

Your Planning Calendar

You've sussed out your priorities, not to mention limitations. Next up: translating it all into a manageable course of action. Below is a comprehensive checklist based on the 16-month length of the average U.S. engagement. (You can download additional copies at www.realsimple.com/planningcalendar.)

SIXTEEN TO NINE MONTHS BEFORE	EIGHT MONTHS BEFORE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Start a wedding folder or binder. Tear out pages that inspire you from bridal, lifestyle, fashion, gardening, design, and food magazines.<input type="checkbox"/> Work out your budget. Determine how much you have to spend and how much your families are kicking in.<input type="checkbox"/> Build your wedding party. As soon as you're engaged, people will start wondering who's in and who's out.<input type="checkbox"/> Settle on a head count. Construct a guest-list database with columns for contact info, RSVPs, gifts, and any other relevant information. Remember that the best way to cut costs is to reduce your guest list.<input type="checkbox"/> Hire a planner, if desired. A planner has insights about and relationships with vendors, so loop her in immediately.<input type="checkbox"/> Book your date and venues. Decide whether you want separate locations for the ceremony and the reception. If so, start from the most important place and choose your second spot after factoring in travel time between locations.<input type="checkbox"/> Book your officiant.<input type="checkbox"/> Research photographers, bands, florists, and caterers.<input type="checkbox"/> Insert the names of vendors and their contact information into a master contact list, such as the one available in the pullout guide in this book. Keep this in your binder.<input type="checkbox"/> Throw an engagement party, if you like. Attendees will expect invitations to the wedding, so choose them accordingly.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Book the photographer and the videographer. While you don't need to talk specifics now, make sure the people you hire are open to doing the range of shots you need.<input type="checkbox"/> Book the entertainment. Attend gigs of potential acts to see how they perform in front of audiences, then reserve your favorite.<input type="checkbox"/> Start meeting caterers, if your location doesn't offer its own. Hire a caterer this month or early next.<input type="checkbox"/> Purchase a dress. Custom gowns can take months to make, and even if you're buying off the rack, you'll typically need three fittings. Veil shopping can be postponed for another two to three months.<input type="checkbox"/> Book a block of hotel rooms for out-of-town guests. Pick three hotels at different price points close to the reception venue.<input type="checkbox"/> Register. Sign up at a minimum of three retailers. Keep in mind that some guests will tap into registries for shower and engagement gifts as well.<input type="checkbox"/> Launch a wedding website. Create your own page through a free provider, such as www.weddingchannel.com. On it, note the date of the wedding, travel information, accommodations, and any other FYIs for friends and family. Then send the link to invitees. Some sites also offer a free online RSVP service.

SEVEN TO SIX MONTHS BEFORE	FIVE TO FOUR MONTHS BEFORE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Select and purchase invitations, and hire a calligrapher, if desired. Addressing cards is time-consuming, so the more time you allow, the better. <input type="checkbox"/> Start planning a honeymoon. Better deals can be found by booking far in advance. Going abroad? Make sure that your passports are up-to-date, and schedule doctors' appointments for any shots you may need. <input type="checkbox"/> Shop for the bridesmaids' dresses. Corraling friends for a shopping session can be tough; allow at least six months for the gowns to be ordered and sized. <input type="checkbox"/> Meet with the officiant. Map out the ceremony and confirm that you have all the official documents for the wedding (documents vary by county and religion). If one person is converting to a new religion, schedule the requisite counseling. <input type="checkbox"/> Send save-the-date cards. <input type="checkbox"/> Reserve structural and electrical necessities. Book portable toilets for outdoor events, extra chairs if you need them, lighting components, and so on. <input type="checkbox"/> Book a florist. Florists can serve multiple clients on one day, so you needn't nail them down as early as other vendors. Plus, waiting longer means you'll have a firmer grasp of how flowers fit into your vision. <input type="checkbox"/> Arrange transportation. Looking for a limo? Know that these low-to-the-ground vehicles can make entries and exits dicey if you're wearing a fitted gown. Other options: a minibus or trolley, if you're traveling with your wedding party, or a town car. <input type="checkbox"/> Start composing a day-of timeline. Draw up a schedule of the event and slot in each component (the cake cutting, the first dance). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Book the rehearsal and rehearsal-dinner venues. Negotiate the costs and the menu. If you're planning to host a day-after brunch for guests, book that place as well. <input type="checkbox"/> Check on the wedding invitations. Ask the stationer for samples of the finished invitations and revise them to suit your needs. <input type="checkbox"/> Select and order the cake. Attend several tastings. Be aware that some bakers require a long lead time. <input type="checkbox"/> Send your guest list to the host of your shower. Since there aren't umpteen things to do during these months, now is a great time to get "showered." <input type="checkbox"/> Purchase shoes and start dress fittings. Bring the shoes you plan to wear to your first fitting so the tailor can choose the appropriate length. If your gown takes a while to make, it's perfectly fine to start fittings at three months, but after that you're cutting things close. <input type="checkbox"/> Schedule hair and makeup artists. Make a few trial appointments with local experts (preferably on days when you have fun dinner plans and want to look glamorous). Snap a digital photo or a Polaroid so you can see how you look in photos and you both will remember the exact look down the line. <input type="checkbox"/> Choose songs. What tune do you want playing when the wedding party is introduced? What should play during dinner? How do you want to get the party started? Keep a running list of the songs you do—and do not—want played. <input type="checkbox"/> Plan welcome baskets for guests, if desired. A few ideas: a detailed itinerary, a list of restaurants in town, transportation options, locally produced gourmet foods, a hand-drawn map of local attractions, and a sweet-smelling candle to freshen the room.

