sister is my maid of honor, and will be handling the pre-wedding planning. !!

A: A young girl in the role of honor attendant would be called a maiden of honor, and you can absolutely give your daughter that title while your sister remains maid of honor. !!

Q. I'm the maid of honor in the wedding of my best friend from high school. The other bridesmaids are friends she made at college, etc. It's hard to coordinate with a group of women I don't know, and my friend is doing very little to bridge the gaps. For example, she keeps stressing how "weird" it is that I don't know any of her friends. I just told her I wanted to host the shower (in her hometown), and she said she didn't think that was a good idea since she and the other girls want to have it at their favorite restaurant (in the town where they live). I'm supposed to be leader of the bridesmaids, but I just end up feeling excluded. Should I throw in the towel altogether?!

A. Since your friend is doing nothing to merge past and present, why not organize a casual pizza party or bagel brunch for the bridal team -- just for the sake of getting to know everyone? That will make planning the shower, fittings, and bachelorette party together a lot easier. However, if no one cooperates, it's time for a heart-to-heart with the bride. She needs to know that she's hurting your feelings. Perhaps she's just so caught up in wedding planning that she doesn't realize she and the other girls are being exclusive. If talking doesn't change things, it's up to you whether or not to bag the wedding. !!

Q. I want to honor both my sister and my best friend with the title of honor attendant. Will etiquette let me get away with having two?!!

A. There's absolutely no reason you can't have two maids/matrons of honor. These are the two women you feel closest to, and you want them by your side on your wedding day. Just be aware that they may squabble over honor attendant duties: who gets to hold the ring, the bouquet, stand right next to you, sign the license, etc. Just tell them what you specifically want each to do for you. !!

Q. I have to have two maids of honor -- my older sister, who's like a second mother to me, and my younger sister (we're basically twins - I'm 8 months older). Who is more honored when it comes to the ceremony? How are we going to pull this off?!!

A. It's up to you and your two honor attendants to decide who walks where and does what during the ceremony (adjust your train, hold your bouquet, hand you the groom's ring, etc.). This can be tricky, because there's lots of pride and jealousy involved. You and your sisters should probably sit down together and decide on responsibilities. That way you'll see what's important to everyone (maybe one sister couldn't care less about holding your bouquet, while the other is dying to do so). If you feel you need to come up with extra duties so that each sister will feel needed and special, do that. Maybe one can light a candle, read a poem, or participate in an ethnic or cultural ceremony ritual.!!

Q. I'd like my maid of honor to stand out from the others. How can I have her dress be different but in keeping with the conventions of the others?!!

A. There are lots of ways you can make your MOH stand out. If you decide that all three maids will wear the same dress, consider a matching scarf, jacket, or wrap for your honor attendant. Or perhaps she can wear a dress in the same color as the others but in a slightly different style -- maybe the maids' gowns have cap sleeves, and hers is strapless. Or put all the maids in the same style dress, with your honor attendant in a different but complementary shade of blue. Another option? Have her don a tiara or hold a slightly different bouquet.!!

Q. On the day of the wedding, how much do I really have to "attend" the bride? Are we talking every second?!!

A. That will depend on how high maintenance the bride is. She may want you to sleep over at the hotel with her, take her calls while she's in the shower, run out to get her cigarettes, and more. Plan on being there for her from the moment she wakes up to the moment she walks down the aisle. Some brides may just want moral support, help with buttons, and honeyed words. Others may be more demanding. Either way, it's going to be a very exciting day for both of you. Try to get psyched.!!

Q: Is it customary for the maid of honor to give a speech at the reception? Should I be prepared just in case?!!

A: It's definitely a trend for the maid of honor to go head-to-head with her male counterpart in toasting the newlyweds. It's not mandatory, but it's a wonderful idea -- why should the best man speak while the maid of honor remains silent? If you want to make a toast, it's a good idea to prepare in advance. Think about your relationship to the bride, some of the highlights

of your friendship, the first time she told you about her fiancé, and consult romantic literary passages and favorite love songs for inspiration.

