

SETTING THE STYLE

Gown basics, silhouettes and the bridal magazines

What's the right style for your bridal gown? What the heck are the basic styles, anyway? We'll help answer those questions in this chapter, plus look at the four basic dress silhouettes and what looks best on different body types. Next, we'll take a hard look at those glossy bridal magazines and reveal a few secrets they don't want you to know.

OPEN UP ANY of those 1000-page bridal magazines and just look at all the gowns. Go ahead, we'll wait right here.

Mind numbing, isn't it?

As a country, the United States may have crumbling highways, a health care crisis, and kids that rank 19# in science (right behind Sri Lanka), but darn it if we don't have the most developed bridal industry in Western civilization. It makes us proud to be Americans.

The sheer number of bridal gowns may renew your faith in the free enterprise system, but it quickly makes the task of actually *selecting* a dress seem like climbing Mount Everest.

What dress would look best on *you*? Should you go for the understated look or a dress that resembles a chandelier? And how do you pronounce those stupid designers' names, anyway?

In order to keep mental institutions from being overrun with brides who mumble to themselves, we'd like to present our five steps to wedding planning and gown shopping. Here goes:

1. Find a groom.
2. Get him to propose to you (or vice versa).
3. Pick a date.
4. Find a place to have the ceremony and reception.
5. When you find the ceremony site is booked on that date, go back to #3 and start again.

Now, we only mention the step of finding a groom as a courtesy reminder. This might seem like a safe assumption in the bridal gown shopping process, but we actually did meet a bride who bought her wedding dress before her groom ever proposed to her. Now, *that's* self-confidence. Or maybe it was just a good sale.

Reality Check



The selection of a date and place for your wedding sets into motion a series of events that impacts your gown style decision. Let's take a look at some of the complications:

1 DRESS CODES. Churches and synagogues may have dress restrictions on the proper attire for brides and grooms. After all, this is a house of worship and sashaying down the aisle in the Bridal Bikini from the Pamela Anderson Lee Wedding Collection may be a tad gauche. Some ceremony sites actually have written booklets with dress "guidelines." Low-cut necklines, sleeveless or backless gowns may be no-no's. (Of course, the bridal designers have realized this and in some cases may offer a little jacket you can wear during the ceremony).

2 THE TIME OF DAY. Will your wedding be at 2pm with a small reception afterwards in the church hall? Or a 7pm ceremony with a sit-down dinner at a four-star hotel? While one might assume that a garden wedding would imply a bridal gown that is less formal, there are no federal laws on the subject. If you want to select a style that is more or less formal, however, we'll go into the differences later in this chapter.

3 THE LOCATION OF THE CEREMONY. Are we talking a majestic cathedral ceremony presided over by your Monsignor or a local civic rose garden ceremony with a justice of the peace? Besides style issues of formal or informal, there are practical issues as well. For example, if you plan on a religious ceremony that calls for you to kneel at some point, you might want to stay away from form-fitting skirts like sheath and mermaid designs.

What makes a dress "formal," anyway?

If Congress would just pass a law that says a formal bridal gown is white and an informal gown was some other color, say red, this would greatly simplify the whole question as to what makes a formal gown. But given the current mood in Washington, that seems unlikely, leaving brides on their own to decipher the subtle clues that separate a white formal gown from a white *semi-formal* gown.

We have suspicions that this whole issue is a make-work program for the bridal magazines. In every issue, they'll run fancy

charts with advice on “what to wear” for various formality categories. Let’s see, there’s formal, informal, semi-formal, the new age para-formal and our favorite, the dreaded pseudo-formal. And don’t forget, demi-formal—any event in which someone arrives dressed (or undressed) as Demi Moore. But that’s another book.

If that wasn’t chilling, consider that bridal magazines will next offer you advice on what’s politically correct for certain times of the day, such as “daytime formal” and “evening semi-formal.” While they’ve yet to invent rules for “informal brunch” and “ultra-formal nighttime snack,” we assume they’re just around the corner.

To simplify this discussion, let’s just do the basics:

☉ **Formal.** If a dress has a full, floor length skirt and train, it is considered formal. In general, the longer the train, the more formal the dress. Of course, you can add details like gloves and a fancy headpiece to increase the formality of most dresses.

