4 Week Online Photography Course

Introduction to Wedding Photography

Documentary Wedding photography, Reportage & Wedding Photojournalism

Lesson 1

Course Notes

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MyPhotoSchool®

virtually everything about photography
The proliferation of point and shoot digital compact cameras and prosumer DSLR’s has led many people to believe that they now have the means capable of photographing a wedding.

The truth is that if you want to become a good wedding photographer there is a huge learning curve, both practical and technical.

My name is Keith Appleby and welcome to your course on Wedding Photography, which will provide you with the practical and technical information to help you produce a successful set of wedding images.

In this lesson we will look at the reasons why you want to be a wedding photographer, the thinking process required to be a wedding photographer, and how to pre-plan for the day.

We will also look at the early stages of the wedding day, where the bride is getting ready.

We will look at how to photograph the wedding dress and accessories.

I can't over emphasise how important pre-planning and preparation is for the successful outcome of your photographs, as this will minimise the levels of stress that can arise during the day.

Keith Appleby
Course Curriculum

Week One: Have you got what it takes?

The odds are that if you own a half-decent DSLR camera that you will eventually be asked to photograph a friend’s wedding. Or perhaps you have already photographed a wedding or two and would like to learn how to improve your skills so that you can capture those once in a lifetime fleeting moments. In the first lesson I talk about the huge importance of preparation, and also how to ensure that you are mentally equipped for any eventuality that the chaos of a wedding day can throw at you. We’ll look at the essential camera kit you can’t do without and we will also look at the early stages of the wedding day itself.

Lesson Two: Things which happen before the Ceremony

The wedding day is upon you and the nerves kick in. You have to be everybody’s friend and yet take seemingly relaxed and intimate photographs of the bride and her entourage as they prepare for the wedding. In this lesson I will show you some tips for getting the essential images during the getting ready process and the lead up to the processional. I will show you proven tips for photographing the dress, shoes, rings, flowers and the groom with his ushers. We will join the father of the bride in the bridal car as the bridesmaids are anxiously waiting, and how you can get elegant shots of the guests arriving.

Lesson Three: How to photograph the ceremony,

The bride is walking up the aisle with her father and the groom sees her for the first time. What’s the best way to capture this critical moment? In this lesson I will show you how to photograph the significant moments from the ceremony, whether religious or not, indoors or outdoors. I will show you how to look out for the transitory candids at the Reception and if it’s an indoor reception, how to use your speedlight to look as if it’s lit naturally. I stress the importance of your people skills, which will help you take genuinely joyful and relaxed formal group photos.

Lesson Four: How to photograph the breakfast, dancing & fireworks.

How do you make the bride and groom look totally at ease in front of your camera? It’s not that complicated, but you do need their complete trust. In this lesson I will show you my approach to getting uncontrived images of the bride and groom. I will show you how to get the key images from the wedding breakfast including speeches, cake cutting and the dancing. I will also show you the best way to shoot fireworks and Chinese lanterns prior to the send off. After the wedding the work begins again in front of your computer so I will give you an outline of my workflow to help you minimise the processing time.
To get the best from this course I am expecting you to already own a Digital SLR camera and have good hands-on knowledge of how your camera works. For example you should know the effect of differing focal length lenses and understand the meaning of photographic terms such as f-stops, sensor sizes, shutter speeds and how different lenses will affect the outcome of your image.

You should also have a detachable flash Speedlight and know the basics of how this works, too. The first thing you have to ask yourself is why you want to be a wedding photographer and do you have what it takes? A lot of professional photographers are now considering becoming wedding photographers because it’s much harder than ever to earn a living in other areas of photography.

This is because there are so many photography graduates who are happy to take on editorial work for a very reduced fee (if any) in order to gain experience.

In reality, wedding photography is probably one of the most stressful professions on the planet, as you must be able to handle pressure exceptionally well and yet appear outwardly calm, smiling and super confident at all times. A good wedding photographer makes it appear easy even if one of his or her cameras has stopped working.

You should be aware that people are watching you all the time at a wedding, as you are always on show, so try and avoid slouching or putting your hands in your pockets or looking bored, worried or anxious. You must always act confidently, even if your shutter has just jammed!

You should also be very mindful to be as discreet as possible on the wedding day. This is not your day. You are there to ‘document proceedings’ and not dictate them. However sometimes you have to be sure footed and determined to get the shots, because if you are too timid you’ll never get the key shots. There is a real art in getting the balance between being unobtrusive and still capturing the great moments.

