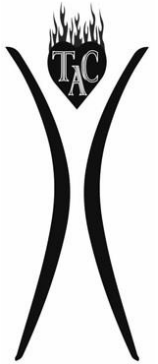


# So You Want to Officiate a Legal Wedding at Burning Man?

## The Assless Chaplain's Ultimate Guide to Officiating (and Planning) Burning Man Weddings

*Officiating a legal wedding at Burning Man is one of the greatest Playa gifts one can give and one of the most fun. Though it's not too difficult to arrange, the importance of the gift means you should be ready to do a great job and prevent any legal hiccups. Burning Man has [basic instructions](#) for making your friends' (or strangers') dreams come true. This is meant as a more comprehensive, step-by-step guide. Keep in mind that most of these steps do not need to be taken in order. I would recommend that the officiant and the couple read this whole document as soon as they decide to get married at Burning Man. Have fun and make it special: people get married at Burning Man for a reason. Let that reason dictate the ceremony.*



### Step 1: Become a Certified Officiant

To marry someone in Nevada, you must be a County Clerk, judge or notary in good standing, a US military chaplain or a religious official. There is really just one reasonable way for you to do this. The Universal Life Church is a religious organization that exists exclusively to let people easily become wedding officiants.

You can do this online, quickly and easily [right here](#). The ULC does not charge for this service. However, they do fund themselves by selling officiant kits. I encourage you to buy one. Though much of the swag is useless, it's less than \$50, you support a good cause, and it does include some useful stuff, like a book with wedding advice and descriptions of different religions' weddings, along with a few "fanciful" wedding certificates (I'll go more into this later.) Order either the Nevada package or, if available, the Burning Man package.

One thing that you'll need that no one told me about is an Affidavit of Authority to Solemnize Marriages. So, after you become an officiant, contact ULC and ask for this. This should be valid for a few years.

## Nevada Wedding Laws

In Nevada, one need to meet the following criteria to be legally married:

- 18+, except 17+ with guardian and court approval for good cause.
- Must not already be married.
- Must be no more closely related than second cousins.
- There are no residency or gender restrictions. They will provide documentation for recording of weddings in foreign jurisdictions.
- Marriage by proxy is not legal.
- The officiant must be present at the wedding.
- You cannot *legally* marry someone to themselves, to anyone or anything that is not human, nor may you legally marry more than two people to each other. Of course, if the wedding need not be legally-binding, you can do whatever.

## Step 2: Obtaining a Wedding License

The couple needs to obtain the wedding license in-person and must bring IDs. They can get this done by any county clerk in Nevada. If asked, they should indicate that this will be a religious wedding ceremony.

The clerk's office must receive the finalized license within 10 days of the ceremony. Keep this in mind when choosing a clerk's office and when scheduling the ceremony. For instance, if you officiate a wedding on Burn Night and get back to your home in, say, the Bay Area, a few days later, you can easily mail the license back to Vegas in time. On the other hand, if you're doing an early-week wedding, you may want to ask the couple to get their license in Reno and mail it from a postal box in Reno on your way out. The license can be returned by the officiant or the couple, in-person or by mail. It is wise to have someone at the wedding tasked with safely securing all important paperwork.

The license is valid for a year, anywhere in the State of Nevada and does not designate a specific official. If something goes wrong and you can't officiate the wedding at Burning Man, the couple can still get it done at a county clerk's office or another officiant *who is a resident of Nevada*. Licenses cost \$77 as of October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2024.

The couple should use their real, legal names that match their IDs. You should use these names, exactly, on all other paperwork.

## Step 3: Obtain a Temporary Certificate of Authority to Perform Marriages

Unless you live in Nevada, you need a Temporary Certificate of Authority to Perform Marriages for **each** wedding you plan to officiate from the Pershing County Clerk-Treasurer's office. As of October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2024, you can download the paperwork through [this link](#). If that link doesn't work, visit [www.pershingcountynv.gov](http://www.pershingcountynv.gov) and find the Clerk-Treasurer office's page. Fill the paperwork out carefully. You'll have to send in a check for \$30 (as of 10/29/24). You'll need to get the paperwork notarized first, which costs \$15 in California, as of 10/29/24.

