



Five Questions for *Real Vows*

A one-evening worksheet. Answer five questions in separate rooms, and you will go to bed with a first draft of your vows that sounds like you.

Before you write *a word*

Congratulations, you're getting married, and somewhere on the list is the part where you stand up and say something true in front of everyone you know.

I have stood three feet away from people reading their vows at 300+ ceremonies, close enough to hear which lines people lean in for. The vows that work best are the most specific ones, with a detail in them that only the two of you would recognize, and they are rarely the most polished.

That is why I stopped letting my couples open a blank document. Faced with an empty page, most of us try to sound like a vow and end up with sentences that could be said to anyone. A good question gets around that, because all you have to do is remember something that happened and write it down.

So this is a worksheet more than a reading assignment. There are five questions, each with room to write, and then a few pages that turn your answers into a draft of 150 to 300 words. Give it one evening, and do the answering in separate rooms.

You've got this. Turn the page and set a timer.

Robyn

ROBYN WALKER · ROBYN ASHLEY WEDDINGS · NYC



Robyn Walker

How the evening *goes*

Plan on about ninety minutes. Each of you fills in your own copy, so print two or save the file twice before you start.

Before you start

Decide together whether your vows are a surprise. If they are, you will compare only the facts about your drafts tonight (how long, how many promises, how playful) and save the words for the ceremony. If they aren't, read your answers to each other at the end, since a second listener is quick to notice the detail you were about to cut.

Forty minutes, apart

Go to separate rooms with a pen and give each question about eight minutes. Write the first true thing that comes to mind in the plainest words you have, and keep going when it feels too small to matter. You are collecting material at this stage, so nothing has to sound like a vow yet.

Ten minutes, together

Come back to the same room and compare. The line under each writing space tells you what to trade for that question without giving your words away.

Thirty minutes, apart again

Use the pages after the fifth question to choose your story, turn your answers into promises, and write one line about the future. Then copy it all out as a single draft.

Ten minutes, out loud

Read the draft aloud once, alone, with a timer running. The checklist near the end tells you what to listen for.

Wine is allowed, and the phones are only there for the timer.

When did you *know*?

Why it works. Your vows open with one story, and this question finds it. A single scene, with a place and something one of you said, is far easier to listen to than a summary of your whole relationship, and it is easier to read aloud too.

How to answer it. Finish the sentence “I knew this was different when” and keep writing for eight minutes. Look past the milestones, since the proposal and the first date are the answers everyone expects, and go for the ordinary day when something small shifted. Put in where you were, what was said, and one thing you could see.

The wrong turn here is the highlight reel, where you list the trips and the anniversaries in order. It feels thorough, but nobody can picture five years at once. If your answer covers more than one day, pick the day you would miss most and cut the rest.

The kind of answer that works

Examples I made up to show the shape.

“I knew when you pulled over on the way to the airport to move a turtle off the road, and we nearly missed the flight, and you weren’t sorry at all.”

“I knew the night my card got declined at the laundromat and you paid without a word, then complained about the dryers the whole walk home so I wouldn’t have to say thank you.”

“I knew when I caught myself saving you the last dumpling, which I have never done for anyone.”

YOUR ANSWER *I knew this was different when...*

Then compare. Tell each other whether you wrote about a big day or an ordinary one, and keep the rest to yourself.

What do they do that *nobody else sees*?

Why it works. This is where your detail comes from, the small thing that shows you have been paying attention. My couples try to delete their smallest observation for being too little to say at a wedding, and I ask them to keep it, because it is usually the line that sounds most like the two of them.

How to answer it. List five things your partner does when they think nobody is watching, or that only someone who lives with them would know. Habits and small rituals count, and so does the exact way they do an ordinary task. Then circle the one that makes you smile while you write it.

The wrong turn here is the compliment that anyone could give. Kind, generous and funny are all true of your partner, and a coworker could say them after a month. Ask whether someone who met them once could have written the line, and if so, look for the habit underneath the adjective.