The best wedding photographers instinctively know how to do this. So first and foremost you must be a people person - which means that you genuinely feel at ease with new people… but more importantly you must be able to make them feel at ease. Some people are naturally shy and feel threatened by our large cameras and lenses - so it is important to gain their trust.

During the reception I might start by chatting and befriending people without even raising the camera to my eye. So they think I could be a guest or a friend of the bride and groom and this way they will be far more approachable when I snap them later on. I like to think of myself as everybody’s friend for the day. I’m always mindful of the time I have available at each stage of the day and have learned not to be over eager early on or rush opportunities which will appear at later stages of the day.

The bridal couple might typically spend a year or so planning for their wedding day and usually once they’ve chosen their venue one of the first things that they will want to do is book their wedding photographer as it such a crucial part of their day. The first time you meet your prospective couple is absolutely critical as first impressions really count.

And what a couple need to feel more than anything when they first meet you, is confident; confident that you will deliver the kind of photography that they think they want.
The best way to help a couple gain confidence in you during the initial meeting is for you to be genuinely interested in their day, and ask relevant questions about their day. This way your engaging personality will become apparent. Typically, when I first meet a couple I don’t actually show them any of my work for at least 15 minutes. I prefer to ‘get to know them’ a bit so I can gauge the type of couple they are.

Of course they are interested in the photos you show them, but it will ultimately be your personality that will be the deal breaker, not just the photos.

If you think you can just sit there quietly and say next to nothing whilst they gaze in awe at your work then think again.

You need to be clear about your style of photography.
confident also that you will fit it on the day.

The most popular style of wedding photography today is documentary, reportage, or naturalistic wedding photojournalism, which tells the story of the wedding day from start to finish - and this is the style of photography that this course will focus on. Actually I find myself shooting a mix of styles throughout the day and it is often hard to pigeonhole one from the other.

Generally it’s the candid shots and the emotional moments that most people really love, and being caught unawares. However don’t dismiss the cheerful, happy mug shots of couples smiling and looking straight at camera; though not deemed in any way artistic and not the type of shots to advertise yourself, people love these too, as we all like to see pictures of ourselves.

And, if you want to maximise your print sales after the wedding, these are the ones that will do it, not the emotional tear-jerkers. I will touch on this later as I do try to take a quick smiley photo of all the guests, if it’s not too large a wedding, say less than 130 guests.

The bride and groom really appreciate this, and most guests are very happy to oblige - but you need to choose your moments carefully, like everything else at a wedding. Most couples who choose reportage photographers don’t want to spend an hour or so posing in front of the camera in contrived and gimmicky positions pretending to be fashion models or film stars for the day.

When I take ‘couple shots’ I try to make it an enjoyable and natural experience for the couple by making it more spontaneous rather than fabricated and I will cover this in more detail in a later lesson. However this does not exclude the taking of family group shots or formal photos as this is an important part of day whether you are reportage or not and here pre-planning is essential.

I always email my couples a month ahead of the wedding and ask them for a list of family photos they’d like taken on the day to ensure that we make adequate time for this during the reception. But the trick and the skill is to make this a fun and relaxed session - and this is where your wonderful personality will put everyone at ease and help them enjoy themselves.

It is the one time at a wedding where you really do have to be in command of the situation and be charmingly forceful or else the shots and expressions might be vacant. Let’s now run through the essentials of your camera equipment.

The first thing you have to do is ensure that your camera kit is fully functional and that you have a good back-up plan should anything fail. That means you must have two of everything – two camera bodies, two flash Speedlights, and plenty of fully charged batteries.

I use a diffusion dome on my speedlights for 90% of the images as I find this gives a softer more natural light in most situations. Never use rechargeable batteries in your speedlights to save money - this is a real error of judgement. If you miss that critical shot because your flash unit hasn’t recycled – you’ll curse yourself. I would recommend Lithium batteries in your Speedlights as they are six times more powerful than alkalines.

I use a Quantum Turbo battery booster so that I can fire my flash units ultra fast in situations where I would otherwise have missed the shots, particularly during the dancing or if there’s a long family processional. I often jokingly compare wedding photography to going into a war zone, although it is only a friendly fire zone at a wedding, you need to be prepared for any eventuality.
You should also shoot in camera Raw mode as this will help you recover any incorrectly exposed images. Weddings are fast paced and some photo opportunities are so quick that you can’t always reset your camera in time and at least in Raw mode you can correct this later on in post production. Depending on your camera model you don’t need to shoot in full Raw, as this might be overkill for most wedding photos.

