
WEDDING TIMELINE STARTER GUIDE

A simple framework to help you plan a seamless wedding day and make more room for the moments that matter most.



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EVERY MOMENT



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WEDDING PHOTO & CINEMA



A FREE PLANNING RESOURCE

The Wedding Photo & Cinema Timeline

Starter Guide

*How to build a wedding-day schedule that actually leaves room
for the moments you'll want to remember.*

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Before you build your timeline

Congratulations on your engagement! One of the questions we hear most often from couples in the planning process is some version of: “How much time do we actually need for photos and video on the wedding day?”

It's a great question, and the honest answer is: it depends on your ceremony style, your guest count, your venue, and how many of the classic wedding-day moments matter most to you. But there are patterns that hold true for almost every wedding, and this guide walks through them.

Inside, you'll find sample timelines for three common wedding lengths, guidance on golden hour and first looks, a family formals strategy that keeps things moving, and a list of the most common timeline mistakes we help couples avoid.

Use this as a starting point, not a rulebook. Every wedding is different — and when you're ready to build a schedule tailored to your actual day, that's exactly what we love to do together.

Why the timeline matters

Your photo and video coverage is only as good as the time it's given. A rushed schedule creates rushed images — tense family formals, a getting-ready session shot in five frantic minutes, a first dance captured while the caterers are still resetting tables. A well-paced timeline does the opposite: it gives your photographer and videographer room to actually see the day, and it gives you room to be in it, rather than managed through it.

Two decisions that shape everything else

1. First look or no first look?

A first look is a private, planned moment where the couple sees each other before the ceremony, usually with just the photographer and videographer present. It's optional, but it changes your whole timeline.

With a first look	Couple + wedding party portraits happen before the ceremony. More of the reception is free for guests. Calmer, more private moment between the two of you. Ceremony can start closer to sunset.
Without a first look	All portraits happen after the ceremony, which usually means a longer cocktail hour for guests. The traditional “reveal” moment happens at the aisle instead. Works well for shorter guest lists or tighter timelines.

2. Chasing golden hour

Golden hour — the soft, warm light in the hour or so before sunset — is when most of the portraits couples fall in love with are made. If romantic outdoor portraits are a priority, work backward from your local sunset time and block 20–30 uninterrupted minutes for just the two of you during that window. Ask your planner or venue for the sunset time on your actual wedding date; it shifts throughout the year.

TIP: If your ceremony is in the evening, consider a first look so you don't lose golden hour to family formals and group photos.

Three starting points, by coverage length

These sample schedules assume a 5:30 PM sunset and a first-look format. Shift every block earlier or later to match your actual sunset and ceremony time — the spacing between events matters more than the exact clock times.

8-Hour Coverage

TIME	WHAT'S HAPPENING
1:00 PM	Photographer/videographer arrival · detail shots (dress, rings, invitation suite)
1:30 PM	Getting ready coverage begins
2:15 PM	First look
2:30 PM	Couple portraits
3:15 PM	Wedding party portraits
3:45 PM	Family formals (immediate family only)
4:15 PM	Couple refreshes; ceremony details and guest arrivals
5:00 PM	Ceremony
5:30 PM	Cocktail hour; candid coverage and reception-room details
6:30 PM	Reception entrance and first dance
6:45PM	Welcome, blessing, dinner and toasts
7:15PM	Golden-hour portraits—adjust according to the wedding date's actual sunset
7:45PM	Parent dances, cake cutting and open dancing
8:45PM	Final dance-floor coverage or staged send-off
9:00PM	Coverage ends

This sample timeline is a starting point. Ceremony time, sunset, venue travel, cultural traditions and whether you choose a first look will affect the final schedule.

10-Hour Coverage — Traditional Full-Day Wedding

TIME	WHAT'S HAPPENING
12:00 PM	Photographer/videographer arrival · flat lay and detail shots
12:30 PM	Getting-ready coverage for both partners
1:45 PM	First look
2:15 PM	Couple portraits
3:00 PM	Wedding party portraits
3:45 PM	Family formals
4:30 PM	Buffer / travel time
5:00 PM	Ceremony
5:45 PM	Cocktail hour · candid + detail coverage of reception space
6:45 PM	Reception entrance, toasts, first dance
7:00 PM	Dinner service and toasts
Golden hour	Couple slips away for 20–30 minutes based on the actual sunset
8:15 PM	Parent dances, cake cutting and open dancing
10:00 PM	Coverage ends

This sample timeline is a starting point. Ceremony time, sunset, venue travel, cultural traditions and whether you choose a first look will affect the final schedule.