Receiving Line: Etiquette, Options & Tips

What they say about weddings is true: It'll all be over before you know it. So then how can you ensure you'll get the chance to talk to each and every guest before the bell tolls? Enter the receiving line -- the most formal and efficient line dance you'll ever do. Here's how to connect with your company, and give guests your most heartfelt greetings and gratitude!!

Why Have One?! A receiving line is the best opportunity to greet each guest individually and thank him or her for coming to your wedding. And if you're having more than 50 guests, it's considered proper etiquette. The line also guarantees your guests a minute of face-to-face time with you, a chance to hug, kiss, and congratulate you both, and to say things like "The ceremony was lovely." If you rely instead on the more casual greet-them-as-you-see-them approach, you may spend the whole party in a tailspin, ducking out of conversations to say hello to people you haven't greeted yet, and inevitably you'll end up missing someone!!

When & Where?! Generally the receiving line is formed immediately following the ceremony or at the beginning of the reception. You'll want to take spatial constraints into consideration when choosing where to line up so that family and bridal party members aren't standing on top of each other and guests have room to move in a smooth, orderly procession (which in turn makes the line go faster so you can all get on to the party). Proper ventilation is also crucial to avoid sweaty brows and swooning bridesmaids. The most commonly used ceremony site areas include the hallway or vestibule at the head of the aisle, outside the entry doors, down the front steps, or on the front porch. At your reception site the options are many, depending on the party space: consider the cocktail lounge, the lobby, just outside the doors leading into the main room, or the reception room itself, perhaps on the dance floor. Ultimately, pick a spot where you and your guests can stand comfortably for the duration!!

Who Stands in it?

Traditionally, the bride's parents -- as hosts -- head the receiving line and are first to greet guests, followed by the bride and groom and then the groom's parents. Many lines we've seen also include the entire bridal party (if there's room), and sometimes even grandparents (if they're able). Today, however, with more couples contributing to or paying for their own weddings, the lines have blurred (so to speak). The couple may wish to stand alone, especially if the majority of guests are their friends, or they may stand with just the moms while the dads circulate among and welcome the crowd during the cocktail hour!!

Divorced & Remarried Parents! This may be one of the stickier situations you'll encounter when orchestrating the big day, and the resolution often depends on the relationships between the relevant parties. If your parents are divorced, they should not stand next to one another in line -- even if they are sharing hosting duties -- as this gives the impression that they are still a couple. Instead, place Mom on one side of you and the groom, then the groom's parents, then Dad. If this arrangement doesn't sit well, consider placing another family member or an honor attendant between them. And what about stepparents? Should you include them too? That depends: Do you have a good relationship with them? Is your mom/dad capable of sharing this duty with your stepmom/dad with civility and grace? You should strive to make everyone feel as comfortable as possible. If this arrangement gets the green light, simply have your father stand with his new wife, and your mother with her new husband. This way guests will understand the relationships!!

Introductions All Around! The receiving line is where your hosting duties as the bride and groom kick off. It'll no doubt be a whirlwind of faces, but as much as possible you should introduce your new spouse and your parents to all the guests they have not yet met. First names and the guests' relationships to you should suffice. Likewise all guests should take it upon themselves to offer this same information as introduction to attendants and family members whom they've never met as they proceed down the line; simply shake hands, offer congratulations, and keep moving. The bride and groom need only accept everyone's hugs, kisses, and best wishes, and thank them for coming. It's that simple. And yes, you'll end up with a lot of lipstick on your cheeks, but fear not -- you're allowed to make a bathroom pit stop before heading to the party!!

Variations on a Theme

As is common nowadays, traditions such as the receiving line are ultimately open to interpretation. Depending on the size of your guest list, you may opt to greet guests in other ways. One couple we know personally dismissed guests from their seats right after the ceremony, one row at a time (although we wouldn't recommend this for gatherings of more than 150 people, or if guests have to remain seated -- and suffer -- through hot sun, rain, strong winds, or other inclement conditions). If you have fewer than 50 guests, you might decide to turn cocktail hour into the meet-and-greet opportunity instead of a formal receiving line. Whatever you choose, the basic tenets still apply: Greet each of your guests in turn and thank them for joining you on this joyful occasion.!