

WEDDING PLANNING / FROM THE YES TO THE WEDDING DAY

You're engaged. Now what?

A practical guide to the first decisions, the real costs, and a wedding that feels like you.



A sunset wedding portrait by Square Atom. Original photograph, presented without added color grading.

Make room for the experience.

Start with your people and priorities. Use the worksheets when you are ready, and return to this guide as the plans take shape.

By Elijah Holyfield · Square Atom Films & Photography
Planning guide and companion budget workbook · October 2026

01 / START HERE

Just got engaged? Start with these eight steps.

You do not need to plan the whole wedding this week. Work through the decisions that make the next ones easier.

- **Celebrate and share the news** in the order that feels right for you.
- **Check the ring's fit and care instructions** with your jeweler. Keep purchase documents and ask your insurer about coverage if you want it.
- **Name three priorities each.** Compare the experience, people and memories you value most.
- **Agree on a comfortable total.** Confirm contributions and when that money will be available.
- **Write a first guest list.** A list of names is more useful than an optimistic round number.
- **Choose a season and a few date options.** Check essential guests and practical travel needs.
- **Compare venue and key-vendor availability together.** Confirm the entire plan before signing.
- **Open the budget workbook.** Enter estimates first, then signed totals and actual payments.

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02 / YOUR PRIORITIES

Find your kind of wedding.

An intimate ceremony, a city celebration, a beach wedding or a weekend with family can all be meaningful. Start with the experience you want.

Decision	What to discuss
People	Who must be there? Will you include children and plus-ones? Who needs step-free access or extra travel support?
Place	Home, destination, city, coast or mountains? Compare guest travel and the actual space available.
Atmosphere	Choose three words such as relaxed, energetic, elegant, intimate or adventurous.
Priorities	Which three parts deserve the most money and time? Which traditions can you happily skip?

Write the guest list before trusting the estimate.

Count both partners, family groups, wedding-party partners and other invited guests. Ask venues about seated capacity with a dance floor and your proposed layout. A room’s maximum standing capacity does not describe the same event.

Our three shared priorities

Our working guest count / must-have people

Our target season, location and date options

A useful next conversation

“What would we regret missing, and what are we comfortable leaving out?” Use the answer when an appealing extra would stretch your plan.

03 / WHAT WEDDINGS COST

What does a wedding cost?

National averages offer context. Your actual cost depends on the location, guest count, services, season and level of production.

Research benchmark	What the number describes
\$34,200 · The Knot	Reported average in the 2026 Real Weddings Study, surveying 10,474 U.S. couples who married in 2025. [1]
\$36,000 · Zola	Reported average in its 2026 First Look survey of more than 11,500 couples marrying in 2026. This is a forward-looking cohort. [2]

These are different samples, not a price range or a minimum you need to spend. Neither figure is a local vendor quote or a median. Build your budget from current, itemized estimates for your own wedding.

Make the total fit the plan.

- Start with confirmed funds and a total you both accept. Do not rely on hoped-for gifts to cover signed commitments.
- List what your total includes: ceremony, reception, rings, travel, honeymoon and any additional events.
- Keep a separate reserve. The workbook starts with an editable 10% planning assumption, not a required allocation.
- Include taxes, service charges, rentals, transport, overtime, vendor meals, alterations and weather plans.

Guest-count example · illustrative only

Twenty fewer guests at an assumed \$150 each in genuinely avoidable food, drink and rental costs could reduce those costs by \$3,000. Fixed fees and minimum spends may remain unchanged.

[1] [theknot.com/content/average-wedding-cost](https://www.theknot.com/content/average-wedding-cost)
[2] [zola.com/expert-advice/the-first-look-report-2026](https://www.zola.com/expert-advice/the-first-look-report-2026)
Research checked October 15, 2026.

04 / PRINTABLE WORKSHEET

Your wedding budget.

Fill this page by hand, or use the companion workbook for automatic totals and payment tracking. All amounts are in USD.

Total available: \$_____ Reserve: \$_____

Available for planned expenses: \$_____

Category	Planned	Forecast / signed total	Paid	Remaining
Venue & rentals				
Food & drinks				
Photography				
Videography				
Planner / coordinator				
Flowers & décor				
Attire & beauty				
Music / entertainment				
Stationery & details				
Transport / lodging				
Permits / officiant				
Other / extra events				
TOTAL				

Forecast: your latest expected total, including payments already made. Replace an estimate with the signed total when booked. **Remaining:** forecast minus paid. Never add a deposit to the full contract price again.

Reserve stays separate until needed. If you use it, add the expense to the relevant category and reduce the unused reserve so the same money is not counted twice.

05 / PAYMENT PLANNING

Know what is due. Know what is already paid.

A good budget tracks the commitment and the cash. The companion workbook keeps these as separate figures.

