

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FROM YOUR CELEBRANT

WRITING YOUR VOWS

Prompts, structure and examples — plus the words the law actually requires you to say.



BEFORE YOU START

Writing your vows is the task couples put off longest. It's usually the last thing on the list and the first thing that causes a small, quiet panic at eleven o'clock at night three weeks out.

So let me take some pressure off straight away. Your vows do not need to be beautiful. They need to be true. I have stood beside couples through vows that were three sentences long and watched a hundred people cry, and I have listened to elaborate, carefully crafted vows that landed on nobody because they didn't sound like the person saying them.

The best vows I hear are specific, honest and slightly shorter than the couple expected. That's the whole secret. Everything in this guide is just a way of getting you there.

You're in good company, too. In 2026, only about **one in ten** Australian couples used traditional vows alone. Around **four in ten** wrote something entirely their own, and close to **half** blended personal words with the traditional ones.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

- Part One** The only part that isn't optional. Read it first.
- Part Two** Eight steps for getting words onto the page.
- Part Three** Prompts to write into directly.
- Part Four** A structure you can borrow, and examples in four tones.
- Part Five** The day itself — the practical things nobody tells you.





PART ONE

01

THE WORDS THE LAW REQUIRES

Most vow guides skip this, because most of them are written for American couples. In Australia, there are words you must say.

THEY AREN'T OPTIONAL, AND THEY AREN'T UP TO ME

Under the Marriage Act 1961, each of you must say to the other — in front of me and your two witnesses — words to this effect:

I call upon the persons here present to witness that I, **[your full name]**, take thee, **[their full name]**, to be my lawful wedded wife / husband / spouse.

A FEW THINGS WORTH KNOWING

- ✓ **You choose the term.** Wife, husband or spouse — the term you use isn't determined by anyone's gender, so pick whichever fits you.
- ✓ **'Or words to that effect'** allows a little flexibility in phrasing. What can't change is the substance: you must call on those present to witness, and clearly state that you are taking this specific person as your spouse.
- ✓ **It can't become a question and answer.** I'm not permitted to ask 'do you take this person', with you replying 'I do', as a substitute. That exchange is a lovely tradition and we can absolutely include it — but it sits alongside the legal words, not instead of them.
- ✓ **Use your full names** exactly as they appear on your Notice of Intended Marriage.

I'll also be required to say a short statement called the **monitum**, which explains the legal nature of marriage in Australia. That one's mine to worry about, not yours.



HOW THE LEGAL WORDS AND YOUR OWN WORDS FIT TOGETHER

This is the question I'm asked most, and the answer is simple: you say both. The usual order is the legal words first, then your personal vows immediately after — so the legal requirement is met, and then you get to say what you actually want to say.

ON THE DAY, IT SOUNDS LIKE THIS

- 01** I introduce the vows.
- 02** I feed you the legal words a line at a time, and you repeat them.
Nothing to memorise.
- 03** You read your personal vows from a card or a book.
- 04** Your partner does the same.

If you'd rather not speak publicly at all, legal vows alone are completely valid and always have been. Nobody in the audience will know or mind.

SO THERE IS NO WRONG ANSWER HERE

Legal words only.

Short, dignified, done. A genuinely good choice.

Legal words plus personal vows you've written and read aloud — the most common option.

Legal words plus promises you repeat after me — personal content, nothing to hold or memorise.

Legal words plus vows you've written together and both say identically — lovely if you'd rather not write separately.



PART TWO

02

EIGHT STEPS TO A SET OF VOWS

From a blank page to a minute of words that sound like you. In order, and none of them take long.



01 — AGREE THE GROUND RULES FIRST

Before either of you writes a word, have a five-minute conversation and agree on three things: roughly how long (one minute each is a good target), the tone (funny, sincere, or a bit of both), and whether you're sharing them beforehand or keeping them secret.

This matters more than any writing advice I can give you. The most common vow problem I see isn't bad writing — it's mismatch. One partner delivers two minutes of heartfelt tears, the other delivers twenty seconds of jokes, and both feel a bit strange about it. Five minutes of agreement now prevents that entirely.

02 — START WITH THE STORY, NOT THE PROMISES

Don't sit down to write vows. Sit down and write about them. Ask yourself:

- Where were we when I realised this was different?
- What did I think of them the first time we met, and how wrong was I?
- What's a completely ordinary Tuesday with them like?
- When have they been at their best? When have they got me through something?
- What do our friends say about us?