YOUR ANSWER *Only I know that you...*

Then compare. Say how many details you listed, and keep the details themselves.

The kind of answer that works

Examples I made up to show the shape.

"You read the last page of a library book before you decide to borrow it."

"You thank the bus driver every time, even when we get off at the back and he can't hear you."

"You keep my mother's voicemails, and you have never told her."

What are you promising on *the hard days*?

Why it works. The middle of your vows is three to six promises, and the ones that hold up are the ones your partner can picture on a normal Wednesday. A promise about a hard day is easier to believe than a promise about forever, because you can describe what you will do. Honestly, I would take one promise about the dishes over three about eternity.

How to answer it. Think of the last hard stretch the two of you went through, and write down what you did that helped. Then write what you wish you had done. Turn each one into a sentence that starts with “I promise to” and names an action, and add one playful promise if that is how the two of you talk.

The wrong turn here is the promise nobody could keep or check, like “I will always support you” or “I will make you laugh every day.” Some days you will be tired and unfunny. Trade each big promise for the small action it would look like at eleven at night, and promise that instead.

The kind of answer that works

Examples I made up to show the shape.

“I promise to put my phone in the other room when you tell me you had a bad day.”

“I promise to say ‘I need ten minutes’ when we argue, and to come back when the ten minutes are up.”

“I promise to drive whenever it snows, and to let you pick the music as payment.”

YOUR ANSWER *I promise to...*

Then compare. Trade the number of promises you each wrote, and how many of them are playful.

Which future moment *can't you wait for?*

Why it works. Your vows end by pointing at the life ahead of you, in one line. A specific moment you are looking forward to does that better than the word forever, because your partner can see it.

How to answer it. Picture the two of you five, twenty and forty years from now, and write one scene for each. Small scenes work best here too, like a school run or an argument about the thermostat. Then pick the one you would be saddest to miss and shape it into a single sentence.

The wrong turn here is carrying on after the line. Once you have said the sentence about your future, anything added behind it weakens the ending, so resist the thank-yous and the second closing thought. Write three versions if you like, and keep one.

The kind of answer that works

Examples I made up to show the shape.

"I can't wait to be the two old people who still split one dessert and still argue over who got the bigger half."

"I can't wait to teach a kid to ride a bike on our street while you pretend you aren't nervous."

"Whatever the next fifty years hand us, I want to be the one carrying the other bag."

YOUR ANSWER *I can't wait to...*

Then compare. Say whether your line is funny or serious.

What do you want them to feel *when you read this aloud?*

Why it works. This one is your editing tool. Vows that try to be funny, tender, grateful and solemn all at once come out sounding like nobody in particular, and choosing one feeling tells you which lines to keep.

How to answer it. Write one word for how you want your partner to feel while you are reading, such as known, safe, chosen, teased or proud. Then write one sentence about why that is the right word for the two of you. You will hold your draft up against this word later, and anything that pulls the other way comes out.

The wrong turn here is writing for the guests. A line aimed at getting a laugh from your college friends usually needs a backstory the other chairs don't have, and I have watched those jokes meet silence. Write to the one person standing across from you, since they are the only one who needs to get every reference.

The kind of answer that works

Examples I made up to show the shape.

"I want you to feel known, because you have spent years looking after everyone else and I was watching the whole time."

"I want you to feel teased and adored in the same breath, since that is how we talk at home."

"I want you to feel safe, so I want to sound the way I do when I talk you down at night."

YOUR ANSWER *I want you to feel...*

Then compare. This is the one answer worth sharing in full. If one of you wrote "teased" and the other wrote "safe," talk about tone now so your two sets of vows sound like they belong to the same ceremony.



Vows read from a single card, eyes up between lines.

Turn five answers *into* vows

You now have more material than your vows can hold, which is the right problem to have. Vows have three parts, and each of your answers already belongs to one of them.

The story

four or five sentences

Start with your answer to the first question and tell it the way it happened. Put your detail from the second question into it or right after it, so your guests meet your partner through something they do.