Vendor / expense	Due date	Amount	Paid date

Use the workbook in this order.

- On **Budget**, enter your spending limit, reserve, guest estimate and each category’s planned allocation.
- Enter the latest quote or contract total in **Forecast / signed total**. If you leave it blank, the workbook uses the planned amount. A deliberate zero stays zero.
- On **Payments**, enter one installment per row. Add the amount paid and payment date only when the payment actually happens. Partial payments leave a balance due.
- Review remaining costs, overdue payments and budget headroom together. Payment rows do not increase the forecast; update the category forecast if the contract changes.

Avoid counting packages twice

06 / PLANNING TIMELINE

Work backward. Leave room to adjust.

Suggested planning windows, not booking guarantees. Vendor availability and your actual deadlines take priority.

When	Focus
First month	Vision, confirmed budget, first guest list, season and date options. Compare venues and your priority vendors together.
12+ months, if available	Secure date, venue and core team. Discuss planning support, guest travel and attire lead times.
9–12 months	Build the wedding website, arrange engagement photographs, research accommodation and share travel plans when confirmed.
6–9 months	Refine food, entertainment, design and ceremony plans. Send save the dates when your date is firm; allow more travel notice where possible.
3–6 months	Confirm attire, invitations, transport and rentals. Draft photo/video coverage, family groups and an indoor weather plan.
1–3 months	Set the RSVP deadline around catering and venue requirements. Review due dates, guest needs and all vendor deliverables.
Final month and week	Finalize the schedule, contacts, seating and payments. Pack details, designate helpers and distribute the plan.
After the wedding	Check delivery milestones, back up photographs and films, order prints and albums, and send thanks.

Planning in six months or less?

Compress the decisions in the same order. Prioritize availability, essentials and clear communication. Use flexible dates, a focused guest list and fewer custom components where they help.

07 / VENUE AND TEAM

Ask better questions before you book.

Compare the same guest count, hours and inclusions so the lowest headline price does not hide the largest total.

Ask the venue	Ask each key vendor
What exactly is included in the quote?	What is the full total, payment schedule and scope?
What are the minimum spend and fees?	Who will personally provide the service?
What is the workable indoor rain plan?	What is the backup plan for illness or equipment failure?
When can vendors arrive and leave?	What are the overtime and travel terms?
Are there sound, lighting or access rules?	What are the cancellation, reschedule and change terms?
Who handles setup, cleanup and the timeline?	What will we receive, and when?

Choose the planning support you need.

Full-service planning can cover the overall planning process. **Partial planning** supports agreed decisions or tasks. **Coordination** focuses on preparation and execution around the wedding. Ask when support begins and which responsibilities belong to you, the venue and the planner.

Our vendor shortlist and comparison notes

Our unanswered questions before signing

Square Atom can discuss photo and film coverage, planning assistance and planner referrals. Ask about DJ options and confirm the exact providers and responsibilities in your proposal.

08 / PHOTOGRAPHY AND FILM

Choose the whole story.

A strong portrait matters. So does how the team handles the ceremony, family photographs, speeches and a dark reception.



Wedding portrait by Square Atom · Minneapolis, Minnesota

- Request complete galleries and films from weddings with similar light and event flow.
- Ask who is assigned, how many people are included and what changes if preparation happens in two locations.
- Compare hours, photo deliverables, film types, audio coverage, editing, delivery windows and usage rights.
- Discuss backup equipment, file handling, weather, ceremony restrictions and the approach to flash.
- Ask how the photographer directs people who feel uncomfortable posing. Share family dynamics and meaningful traditions in advance.

The Square Atom approach

Dramatic light, natural emotion and editorial direction. We combine documentary moments with intentional portraits, using natural light and off-camera flash where the setting and schedule allow.

09 / ENGAGEMENT PHOTOGRAPHS

Make the session feel like your story.

Use your session to get comfortable with the camera and create photographs for your home, wedding website and save the dates.



An engagement portrait beneath the Indiana Statehouse rotunda · Square Atom

- Choose a location with meaning: city architecture, coastline, a waterfall, a favorite neighborhood or a ranch experience.
- Talk through clothing, shoes, walking distance, accessibility, permits and weather before the day.
- Allow time for movement and conversation. A short phone call helps us understand the mood and what makes you comfortable.
- If you need images for printed save the dates, work backward from printing and mailing deadlines and the confirmed gallery delivery date.

[Read: What to wear for engagement photos](#)

[Read: How to choose an engagement photo location](#)

10 / DESTINATION PLANNING

A different place. A few more decisions.

Separate the wedding itself, your own travel, the creative team's travel and any guest expenses you agree to cover.