You're looking for one small, specific, true thing. Not 'you're always there for me' — everyone says that, and it means nothing. Something like the drive home from the hospital, or the way they text you when they've arrived somewhere, or the fact they learned to make your grandmother's biscuits. Specific beats poetic every single time.

03 — SAY WHAT YOU LOVE, PRECISELY

Write down five things you love about them, then cross out any that could be said about someone else's partner. Whatever survives is what belongs in your vows.

A test that works: imagine describing them to someone who has never met them, and you have thirty seconds to make that person understand why. What do you say?

04 — MAKE PROMISES YOU'LL ACTUALLY KEEP

A vow is a promise, and the good ones are the ones you can imagine keeping on an unremarkable Wednesday in eight years' time.

Grand promises — 'I will love you forever, through everything' — are fine, and there should probably be one. But the promises that land are the ones with edges: to keep asking how your day was and actually listen to the answer; to always be the one who gets up in the cold; to never let you drive when you're that tired.

Aim for a mix. One or two big promises, two or three small and specific ones.

05 — SOUND LIKE YOURSELF

If you don't say 'my beloved' in real life, don't say it at the altar. Vows written in a voice that isn't yours sound performed, and everyone can hear it — including the person you're marrying.

The best test I know: write it as though it's a letter to them that nobody else will read. Then, at the end, only take out the things you'd genuinely be uncomfortable having your family hear. Usually that's less than you'd think.

06 — KEEP IT SHORT

This is the single most useful piece of advice in this guide, and the one couples resist most. Short vows are not less meaningful — they're more. Every sentence that doesn't earn its place dilutes the ones that do. If you have to cut, cut the general and keep the specific.

150

words is about one minute each
— the target

90s

is plenty, and always feels longer
than it reads

2min

is the outer limit. Truly.



07 — WRITE IT OUT AND READ IT ALOUD

Handwrite a version. It slows you down and you'll remember it better. Then read it out loud, standing up, to an empty room — and then to the dog, a friend, or a mirror.

Reading aloud catches everything writing doesn't: the sentence that's too long to say in one breath, the phrase that sounds odd out loud, the joke that isn't as funny as it looked. Do this at least twice.

08 — SET A DEADLINE AND THEN STOP

Give yourself a finish date two weeks before the wedding, and when you reach it, stop. Vows are never finished — they're abandoned at a reasonable point, like every piece of writing.

Keep a note in your phone from the moment you start. Lines will arrive while you're driving or falling asleep, and they're almost always better than the ones you sit down to force.

Specific beats poetic. **Every single time.**





PART THREE

03

PROMPTS

Write straight onto these pages. Don't edit as you go — get it down messily first, then pull your vows out of the mess afterwards. Nobody else will read this part.

The moment I knew

Three specific things I love about you

What an ordinary day with you looks like

A time you got me through something

The big promise — the one that covers everything

Three small promises, the kind that come up on a normal week

What I want our life to feel like in twenty years

The one thing I'd want them to hear even if they heard nothing else



PART FOUR

04

STRUCTURE AND EXAMPLES

A skeleton to fill in, and four sets of vows in four different tones — to show you shape, not to be borrowed.



A STRUCTURE YOU CAN BORROW

If the blank page is the problem, use this skeleton and fill it in. It works, and no guest has ever noticed a structure.

OPEN WITH THEM

1-2 SENTENCES

One specific line about who they are, or a moment you shared.

SAY WHAT THEY'VE BECOME TO YOU

1-2 SENTENCES

What has changed because of them.

PROMISE

3-4 SENTENCES

One large, two or three small and specific.

CLOSE

1 SENTENCE

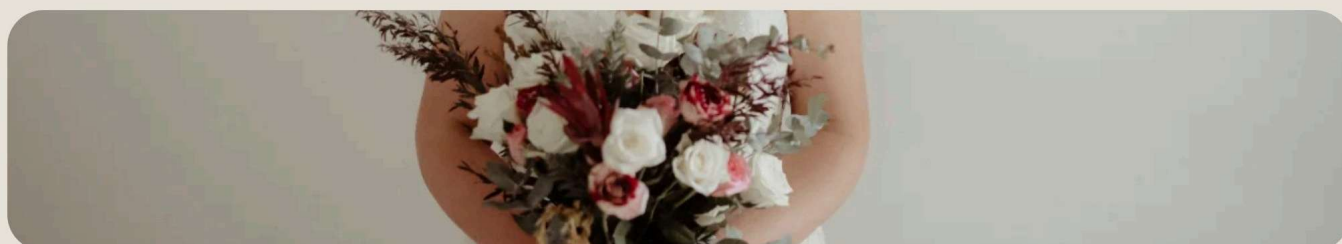
Short. One line that lands.