The folks at the Clerk-Treasurer's office are really polite, helpful and efficient (thanks, Lacey!) However, they are a small office and have to process a lot of these before Burning Man. I would suggest you start this process as soon as possible, up to six months before the wedding. If you have less than 6 weeks before the wedding, call them.

The paperwork will ask for the wedding location and any aliases you use. Be as specific and thorough as possible. I fill the form out with my legal name and my "Assless Chaplain" alias. I use my camp's address, Black Rock City and Gerlach when describing the location of the wedding, unless the wedding is on the open Playa, in which case I write "Black Rock Desert," instead of Black Rock City.

## Step 4: Plan and Officiate the Wedding

Legally, you only need the following to solemnize a marriage in Nevada:

- The presence of the couple, at least one witness and a qualified officiant;
- Paperwork properly filled out and submitted by the above individuals;
- The officiant must obtain from the couple a clear indication that they both agree to the marriage and the officiant must also declare the couple married.

However, you should plan something special and meaningful for the couple. Let's go through the elements of planning.

### Meeting with the couple

I typically plan two Zoom meetings with the couple. In the first, I explain the legal requirements of the wedding, talk logistics, let them know what their options are for the ceremony and learn more about them and their relationships to start building a sermon and ceremony. In the second meeting, I finalize details, including finding out which elements of the ceremony they want to approve in advance and which they want to be surprised by. Just as a heads up – more about this toward the end of this document – you may want to discuss the wedding certificate, too and details/expectations for photography.

### Place and time

There are no requirements for where and when you can conduct the ceremony. Keep in mind weather, sleep and the requirements of the ceremony. For instance, many couples want to have their ceremony next to some incredible piece of art. At 5p, it's going to be hot. At sundown, it's going to be crowded, likely with other weddings. Mornings may be best for couples with only a few, reliable guests, but might be too cold for sexier attire that covers less of the couple's bodies. Night weddings require sufficient lighting for guests to see, photographers to take pictures (depending on photography setup) and for the paperwork to get filled out.

If you want to have a great reception, with many guests, you might be best doing it at a chapel or bar. Having separate locations for the wedding and the reception is do-able, but can be exhausting or

confusing for guests, depending on the details. Remember that weddings later in the week make it easier to comply with the 10-day return period.

## Ceremony

Within the minimal requirements given above, a Burning Man ceremony can take infinite forms. However, there are some basic elements of a ceremony that I've seen in many or most of the dozens that I've officiated. I've put them below in the order I usually do them in, but that order can be switched up. Remember, that this ceremony is meant to be special, so be ready to help the couple plan anything under the (hot) sun.

Don't forget that Burning Man is a place that induces some degree of ADD in everyone. Avoid overly long weddings and keep the ceremony moving. I've include suggested time caps for each element and/or my estimate of the typical amount of time across the ceremonies I've conducted

## The Processional

In a traditional wedding for cultures influenced by Christianity, the groom walks down the aisle, accompanied by someone meaningful to him and then the father-of-the-bride walks his daughter down the aisle to give her away to the groom. Nearly every wedding I've conducted has retained the processional (walking down the aisle), but not the dad giving away the bride part.

Of course, the aisle takes all sorts of forms. At large-scale art weddings, we often just have the guests stand to either side to create in aisle. In other cases, there's no aisle, the couple just walk up to the officiant.

In most cases, either both partners are given away to each other or, most often, the couple walks down the aisle together. Sometimes, I play a song special to the couple and they dance down the aisle. **Do not, of course, throw flowers, rice or candy at a Burning Man wedding, as this is just MOOP.** An easy substitute for throwing flowers is blowing bubbles with a machine or just a little bottle of bubbles. One year, we had a flower girl who made herself a belt with plastic flowers attached to the belt, so they stayed connected to her after she threw them.

*Maximum time:* 5 minutes for dances

*Typical time:* 20 seconds

## Welcome Statement

Once the couple walk down the aisle, a brief statement can be made welcoming guests and sharing any pertinent information (like requests not to take pictures or a heads-up on ceremony interactivity.) This statement is usually made by the officiant but can also be made by the couple or a friend (as a way to give more people a role in the wedding.) Of course, you can also just jump into the sermon.