12-Hour Coverage — Extended / Multi-Venue Wedding

TIME	WHAT'S HAPPENING
10:00 AM	Photographer/videographer arrival · details and preparation spaces
10:30 AM	Getting ready, both partners
12:00 PM	First look
12:30 PM	Couple portraits
1:15 PM	Wedding party portraits
2:00 PM	Wedding party
2:30 PM	Immediate-family formals
3:00 PM	Travel to ceremony venue (if separate location)
3:45 PM	Ceremony
4:30 PM	Cocktail hour
5:30 PM	Reception entrance, first dance and welcome
6:00 PM	Dinner service and toasts
Golden hour	Couple portraits scheduled according to the actual sunset
7:00 PM	Parent dances and cake cutting
7:45 PM	Open dancing, guest interactions and reception coverage
10:00 PM	Send-off · coverage ends

Longer coverage windows aren't just about capturing more events — they build in breathing room, which is what actually prevents a rushed-feeling wedding film or a stressed-out portrait session.

A simple family formals strategy

Family formals are the single most common place a wedding-day timeline falls apart — usually because a family member wandered off, or the photographer is reading names off a list for the first time. A little prep goes a long way.

- **Order by Group Size:** Organize the list in **shot order**, not guest order. Start with your largest group combinations and gradually work your way down to smaller groups and the couple alone.
- **Assign a wrangler:** A **groomsman, bridesmaid, or planner** who knows the family should be responsible for physically finding people and bringing them into frame.
- **Send the list to your photographer in advance:** at least two weeks before the wedding, not the morning of.
- **Timing & Prep:** Budget roughly **3 minutes per group** (a list of 10 groups will typically take 30–40 minutes). Send your finalized list to your photographer/videographer **at least 2 weeks in advance**.
- **Location:** Somewhere with **even light** and **easy access**, ideally right after the **ceremony** while everyone is already gathered.

Sample shot list order

1. Couple + Both Sets of Parents
2. Couple + Immediate Family (Both sides combined))
3. Couple + Extended Family / Special Relatives
4. Couple + Grandparents
5. Couple + Partner A's Side + Siblings
6. Couple + Partner A's Side Only
7. Couple + Partner B's Side Only
8. Full wedding party
9. Wedding party by side
10. Couple alone

6 timeline mistakes to avoid

1. Underestimating hair and makeup.

Add 30–45 minutes of buffer beyond what your stylist quotes. It almost always runs long, and a rushed getting-ready hour shows up on camera.

2. Scheduling travel time as zero minutes.

If your ceremony and reception are at different venues, build in real drive time plus a 15-minute buffer for parking, gathering the group, and unexpected delays.

3. Skipping a buffer before the ceremony.

Leave at least 15–30 minutes of unscheduled time before you walk down the aisle. It's the difference between arriving calm and arriving flustered.

4. Planning zero alone time as a couple.

Between formals, greeting guests, and the reception, couples often realize afterward they barely spoke to each other all day. Protect even 10 private minutes.

5. Not accounting for sunset.

Sunset time shifts by over an hour across the wedding season. Check the actual sunset time for your date and venue before finalizing portrait timing.

6. Cutting cocktail hour too short.

A rushed cocktail hour compresses reception-detail photography and can back up your entrance and toasts. 60 minutes is a safer minimum than 45.

Your timeline-building checklist

- ☐ Confirmed sunset time for the actual wedding date and location
- ☐ Decided: first look or traditional reveal at the ceremony
- ☐ Hair & makeup start time confirmed with stylist, plus buffer added
- ☐ Family formals shot list written and sent to photographer/videographer
- ☐ Wrangler assigned for family formals
- ☐ Travel time built in between every venue change
- ☐ At least 15 minutes of buffer before the ceremony
- ☐ Golden hour portrait window blocked on the schedule
- ☐ 10 minutes of private couple time somewhere in the day
- ☐ Final timeline shared with photographer, videographer, planner, and venue coordinator

This checklist covers the essentials, but every venue, guest list, and vision is different. If you'd like help mapping this onto your actual wedding day, that's exactly what we're here for.

Let's build your timeline together.

AlphaScape Studios would love to walk through your wedding day, venue, and vision, and help you build a schedule that's realistic, unhurried, and made for the photos and film you'll actually treasure.

BOOK A FREE CONSULTATION - nate@alphascapestudios.com