I use a compressed Raw on my Nikons, and if you’re a Canon shooter you can use medium Raw, which still gives a very large file. The most useful pair of lenses at a wedding is a 24-70mm for a full frame camera and a 70-200mm. I normally keep one on each body to avoid too much lens changing and hence protecting the sensors from dust. I also carry an extra wide 14-24mm - and if your preference is for prime lenses that’s fine. These are only my suggestions.

Whilst it is good to have the best kit you can afford, what really matters is your ‘eye’ and your ‘approach’. I don’t want you to get bogged down in worrying about your kit or turning yourself into an equipment geek. The most important thing above all is getting great shots and capturing key moments, and this can be done with the most basic of cameras.

However if you want to avoid stress, then go for the best bit of kit you can afford. So let’s move on to the pre-planning. You need to print out the schedule for the day and a list of all the venue addresses, phone numbers & contact names. So in your mind you have already worked out how long you will allocate to each venue. What is the parking like at each venue or are you travelling by cab? You should also have two printed lists of the family formal photos, which the couple have already emailed you, so you can give one list to the ushers to gather up the family.

People often ask me what is the most stressful part of the wedding day and I always say that it’s actually ‘getting to the venue’. It’s the one thing I have very little control over and if your chosen route has a bad traffic delay or an accident is blocking the freeway then this can definitely cause major anxiety. You also have to think about eating on the day, otherwise your energy levels will drop. A quick sandwich is fine for lunch as this is usually grabbed on the go. However if you’re working for 10 hours you will need more sustenance later on.

I have a simple clause in my contract which requests that the caterer provides a meal for the photographer of a similar standard to the guests with a fresh veg or two as this is the requirement for fabulous photos. It is perfectly normal to feel some anxiety before your
wedding; after all it is a big responsibility. You alone are responsible for the capturing the key moments from the day, so there's a lot riding on you.

I still get butterflies when I set off for a wedding, even though I've photographed more than 600 weddings, and all successfully. If you want to be a wedding photographer there is no such thing as being sick on a wedding day. You just can't be. I do occasionally get asked the question "What if you break your leg the day before our wedding?" My reply is that I would arrange for a colleague to cover for me. Touch wood, this has never happened, and I hope it never will. You have to decide what to wear for your wedding. If you're a man then a suit is the most practical. I try to look as smart as the guests as this way I will blend in better and be less noticeable.

I personally avoid wearing a tie as my camera straps always end up strangling me - but this is totally up to you. The main thing for me is to be smart as this will give the most professional impression. There are many photographers who wear flak jackets with bulky lens belts at a wedding, and whilst this might be practical they can really look out of place at a black tie wedding. Typically the first photos of the day will be of the bride getting ready (or groom if he's not too far away). However if the wedding is taking place in an attractive or historic town or village then I try to take an establishing shot on my way to the bride's home.

This photo of Edinburgh set the scene for a city wedding at the famous Balmoral Hotel later in the day and is a great opener for their wedding album. I am always thinking about the story of the day and how these photos will look in the final album. Very much like a film maker, in the back of your mind you should be thinking of the final edit.

Quite often if the church is nearby I'll pop in to see how the florists are getting on and what are the best vantage points and camera angles. I also like to know what the lighting is like inside and if there is any daylight. If the flowers are in place then this is a good time to take some detail shots inside and outside. Wherever possible I try to get some side or key lighting on these shots as it always looks better and gives the best definition.

This will depend totally on what light is available. I avoid using fill in flash on these shots as it can ruin the ambience of the image. If the wedding is taking place in a hotel, and the bride (and groom) are getting ready there as well, then this will make life much easier for you as these establishing shots are ready to hand. If it's a famous hotel then it's well worth trying for an interesting image. This one of Claridges in Mayfair sets the scene for a winter wedding.

And here you can see I've backed up the exterior shot with an interior of the reception area of the hotel. If your wedding is in a landmark venue like this then you have to make very sure you get some stylish interiors; it's good to get these early on before the demands on your time become overwhelming. These were all taken with a 15mm at 2000 ISO.

And you can see here the beautiful indoor winter setting for the civil ceremony within the hotel later on. Your bride might be getting ready at the family home, or at the reception venue or at a hotel. These welcoming ribbons on the gates of this house are lit by a low winter's light, which seems to invite you inside. Once inside the house, if the bride is happy
This is usually a good time to take some detail shots of the dress, shoes and flowers and also gives you a chance to scope out the house and gardens. Most brides will appreciate a stylish image of their shoes and dress and any other accessories, as they have spent many months thinking about these. Try and avoid just plonking the shoes side by side. Often there is a window or a surface that lends itself to a more interesting shot.