The promises

three to six of them

Take them from your third answer, one sentence each, most of them sincere and one playful if you like. If a promise grows out of the story you opened with, put that one last.

The forward line

one sentence, two at most

Use your fourth answer, and then stop.

The Couple's Ceremony Kit has three example vows, taken apart line by line.

Your fifth answer is the test for all of it. Read each sentence and ask whether it helps your partner feel that word, and cut the ones that don't.

Aim for 150 to 300 words, which takes one to two minutes to say. If you run over, cut the sentences that summarize and keep the ones with a detail in them.

Your first *draft*

Write it here, in order. It can be messy, because you will hear what needs fixing when you read it aloud.

*Messy is fine
for a first draft.*

*Stuck on a promise? The Story
Mine in the Couple's Kit has
thirty more prompts.*

THE STORY *I knew this was different when...*

THE PROMISES *three to six, one sentence each*

I promise to

--

I promise to

--

I promise to

--

I promise to

--

I promise to

--

THE FORWARD LINE *I can't wait to...*

Word count

--

Time out loud

--

What a finished draft *looks like*

I wrote these vows for a couple who don't exist, to show how five answers become one page.

Two winters ago my card got declined at the laundromat, with all of our clothes already wet in the machine. You paid without saying a word. Then you complained about the dryers the whole walk home, loudly, so that I would never have to say thank you. I knew that night that I wanted to be looked after by you, and that I wanted to get good at doing it back.

Question one, told the way it happened.

You are the person who thanks the bus driver every time, even when we get off at the back and he can't hear you. I love that you do it anyway.

Question two, the detail.

So here is what I promise you.

I promise to put my phone in the other room when you tell me you had a bad day.

I promise to say "I need ten minutes" when we argue, and to come back when the ten minutes are up.

I promise to drive whenever it snows, and to let you pick the music.

I promise to keep paying for the laundry without a word, and to complain about the dryers for as long as you need me to.

Question three, and the last promise goes back to the story.

I can't wait to be the two old people on the bus who still thank the driver, and who still split one dessert on the way home.

Question four, and then it stops.

The feeling word behind this draft was "looked after," and every line that stayed points at it. The words are plain throughout, and the laundromat, the dryers and the bus driver are what make it sound like one particular couple.

About 220 words, which is roughly ninety seconds out loud.

Read it out loud *before the day*

Vows are heard, so the last edit happens with your voice. Read your draft aloud at least twice before the wedding, in the car or the shower or to the dog, and tick these off as you go.

-
- ☐ I timed it, and it runs between one and two minutes.
 -
 - ☐ I read it aloud alone and marked the spot where my voice caught, so it won't surprise me at the ceremony.
 -
 - ☐ Every promise names something I will do.
 -
 - ☐ I cut any joke that needs a backstory our guests don't have.
 -
 - ☐ I pictured our oldest relatives in the front row, and moved anything that would confuse or embarrass them into a private letter.
 -
 - ☐ I stopped after the forward line.
 -
 - ☐ We traded word counts without sharing a line, and our two sets run about the same length.
 -
 - ☐ It is printed in large type, double-spaced, with short lines, on a card or in a small vow book.
 -
 - ☐ My phone is staying in a pocket.
 -
 - ☐ Our officiant or a friend is holding a second copy.
 -



A single card is plenty for two minutes of vows.

I have watched too many couples read from a screen that dimmed or died halfway through.

The read-aloud chapter of the Couple's Kit covers where to hold the page and what to do if your voice cracks.



The Couple's Ceremony Kit

Now make the rest of your ceremony *as good as your vows*



Inside the kit

- Example vows I wrote, with my notes on what makes each one work
- The six-question quiz that tells you which ceremony style is yours
- The questions that pick your unity ritual, and the one I'd never do outdoors
- The famous reading to skip if you've already heard it at three weddings

Show me the whole ceremony →



Scan to open

www.robynashleyweddings.com/ceremony-kit Instant download · 24-hour refund window

Robyn Ashley Weddings

As featured on the Tamron Hall Show · Brides · The Knot Best of Weddings