



Gail and Joe Andrek of Cortlandt shared personal moments and memories with their guests by writing their own wedding vows.

by nicole sprinkle

## Words to Live By

How to infuse a dose of self-expression into your ceremony.

### Do's and Don'ts

- **DO talk to your fiancé** about the tone you'd like your vows to take (humorous, romantic, etc.).
- **DO find an officiant with experience** guiding couples in writing vows.
- **DO keep it simple**—write from the heart. You want it to be meaningful.
- **DO have the officiant hold a copy of your vows** in case you get too nervous or choked-up to read them.
- **DON'T write "secret" vows**, where you and your fiancé have no idea what your partner will say until the ceremony.
- **DON'T let them drag on.** Your guests should be touched by your vows, not bored to tears.
- **DON'T write vows that could potentially embarrass** either your fiancé or your guests.

**G**ail Tomassetti and Joe Andrek didn't want a cookie-cutter wedding—especially since the way the Cortlandt couple met was anything but ordinary. They first laid eyes on each other on the Cross County Parkway. Gail, a construction worker, was hanging off the tailgate of Joe's truck placing cones along the road. Their eyes met and the rest is history—sort of. They lived together (for 10 years!) until they finally decided to tie the knot. When they got married at The Chalet on the Hudson in Cold Spring, they did almost everything themselves, including writing their own vows—a trend that has taken off throughout Westchester and Connecticut.

Why the move toward a more personalized "I do"? Interfaith minister Maureen Orfino, who's based in Nyack, thinks couples from this area are so well educated that it just makes sense. "These are not the blushing brides of the past," she says. "So why not veer from the script and infuse a little self-expression into the day?"

While it's certainly possible to have a religious ceremony that incorporates individual touches, most traditional churches won't have a lot of leeway when it comes to writing your own vows. That's because they're bound by the religion's format, which requires that certain pronouncements be made. This is why couples like the Andreks, who want more freedom of expression, are increasingly turning to nondenominational ministers (or a friend or family member who's been legally ordained to officiate a wedding).

Gail says it meant so much more to them to have their wedding personalized with words that spoke of all the things she and Joe say to each other on a daily basis. In her speech, Gail told guests how she was marrying "a man who paid attention to every

detail." His pronouncement included the fact that "he couldn't believe he was marrying the person he had the most fun with every day."

But if you think it's easy to write your own vows, think again. It's not something you can wing; it takes thought, planning, and the following of some basic guidelines. To help couples, Orfino says to keep your words simple and to speak from the heart. She also gives them an extensive questionnaire to fill out. The questionnaire asks things such as, "What qualities do you both require to build a strong and lasting marriage?" and "When and where did you fall in love?" It's in these answers that Orfino says the best, most authentic vows are born. "Even people who aren't great writers can come up with meaningful vows by answering such questions," she says. "Sometimes they even end up saying things they'd never verbalized to each other before."

Another important rule to follow is to settle on the length ahead of time. Couples often want to write "secret" vows, which means the bride and groom won't hear them until the ceremony. This can result in one person waxing too long and the other being incongruously brief, or embarrassment if something too private is revealed. This is why it's best to agree on a time limit and give each other at least some idea of the direction you're taking.

Finally, don't discount wedding-day jitters—despite best intentions. Even well-rehearsed vows can turn to stammering, barely audible whispers if nerves kick in. That's why Orfino suggests asking the officiant to hold a copy of the vows. If, when the time comes, you're comfortable saying them yourself, she can hand them over to you. Otherwise, you can give her an agreed-upon sign for *uh-oh, I can't do this*, and she can read the vows on your behalf. ♥♥