Again – try for some natural backlighting as this will bring out the contour of the shoes. This image of a pair of Louboutin shoes on a very sunny ledge required a bit of fill in flash, otherwise the trademark red soles would have been far too dark. This photo was not set up – one of the bridesmaids was fetching the shoes and I managed to grab this quick shot whilst she was en route.

And here you can see another pair of Louboutins, this time shot from a low angle and totally backlit from the window. Don’t be afraid to try things out. This photo is a quick thinking candid shot – I didn’t set it up – it just so happened that the bride was very happy in her shoes and I think it makes for a very different view of a detail shot.

If you’re lucky enough to have a friendly pet in the house, then why not make good use of him. Or any other props like this piano can make for an interesting choice. Of course you might find that the shoes can be photographed as found – but in my experience this is very rare as they are often tucked away in boxes, or in a bag.
to see you then pop up and say hi and try and be as friendly and relaxed as you can, as it's very important to get off on the right footing.

When you come to photograph the dress try and remove any clutter around it so that it's really looking its best. If the dress is still in its cover you can ask an obliging bridesmaid to unwrap it and help position it for you. This image and the subsequent one are of the same dress in alternative settings. On this image I added a small amount of bounced ceiling flash behind me to clean up the shadow areas.

The same dress in this setting had enough light flooding in through the window to shoot available light at ISO 2500. Quite often a bed stand or window is a good place to hang the dress, but the bed might be untidy and have all sorts of stuff on it, so be mindful to tidy it up before you shoot it. Of course you mustn't forget the bridesmaids' dresses either. It's not always possible to get shots of these, as they might not be on display.

I don't normally set this type of shot up but if I notice that someone has gone to the trouble of hanging them then I feel it's valid to photograph them. On this image I tidied up the flowers on the mantel and straightened some of the sashes. This image was just as I found it - though I squared up the shoeboxes a bit.

You will see on the following five images the sequence from this rather normal detail photo of the three bridesmaids' dresses through to the three young bridesmaids wearing these dresses in a formal setting just before setting off for the ceremony. As I mentioned before – it is all about thinking ahead so you can tell the story of the day and documenting what you see.

So first of all I found the bridesmaids totally absorbed in watching TV and completely unaware of my presence. Taken with available light at 4000 ISO and the only light source was through the window – so you need to practice your backlighting exposure to make sure your skin tones are looking good. And here we find them having their sashes tied and getting dressed. Again, not bothered by my presence.

Once they were dressed they all sat on the bed and were chatting to each other. On this occasion I gently asked them to turn round as I knew this composition could work out. So sometimes you have to quietly intervene to get a photo like this and it's really about the way you do this that's so important. The girls were already sitting on the bed and were very happy to turn round for a quick glance at me and then carry on chatting.
Here I found them later on watching TV again - totally absorbed and unaware of me. I found them exactly like this and I think it’s a charming study. I’m showing you this sequence so you get an idea how the all the images knit together to make a good story. I knew eventually the girls would have to come down this very beautiful staircase so I had prepared my camera settings beforehand. I took seven shots in this sequence and this one seemed to work best.

The only direction I gave them was to walk slowly, as little girls tend to run everywhere, which would have made it tricky and not quite as elegant. Finally we see them here in the gardens just before they set off for the church. Wherever possible I try to take formal photos in the shade as it’s much kinder to the skin and avoids squinting. I will show you a more detailed approach to taking formal photos in the next lesson.
Your environment will often dictate how you choose to shoot the flowers. I try to keep this as simple as possible. A window ledge or a chair arm usually suffices. Just let the light drift across them. Occasionally I'll set up a shot on a table indoors, again being very careful to let the natural light contour the flowers.

Or you might choose to pop outdoors and try a combination shot of flowers and shoes together. And here I've put all the elements into the one image, dress, flowers and shoes. It's impossible to generalise about the best way to photograph these details but one constant is to try and use natural light wherever possible.

To summarize, in this lesson we have thought about the reasons why you want to be a wedding photographer and whether your personality can cope with the requisite stress. We've looked at how important it is to pre-plan for your wedding to ensure a successful outcome and reduce the stress. We have looked at the style of photography you want to produce and the essential camera equipment required.

We have also looked at the early stages of the bride's getting ready process. Please make sure you upload your assignment to the classroom in the next 7-10 days and feel free to ask me any question I look forward to seeing your work and until next week....... good bye for now.