Your Planning Calendar (continued)

THREE MONTHS BEFORE	TWO MONTHS BEFORE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Finalize the menu and the flowers. This may seem awfully late in the game, but since both food and flowers are affected by the season, you should generally wait to see what's available.<input type="checkbox"/> Order favors, if desired. Guests always appreciate edibles. Safe bets: monogrammed cookies or a treat that represents your city or region.<input type="checkbox"/> Make a list of the people who are giving toasts. Aside from the standard people (the best man, the maid of honor, the couple's parents), is there any other loved one whom you would like to speak? If anyone fits the bill, ask him now so he can plan what to say.<input type="checkbox"/> Finalize the readings. Determine what you would like recited at your nuptials and who will do the reciting. Call the readers and find out their interests.<input type="checkbox"/> Purchase your undergarments and have your second fitting. Always save the fabric that's cut off your dress; you can use it to wrap flowers and for other decorative details.<input type="checkbox"/> Finalize the order of the ceremony and the reception.<input type="checkbox"/> Print menu cards, if you like, and programs. If they aren't in your stationery budget, consider whipping up something on your own computer and having copies printed at a local office-supply store or on a copier.<input type="checkbox"/> Purchase the rings. By doing this now, you'll have time for resizing and engraving.<input type="checkbox"/> Send your event schedule to the vendors. Giving them a first draft now allows ample time for tweaks and feedback.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Meet with the photographer to discuss shots and locations. Complete a walk-through of the locations and point out spots that appeal to you for posed photos.<input type="checkbox"/> Sit down with the band or the deejay and review the playlist. Come prepared with your wish list, and ask the band (gently) to learn any songs not in their repertoire. Understand, of course, that as these people are responsible for the music, you won't be able to dictate every single song played at your event.<input type="checkbox"/> Send the invitations. The rule of thumb: Mail invitations six to eight weeks before the ceremony, setting the RSVP cutoff at three weeks after the postmark date.<input type="checkbox"/> Touch base with the vendors. Make sure you have gotten feedback and have answered all questions about the schedule you sent last month. If the day is especially complex, consider getting them all together for lunch to iron out the kinks.<input type="checkbox"/> Submit a newspaper wedding announcement. Note that some publications have strict rules about how the photograph should look; check the local paper's website for specifics.<input type="checkbox"/> Enjoy a bachelorette party. Usually the maid of honor, with the help of the bridesmaids, will plan a night out for you. If your friends haven't mentioned it about two months before the wedding, feel free to ask—for scheduling purposes, of course!—if they've set aside a night to celebrate with you.

ONE MONTH BEFORE	THE WEEK OF THE WEDDING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Enter RSVPs into the guest-list database. Phone invitees who haven't yet responded. <input type="checkbox"/> Get your marriage license. The process varies by state and county and can take up to six days, but it's good to leave yourself lots of leeway. If you're changing your name, order several extra copies. <input type="checkbox"/> Mail the rehearsal-dinner invitations. <input type="checkbox"/> Visit the dressmaker for your last fitting. For peace of mind, it may be a good idea to arrange a fitting the week of the wedding. If you try on the dress that week and it still fits like a glove, cancel the appointment. <input type="checkbox"/> Stock the bar. Now that you have a firm head count, order accordingly. <input type="checkbox"/> Send out as many final payments as you can. <input type="checkbox"/> Confirm times for hair and makeup and all vendors. <input type="checkbox"/> E-mail and print directions for drivers of transport vehicles. The chauffeurs will have ample time to navigate a route. <input type="checkbox"/> Assign seating. Draw table shapes (circles, rectangles) on a poster board or a piece of cardboard the same way they appear in the room. Write the names of female guests on pink sticky notes and male attendees on blue ones and stick them to the tables. This way, you can move people around without resketching the setting. <input type="checkbox"/> Purchase bridesmaids' gifts to present at the rehearsal dinner. <input type="checkbox"/> Write vows, if necessary. <input type="checkbox"/> Get your hair cut and colored, if desired. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Reconfirm arrival times with vendors. <input type="checkbox"/> Delegate small wedding-day tasks: someone to bustle the dress, someone to carry your things, someone to be in charge of gifts (especially the enveloped kind), someone to hand out tips, and someone to be the point person for vendors. <input type="checkbox"/> Send a timeline to the bridal party. Include every member's contact information on the document, along with two or three point people for vendors to call if there are problems. <input type="checkbox"/> Make arrangements for the dress to be delivered, or pick it up yourself. <input type="checkbox"/> Supply your photographer with a list of moments you want captured on film. <input type="checkbox"/> Set aside checks for the vendors and tips in envelopes to be handed out on your wedding day. <input type="checkbox"/> Book a spa treatment (like a massage), if only to preserve your sanity, and a manicure and pedicure appointment for the day before the wedding. <input type="checkbox"/> Send the final guest count to the caterer and the venues hosting any other wedding-related events. Typically, companies close their lists 72 hours in advance. <input type="checkbox"/> Break in your shoes. Turn up the stereo and see how they feel while you dance to "We Are Family." <input type="checkbox"/> Assemble and distribute the welcome baskets. <input type="checkbox"/> Pack for your honeymoon.