That's roughly 150 words. That's a minute. That's a complete set of vows.

A NOTE ON THE EXAMPLES THAT FOLLOW

What follows is written to show you shape and tone, not to be borrowed word for word. Vows copied from a page always sound like vows copied from a page.

Read them, notice which one sounds closest to how you actually speak, then write your own version of that. The details are what make them work — and your details will be better than mine, because they're true.



HEARTFELT

I didn't expect you. I'd made my peace with the life I had, and then you turned up and quietly rearranged all of it. You are the person I want to tell things to first — the good news, the bad news, and the very boring news about the car. I promise to keep choosing you, not just today but on the ordinary days when choosing takes effort. I promise to listen properly. I promise to be honest with you even when it would be easier not to be. And I promise that whatever comes, you will not face it on your own. You have my whole heart. You've had it for a while now.

WARM AND FUNNY

Eight years ago you told me you were 'pretty low maintenance'. That was the first lie of our relationship, and I've forgiven you for it. I promise to keep making the coffee, because we both know what happens when you do it. I promise to let you tell the story your way, even the one about the fishing trip, even though we both know how it actually ended. I promise to be your person for the good stuff and the deeply unglamorous stuff — the flat tyres, the hold music, the two in the morning. You make me laugh every single day, and you have made my life immeasurably better and considerably louder. I'd like to keep going, please. For good.



SHORT AND SIMPLE

You are the best thing that has happened to me. I promise to be kind to you, to be honest with you, and to keep showing up — on the easy days and the hard ones. I'll be beside you for whatever comes next. That's it. That's the whole promise.

TRADITIONAL IN FEELING

I take you as you are today, and as you will become, with everything I know about you and everything I've yet to learn. I promise to be faithful to you, to care for you in sickness and in health, and to stand beside you in whatever fortune brings. I will honour the life we build together and the family we make of it. From this day forward, for all the days I'm given, I'm yours.

PROMISES YOU BOTH REPEAT

If neither of you wants to write separately, you can share one set and say it in turn. I'll feed you the lines, so there's nothing to hold and nothing to memorise.

I promise to be your partner in this. To be honest with you, to be kind to you, and to be on your side. To make room for who you are and who you're becoming. To choose you again tomorrow, and to keep choosing you for as long as I live.



WHAT TO LEAVE OUT

- ✗ **Inside jokes that need explaining.** If it takes a sentence of setup, it belongs in the speech, not the vows.
- ✗ **Anything at anyone else's expense** — an ex, a family member, a friend. It never lands the way you hope.
- ✗ **A list of everything you've ever done together.** Choose one thing.
- ✗ **Promises you don't mean.** 'I'll never argue with you' is not a vow, it's a plan for an awkward anniversary.
- ✗ **Quotes from films, songs or poems as the main event.** One line as a garnish is lovely; a borrowed paragraph isn't yours.
- ✗ **Anything you can't say without completely losing it.** Keep one, cut the rest.



PART FIVE

05

ON THE DAY

The practical things nobody tells you — and the small ones that make the difference.

READ THEM. DON'T MEMORISE THEM.

Nobody expects you to recite. Memorising adds enormous pressure and gives you nothing — and if nerves take the words, you have nothing to fall back on. Write them out on a card or in a small book, in large type or clear handwriting.

A vow book or card is also the thing you'll keep. Handwritten vows in a drawer are worth quite a lot in twenty years.

BRING A COPY. AND SO SHOULD SOMEONE ELSE.

Give a spare copy to me, or to someone in your wedding party. Cards get left in cars, in hotel rooms and in jacket pockets with alarming regularity. I'd rather have a copy I never need.

YOU WILL PROBABLY CRY

Most people do, and it's fine. The room is entirely on your side. A few things that help:

- ✓ **Slow down.** Nerves make everyone speed up, and speed is what makes voices break.
- ✓ **Pause and breathe.** A silence that feels endless to you is about two seconds to everyone else.
- ✓ **Have a tissue on you,** and don't rely on your partner having one.
- ✓ **If you can't get through a line, hand the card to me.** I'll read it, and it will be just as moving.

