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## SEVEN WAYS TO MAKE FINDING THE PERFECT WEDDING DRESS EASY

The first dress was exactly what Kate Hale wanted: sweetheart neckline, ruched bodice, simple form-fitting skirt. The second had a similar top, but it was an A-line with a train. She'd never thought she'd want a train. After a full day of looking for a wedding gown, Hale had returned to a boutique she'd visited earlier in the day. She had seen two dresses she liked and wanted to try them both on again; perhaps then she would be able to make a decision.

Standing in front of the mirror, Kate tried on first one dress, then the other. She knew now that one of these would be the dress she would wear at her wedding: but which one? The first was exactly what she had set out to look for after she'd gotten engaged. The second was similar, but it wasn't what she imagined. Still, she loved the way she felt in it. When she put it in, she felt like a bride. It was a hard decision.

Finding the perfect wedding dress will be one of the first things you do when planning your wedding—and possibly the hardest. Fortunately, it doesn't have to be that way. Here are seven simple ways to easily find your dream wedding dress.

### **PLAN AHEAD**

Start your research by looking through bridal magazines and on the Web sites of gown designers. Tear or print out pictures of the gowns you like. Hale, who was married in March 2008, looked online and in bridal magazines and also looked at pictures of dresses she had worn in the past to determine what fit her best.

Don't neglect to make a budget. Knowing how much you can spend will help you narrow down the sheer number of dresses available. Before Anna Milone, who was married in August 2007, began dress shopping, she and her fiancé included the dress and all of its accessories (veil, shoes, jewelry) in their wedding budget and decided how much she could spend.

But be willing to be flexible. "There are many times when a bride might have a budget of a certain amount and they find their dream wedding gown and they go over that," said Starla Flake, owner of Brickhouse Bridal in Houston, Texas. "And there are just as many times when someone is open to spending more but they find their dream wedding gown and go under. A budget is a guideline."

### **MAKE A LIST OF FEATURES YOU LIKE**

Think about how your dress will fit with the atmosphere of your wedding ceremony. Will you be getting married in the morning or at night? In a church or on a beach? Will the ceremony be traditional or fun and modern? Your dress should match the other aspects of your wedding.

Besides lighting, time of day, and climate, Flake recommended thinking about what type of aisle you'll walk down during the ceremony. "If it's a long aisle, a long train or a long

veil would be totally appropriate. If it's on the beach or in a chapel, she'll need to think about the length of the train."

Make a list of what you want in a dress. Perhaps it's most important to you to wear lace, or maybe you've always envisioned a dress that will match your mother's pearls.

Milone made a list of "must-haves" and also features she would prefer. "I wrote down a list of everything I really liked: what material, what color, what style," she said. "I knew I wanted a strapless ball gown. I knew I wanted it to be taffeta. I knew I liked dresses with beading, and more vintage-looking."

### **ONLY TRY ON A FEW DRESSES AT A TIME**

Once you get to the shop, resist the urge to try on every dress there. You'll feel much less flustered—and have an easier time deciding what you like and don't like—if you keep yourself to half a dozen dresses.

"We ask that they start with six dresses," Flake said about her shop. "That will give them a feel for what they're liking and it won't overwhelm them in the process. If they start out with twelve dresses, that's daunting. Then they can either go back and look around the shop some more, narrowing down their search, or we can pull some that they might like."

If you don't know what you like, Flake suggested trying on different silhouettes and materials. "I also tell them to try on a dress that she's never thought of trying on but she liked immediately when she saw it," she said. "Ruffles, bows, things like that."

### **DON'T TAKE EVERYONE WITH YOU**

As much as you want to share this experience with your bridal party, it will be easier for you to concentrate if you bring only two or three people whose opinions you trust.

“You do want to hear people’s opinions,” Milone said, “but you don’t want to hear too many people’s opinions.”

Hale initially started out with not only her mother and her matron of honor, but also several of her bridesmaids. But when she went back to make her final decision, she brought only her mother and matron of honor.

“I enjoyed having all my bridesmaids with me,” Hale said, “but I think that made it harder. It was easier to pick with just the two of them there.”

### **PICK A DRESS THAT WILL MAKE YOU COMFORTABLE AND CONFIDENT**

When you try on a dress, consider how you feel wearing the dress. Will it be comfortable to wear both during the ceremony and dancing all night at your reception? For example, even after it’s altered, will you feel comfortable wearing a dress with a heavy train, or would you prefer a lighter fabric?

“Try to imagine yourself wearing it in front of tons of people and dancing all day,” Milone said.

And—just as importantly—does it make you feel confident and beautiful? Consider whether each part of the dress flatters you or whether a different style of dress would work better.

“Know what your body type is,” Flake said. “Whether you’re an hour-glass or a pear, those kind of shapes.” You’ll be most comfortable in a dress that works with your figure.

## **TAKE NOTES OR PICTURES**

After you get home, you'll want to remember what you liked and didn't like about each dress. Designate someone to take notes about each dress. If you can, take pictures too, though not every bridal shop allows cameras. Call ahead to find out whether pictures are allowed, or ask as you come in.

Flake cautions, however, never to make a decision based on a picture. "So many times there are shadows or it might be clipped," she said. "For me, allowing brides to take pictures in their dress or while trying it on is part of the experience, it's not part of the buying process. They will remember their favorite dresses based on how they felt in them or how they remember they looked in them."

## **LET THE SHOP HELP YOU PICK A DRESS SIZE**

When it's time to look at size charts, it's important not to think about the numbers—just let the shop assistant help you pick the right size. They may also be able to help you cut down alterations by suggesting ordering a different length or, if you're between sizes, choosing the one that will require the least amount of alteration.

"All wedding gowns will need some kind of alteration," Flake said. "And it's much easier to take in a wedding gown than to let it out. We would always recommend if she's between sizes to go up a size so it can be altered in."

If you're unsure, or if you hope to lose weight before your wedding, go with the size the shop assistants suggest; if you go down a size or two by the time the dress comes in, it will feel great to get it altered down.

“It’s a little bit nerve wracking thinking, ‘oh gosh, is this going to fit?’” Milone said. But her consultants helped her choose a petite size that meant her dress didn’t need to be hemmed.

Hale needed to make a decision. She stood in front of the mirror, considering the differences between the two dresses. She felt inclined to go with the first, the one that fit with her initial idea. But there was just something about the dress with the train. She couldn’t let it go.

“You want a dress you’ll feel beautiful in,” her mother told her. Hale knew she was right; this was the only time she would get to do this. She needed a dress that she felt was unique: the dress that made her feel like a bride, even though it didn’t match her original idea.

“I love my dress,” Hale said. “I wish I could wear it more often.”