Planning layer	Confirm before committing
Destination and dates	Season, realistic travel connections, accommodation, guest access and an alternative for weather or closures.
Ceremony requirements	For a legal marriage abroad, confirm documents and local requirements with the relevant authority. Decide whether you want a legal or symbolic ceremony. [3]
Location access	Permit rules, approved locations, guest limits, accessibility and any photography restrictions. Yosemite requires a special use permit for weddings and commitment ceremonies. [4]
Vendor logistics	Outside-vendor fees, accommodation requirements, travel dates, working permissions where applicable, and backup arrangements.
Guest communication	Hotel options, transport, dress guidance, accessibility needs, confirmed schedule and who pays for each expense.

Keep the destination realistic

A smaller guest list can reduce some costs, while flights, lodging and extra events can add others. Compare the complete trip rather than only a resort or venue package.

Square Atom is based in the Atlanta area and travels for weddings and sessions. Share your location, dates and priorities so we can confirm the right coverage and logistics.

[3] travel.state.gov/en/international-travel/living-abroad/marriage.html

[4] nps.gov/yose/planyourvisit/weddings.htm

Check current rules with the destination before booking.

11 / THE WEDDING DAY

Build in time to actually be there.

Sample eight-hour coverage, 12:00–8:00 p.m. This is an illustration to adapt around the real ceremony, sunset and venue schedule.

Time	Coverage focus
12:00–1:15	Details and getting ready
1:15–2:00	Dressing and individual portraits
2:00–2:45	Optional first look and couple portraits
2:45–3:15	Wedding party and selected family groups
3:15–4:00	Travel, touch-ups and a buffer
4:00–4:30	Ceremony
4:30–5:30	Remaining family groups and cocktail-hour coverage
5:30–6:30	Reception entrance, dinner and scheduled events
6:30–6:50	Portrait break if the actual light and sunset suit it
6:50–8:00	Speeches, dances, celebration and final coverage

Seeing each other at the ceremony? Move joint portraits later and allow a longer portrait block. If preparation overlaps at different locations, discuss a second photographer or videographer. Schedule audio setup before the ceremony and speeches.

Put the essentials in writing

List family groups by names. Choose one helper who knows the people. Share pronunciation, traditions, accessibility needs, sensitive relationships and must-have moments with the team.

12 / FINAL PLANNING CHECKLIST

Your calm final check.

Give each task an owner and a due date. Review it with your partner and coordinator instead of carrying every detail yourself.

- ☐ Confirm the final guest count and vendor meals.
- ☐ Review contracts, balances and all payment dates.
- ☐ Share one final timeline with every vendor.
- ☐ Confirm addresses, parking, arrival and access instructions.
- ☐ Agree on the weather decision and who makes the call.
- ☐ Complete the photo/video questionnaire and family group list.
- ☐ Confirm ceremony and speech audio arrangements.
- ☐ Check attire, rings, personal details and emergency supplies.
- ☐ Assign a contact who can answer questions while you celebrate.
- ☐ Confirm transport, accessibility needs and accommodation.
- ☐ Know the process for receiving photographs, films and albums.

The three things we still need to decide

Our wedding-day point of contact and phone

13 / COMMON QUESTIONS

The questions couples ask next.

What should we do first after getting engaged?

Celebrate, then agree on the kind of wedding, a comfortable budget and a first guest list. Those decisions make date and venue comparisons much easier.

How much should our wedding cost?

There is no required total. National averages are context; your plan should use current local quotes, confirmed funds, your guest count and the experiences you want.

When should we book photography and video?

Contact your preferred team when you have a workable date range, and coordinate with venue availability. Confirm your reservation through the contract and payment process.

Do we need a wedding planner?

Choose support around your time, event complexity and comfort with logistics. Ask who will run the day even if you handle the earlier planning yourself.

Can a destination wedding be affordable?

It can fit different budgets, but the full comparison must include travel, accommodation, guest support, vendor access fees and extra events.

Can we bring our photographer to another state or country?

Discuss the destination and dates early. Confirm travel, local access requirements, coverage days and the complete written scope before booking.

14 / YOUR NEXT CHAPTER

Tell us the date and the place.

You can come to the conversation with a detailed plan or just a few ideas. We will help you identify useful next steps for photography and film.



Reid and Deanna at The Pines Downtown · Sevierville, Tennessee · Square Atom

Share your date or season, location, guest estimate, coverage needs and the moments you most want to remember. Ask about planner referrals and options that fit the celebration you are building.

Explore the portfolio [Check availability](#)

Your story can continue through anniversaries, family portraits and the milestones that follow. Ask about current returning-client options when you plan the next session.

About this guide

Original planning guidance and sample schedules by Square Atom. Budget percentages and scenarios are examples, not vendor quotes. Research sources for the cost and destination sections appear on pages 4 and 11. Photography is from Square Atom's existing website and portfolio.

squareatom.net · [@elijah_square_photos](https://www.instagram.com/elijah_square_photos)