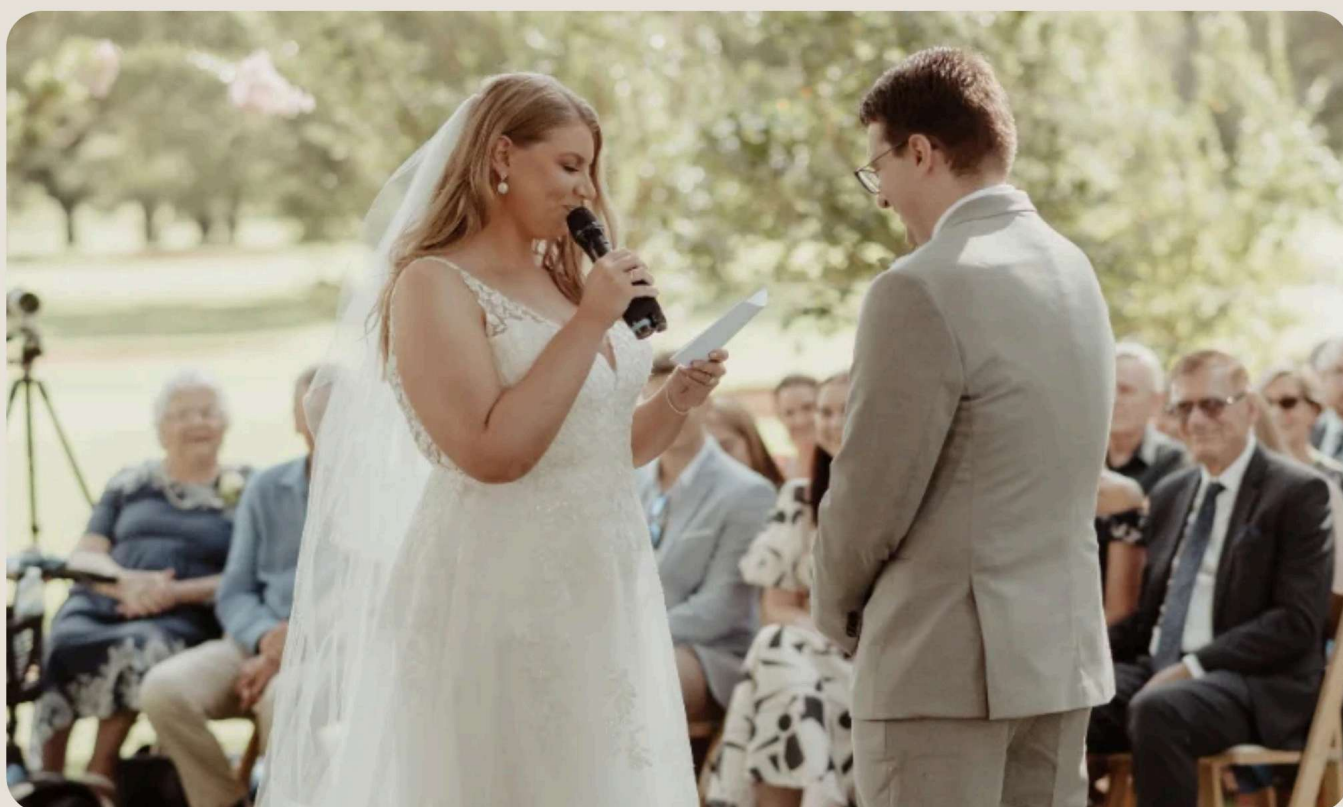


PRACTICAL THINGS

- ✓ **Hold the card at chest height**, not up in front of your face — for your voice, and for the photos.
- ✓ **Speak to your partner, but a little louder than feels natural.** Outdoors, with any breeze, sound disappears fast.
- ✓ **Decide beforehand who goes first.** It's usually calmer for the more nervous person to go first.
- ✓ **If you're keeping them secret, tell me.** I'll make sure the order and the introduction work without giving anything away.
- ✓ **Take a photo of your vows before the ceremony.** Cards get lost; the words shouldn't.

AFTERWARDS

Ask your photographer for a shot of the vow books, and ask whoever's filming to capture the audio. Couples tell me constantly that the vows are the part they most want to hear again, and the part most often missed because a microphone was pointed the wrong way. Mention it in advance and it's easily solved.