*Maximum time:* 1 minute

*Typical time:* 20 seconds

## Officiant's Sermon

“Sermon” sounds awfully religious. Just think of it as a chance to share your thoughts and wishes with the couple and the guests. This is why I do the two meetings with the couple. It's an opportunity to make the ceremony extra special. Many couples come to me to plan a rather casual, light-hearted ceremony. By the time we've gotten to know each other and planned the ceremony, it starts to take on more meaning. The sermon is often a tipping point at which everything gets really deep and emotional. Be ready for tears. But make sure the couple even wants you to do this. They may not.

*Maximum time:* 5 minutes for a couple, maybe a bit longer for a thurple, up to 10 minutes for a double wedding.

*Typical time:* 5 minutes

## Best Man and Maid of Honor Speeches

Again, I'm using the language of traditional weddings, but the couple may want to have some of their loved ones speak. This is a suitable time to do that. These may be planned speeches, but it's also fine to put someone on the spot in the moment.

*Maximum time:* 20 minutes

*Typical time:* 5 minutes

## Guest Participation

Discuss with the couple whether they want their guests to participate in the ceremony. This can take many forms. One way I often suggest is to have them yell out their wishes and blessings for the couple.

*Typical time:* 5 minutes

## Declaration of Intent:

You know in the movies when the minister asks something like “Do you take Becky to be your lawfully wedded bride, in sickness and in health, until death to you part?” That's the declaration of intent. While not strictly required for legal reasons, it sets the couple up for the legal obligation of stating that they want to be married to each other.

This declaration can take any form, though for legal reasons, it should be an intelligible and clear request for affirmation of the couple's assent to the marriage. The couple may give you guidance on this. You may want to involve elements of Burning Man into it, like asking that the couple will keep burning together, mentioning the Ten Principles or citing The Man as your authority, etc.

Generally, I ask each of the two people getting married to declare their intent. Sometimes the declaration is the same for both. Sometimes they are different. You can also ask both of them at the same time. Their answer should be clear, like “I do” or “Yes.”

*Maximum time:* 5 minutes

*Typical time:* 2 minutes

## Vows

In traditional weddings, couples will recite vows to each other. These may be standard, in line with their religion, or they may be written by the couple. I officiated one wedding of two campmates who had two other campmates write and deliver the vows in their place, which was hilarious and meaningful at the same time.

Most couples I've married just write their own vows, if they do vows. On rare occasions, we skip this part. On the other hand, nearly half of the couples I've married replace vows with other meaningful words to each other, affirming their love, explaining why they want to marry them, etc. They can decide who speaks first in advance or at the last moment.

*Maximum time:* 10 minutes (Although in one case, the groom had a head full of acid and went on for 20 minutes and it was pretty damn good.)

*Typical time:* 5 minutes

## Ring Exchange

You do not need to do a ring exchange. One cute couple I married handcuffed themselves to each other for the night instead. The couple can also exchange other objects. Most, however, do rings. They should probably bring their own. If they don't and you didn't bring any, you can usually find rings on-Playa. Stop by The Assless Chapel, if you're in a pinch: we've got plenty.

Nearly all couples do want to do a ring exchange. This is easy. The couple should decide who goes first or if they do this simultaneously and whether they want to wait until they've both delivered their "vows" or after each one has. These are generally not important details and can be figured out during the ceremony.

Usually, the couples carry their rings with them or I have them. Sometimes, though, it can be nice to honor guests as ring-bearers, as in a traditional wedding. I don't like involving ring-bearers in the processional – it fits into the ceremony awkwardly. Instead, just ascertain who has the rings ahead of time and ask them to come up at the right time.

*Typical time:* 30 seconds

## Pronouncement

This is when you will pronounce the couple married. I always ask in advance about what basic language to use "I now pronounce you married" or "I now pronounce you wife and wife," etc. Just as with the Declaration of Intent, this is a good time to add flourishes about the couple, the guests or Burning Man. You can go over this with the couple in advance, plan it yourself in advance or come up with it on the spot, if you're good at that type of thing. Just clarify your plan with the couple in advance.

Typically, you should exhort the couple to kiss – expect that, at Burning Man, the kiss may take longer than usual and may go beyond a kiss. The couple may also want to throw a bouquet. They will typically exit by walking back down the aisle while everyone cheers.

