



You spent your lifetime dreaming about your wedding gown, so shopping for it is sure to be an exhilarating, exciting and yes, overwhelming experience. When should you start? Where should you go? What happens once you're there? Well, your worrying is over. From ordering to altering, here's everything you need to know.

When to Begin

Two words: Shop early. Nine to twelve months before the wedding is ideal, since it's best to have about six months to spare for fittings. Why? Unless you buy a ready-to-wear gown or a sample, wedding gowns are custom-made (and any beading are likely hand-sewn). Then, once the gown arrives, it must be altered -- usually several times -- to fit you perfectly. That said; many companies can turn a gown around quickly. If you have less than six months, it is not impossible, just get started pronto. One tip: Go simple. As a rule, the less complicated the gown, the less time it takes to make and fit.

If you have lots of time, you can hit every salon, shop 'til you drop, and agonize over your gown decision. Most important, be decisive!

9 to 12 Months Before

- Start envisioning yourself in your wedding gown. Think about your everyday style. Now write down six adjectives that best describe how you want to look and feel (summery, sweet, elegant, royal, sexy, sophisticated, demure, over-the-top, to name a few).
- Choose the time of day and formality of your wedding before you set foot in a store.
- Start learning the ins and outs of wedding gowns. Get the lingo down and determine which design elements will complement your body.
- Hone in on a specific style. Browse through the thousands of options on The Knot Wedding Dress Search to find designers and styles you like. Save some of your favorites and print them out. Jot down a few names and gown elements that you find especially appealing.
- Now get some paper and a pencil and put into words what you absolutely do not want in a gown (for example, short sleeves, a full skirt, or beading).
- Determine your gown budget -- a good guideline is to spend 10% of your overall wedding budget.

8 Months Before

- Find two or three salons that suit you. Ask recently married friends where they bought their gowns and whether they had a good experience. Check to see which salons carry the designers you like. Call and make appointments, allowing at least one hour at each salon. Use a notebook to keep track of the salons, addresses, dates, and times.



- Decide who to bring and invite them along. Limit your entourage to no more than three oglers at once.
- Get your gear ready. Many salons provide some of the essentials listed below, but they may not fit properly:
 - A strapless bra or bustier
 - Control-top panty hose (gowns go on more smoothly, especially the often-too-small sample sizes)
 - A slip if you plan to try on sheaths or slip dresses
 - Shoes with approximately the same heel height you plan to wear on your wedding day
 - Tissues for when your mom sees you in your first gown
- As you shop take careful notes on the dresses and the designers you like and write down descriptions of the gowns with prices.
- A few words on sizing: Wedding gowns can run small. The store will measure your bust, waist, and hips, consult the individual manufacturer's sizing chart, and order the size that matches your largest measurement (it's much easier and less expensive to take in a dress than to let it out).

7 Months Before

- Narrow down your gown choices and go for a second (or third or fourth!) salon visit. You can return as many times as you like. No matter how indecisive you think you are, you probably won't come close to being the most neurotic bride they've ever helped. Also, make at least one trip on your own (so you can ponder your options without others' opinions coloring your thoughts).
- At the salon, ask if the gown has coordinating accessories (veil or shawl) and try them on, too. Don't feel pressured to order anything: You still have time to look elsewhere for accessories.

6 Months Before

- Order your gown. Make sure the following contract points are in writing on your receipt:
 - designer name
 - style number or name
 - size or measurements the salon is sending to the manufacturer
 - approximate delivery date
 - how many fittings are included in the price (if any)
 - how much money you still owe for the gown
 - amount of your deposit and that it's marked paid



5 Months Before

- Call the salon to confirm the delivery date.
- Decide what accessories -- shoes, lingerie, jewelry, headwear, wrap, gloves, outerwear, and bag -- you need (or want!) and shop for them.
- If you plan to lose weight before your wedding, do so before your fittings begin. Once fittings are underway, try to maintain your weight. (Better yet, forget about the diet -- obviously he thinks you look great just the way you are.)

6 Weeks Before (or once your gown has arrived)

- Have your first fitting. Invite an honest, sharp-eyed friend or family member to come along. Bring your accessories, too, so you can see the whole look.

4 to 5 Weeks Before

- Have your second fitting. Make sure that:
 - The hem of a full-length gown skims the tops of the toes of your shoes
 - You can move comfortably
 - The gown stays in place as you move
 - There is no obvious wrinkling, bunching, or pulling
- Continue to schedule fittings until you are completely satisfied.
- Bring your maid of honor to your final fitting to learn about the gown. Does it need bustling? Ask the salesperson to teach her how to do it. Does it have complicated straps or buttons? Make sure she knows how to work them. Also, find out how to banish last-minute wrinkles. Should you use an iron? On what setting? Is steaming a better option? And what if you spill something on the gown? Are there certain products you should or shouldn't use?

3 Weeks Before

- Schedule a day and time to pick up your gown from the salon. We suggest you try it on one last time, no matter what the salon says, especially if it's been a while since your last fitting. We all know stress affects our appetites, and if you suddenly don't fit into your gown you need time to adjust it, or your diet.
- Pick up your gown!