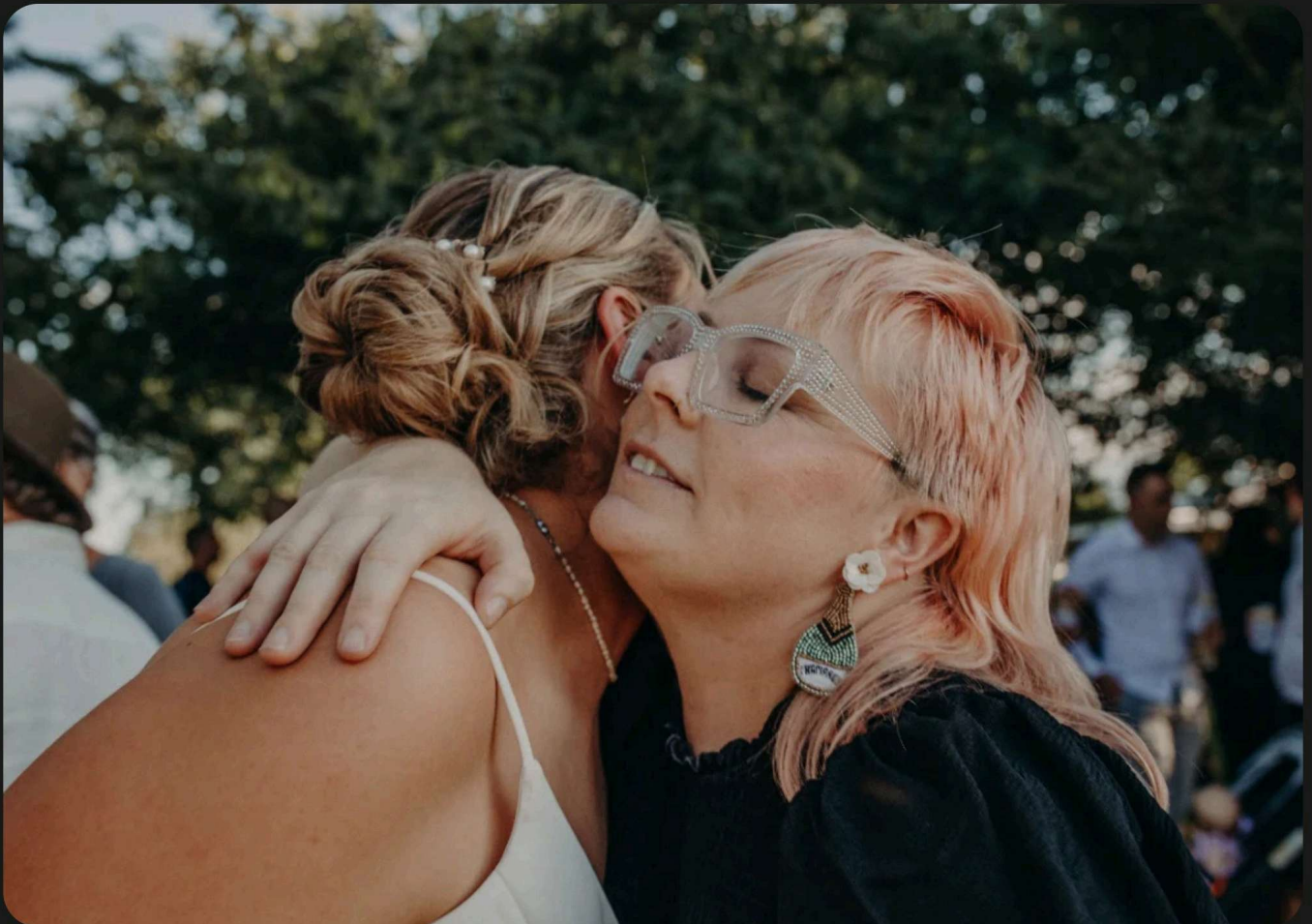
A LAST WORD

YOU ALREADY KNOW WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY

That's the thing about vows — the words aren't out there waiting to be found in a guide like this one. They're already in the way you talk about each other when you're not trying.

So write them badly first. Cut half. Read them out loud until they sound like you. Then stop, and let it be enough — because it will be.

And if you get stuck, tell me. Helping couples find these words is genuinely the best part of my job, and there is no version of this where I'd rather you struggled alone with it.



With thanks to the couples who let me share their photographs here — and to the photographers who took them.

THE SHELLEYBRANT

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