*Typical time: 3 minutes*

## Closing Statement

After the pronouncement there will be a lot of yelling and cheering. Once the couple has exited, it's time for you to use your big voice (or a bullhorn) and let guests know what to do next: "we're going to head to Hair of the Dog for drinks"; "we're all biking to the Man now" or "we have apps and Champagne at the bar; Squid and Red, can you two set up the speakers?"

## Guests and Reception

Phew... that was a lot about the ceremony. A few notes on guests and the reception. This is Burning Man; no one expects seating for everyone, and people get into things more when they're standing. But make sure you have sufficient bike parking and enough seating for those who can't stand. If you're hosting a reception, make sure you have enough booze and bartenders.

Many burners love to help out with weddings. At my Burning Man wedding, friends got the USS Nevada to host us and drive us around. Bars are often happy to host receptions. Just keep in mind that these are also gifts. It's not on the couple to take the lead in terms of showing appreciation for the gift and respect for the venue: it's your job. Leave no trace, be kind, be grateful, you know the drill...

## Pictures

If you can, have a dedicated wedding photographer (or multiple photographers) and plan ahead of time for how the pictures will be delivered after the burn and who will have access to them. Even though it's a wedding, photographers must still be respectful and not take/share pictures of people who would rather that not happen. This can be a bit complicated, but certainly be careful with compromising photos.

## Attire

There are no dress codes at Burning Man. You, however, should make sure your outfit meets the couple's expectations for the vibe of their wedding. Couples are best off bringing their own outfits, but many camps can loan or gift great wedding outfits. Costume Kult and Black Rock Boutique are great places for that. Lingerie Lounge can help for more risqué outfits. Some of the wedding camps may be able and willing to loan an outfit.

You may want to bring some items of clothing to share. If the couple doesn't want them, no problem. If they do, let them keep the item as a memento.

## Staffing

It's best if you have help for the wedding. I've already written about bartenders and photographers. You may want someone or a couple people assigned to handling music. You may need people to direct guests and manage bike parking. **You should have two reliable people to help the officiant and the couple.** These people will handle the important paperwork and be available for any unforeseen tasks that arise in the moment.



## Step 5: Finalizing the Wedding

Once the ceremony is complete, you need to make sure to accurately and properly fill out the paperwork. At this point, getting people to do their part in this process will be like herding cats. Let people know what they need to do in advance, get this done as soon after the ceremony as possible and be patient: everyone will want the couple's time, the witnesses will be drinking Champagne from the bottle and guests will assume that your job is done.

You will need yourself, the couple and at least one witness to fill out the legal paperwork. You can also have two witnesses (or more for the "fanciful" certificate.) Take your time, be careful and read everything twice before filling it out. You do not want to mess this up.

There should be two copies of the marriage license. One is the official copy that you fill out and return to the county clerk who issued it. The second is the "keepsake." You fill this out exactly the same and give it to the couple. The couple will keep it as a souvenir but, more importantly, it is their backup proof of marriage. If the copy you send to the clerk is lost in the mail (I've had this happen), that keepsake will help expedite solemnization of the marriage without the original. It can also be used as evidence of the marriage for other government organizations or if something catastrophic happens that destroys records of the original.

International burners should check with their local authorities to understand what they need to have their marriage recognized in their home jurisdiction. I can personally attest that Pershing, Clark and Washoe Counties are all easy to work with on this issue. There shouldn't be any major problem (at least for weddings of EU and CIS residents.)

I would also recommend that you give the couple a "fanciful" wedding certificate. The keepsake license is just a bland piece of paperwork. Part of your gift should be a wedding certificate they can put up on their wall or in a photo album. ULC's minister packages include a few. But it would be nicer if you designed one. Check with the couple, maybe they want to design it or to at least want to give you input.





Above is an example of one of the marriage certificates we've issued at The Assless Chapel. Design these however you'd like, but make sure there is room for the couple, witnesses and the officiant to sign their names.

Nearly all the marriages I've officiated were solemnized without problems but, recently, I had issues with the Clark County Clerk. I would recommend that the officiant follow up with the appropriate clerk's office about two weeks after mailing out the finalized license. The Clark County Clerk has been very helpful and responsive in resolving the issues that came up.