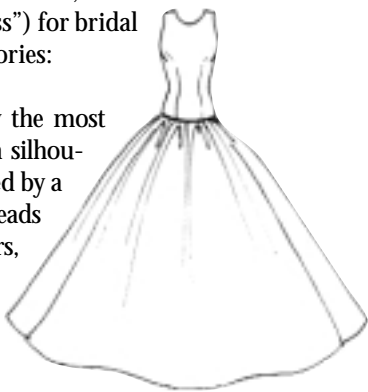
☉ **Informal.** In the past, wedding dresses that were shorter than floor length were considered informals. Today, some designers offer informal gowns with floor length skirts. The key deciding factor between what makes a floor length dress formal or informal is the train. Most informal gowns don’t have a train at all or, at most, a slight brush train (a train with a just a few inches of fabric brushing the floor). A simple hat or headpiece without veil usually completes the look.

Of course, nothing in the real world is so black and white. In your gown search, there’s no doubt you’ll find examples of gowns that don’t seem to fit in either the “formal” or “informal” categories. With the right accessories, these dresses will look equally beautiful at a morning garden wedding or an evening sit-down dinner reception.

Silhouettes: Setting the overall look

Before you get lost in the blizzard of bridal fashion terms for sleeves, necklines and trains, consider the basic outline of the dress. The “silhouettes” (a French term, literally translated as “that damn dress”) for bridal gowns fall into four broad categories:

1 **BALL GOWN.** This is probably the most traditional of all bridal gown silhouettes. The ball gown look is typified by a fitted bodice and waistline that leads to a very full skirt. In recent years, this look has been quite fashionable, as designers try to echo the golden age of Hollywood.



Pictured on the previous page is a Marisa-designed dress, a classic ball gown silhouette with a simple sleeveless bodice.

2 EMPIRE. A high waistline (right under the bust) which falls to a slimmer skirt width is the hallmark of an empire style gown. This look was hip in the 60's, all but disappeared in the 70's and 80's, only to return with a vengeance in the 90's. This example of an empire silhouette is designed by Lila Broude.



3 PRINCESS OR A-LINE. A princess silhouette has vertical seams from the shoulder to the hem. The result is a "fit and flare" effect without a defined waist. Princess silhouettes almost always paired with A-line skirts (which refers to the width of the skirt). Sometimes the terms "princess" and "A-line" are used interchangeably. (Of course, A-line skirts can be seen with other silhouettes as well, including those with defined waists). Princess silhouettes (the example to the left is from Lila Broude) are quite popular today, thanks to their flexibility in fitting just about any body type.



4 SHEATH. As you might guess, the slim skirt is a key attribute of a sheath silhouette, probably one of the more contemporary bridal gown looks. It goes without saying that the body-hugging sheath style isn't for everyone. A variation of the sheath is the mermaid-style gown, which is also form-fitting but flares out below the knees.



Shopping Tips

Fashion in the Real World:

Different styles for different folks



In the recent book, "Woman who have Different Bodies and the Men Who Love Them," a psychologist pointed out that, yes, women *do* have different bodies. This came as a revelation to us. After you spend endless hours looking at bridal magazines, you'd be convinced that every American bride looks just like Cindy Crawford.

But seriously folks, we do realize that there is more out there than size 10. So, let's look at some common body types and possible bridal gown silhouettes that might work with each.

❖ FIVE FOOT TWO AND EYES OF BLUE

“I’m a very petite 5’2”. Since bridal shops only carry gowns in sizes several times larger than I am, it’s darn difficult to figure out what gowns would look best on me. Any ideas?”

Silhouettes that look best on petite brides include A-lines and sheath gowns. Most small brides should stay away from bouffant skirts, which can swallow up a petite figure. Consider a dress that has beautiful detailing at the neckline to help draw the eye up to the face. Avoid frou-frou detailing like ruffles on the skirt and dangling beads on the sleeves. Another idea: you can also wear a taller headpiece such as a tiara style to add height (later in the book, we’ll go over the various headpiece options).

❖ ONE STYLE FITS ALL

“How can anyone make sense of all those dresses in the bridal magazines? Are there any styles that look great on everyone?”

This may come as a surprise, but there are a few styles that look good on almost every body type. A-line/princess dresses seem to be universally pleasing regardless of your personal plusses or flaws. If you’re lucky enough to be one of those tall, thin types (if so, please stop reading this book, go to the kitchen and eat a Twinkie), you can wear just about any style out there.

❖ FULL-FIGURED FAUX PAS

“Being a size 24, I’ve had incredible problems finding sample gowns to fit. It’s so difficult to visualize what will look good on me while I try to hold the dress on. Any fashion do’s and don’ts for full-figured women?”

As you’ve probably discovered, most bridal shops only stock sample gowns in sizes 10 or 12. Isn’t that nice? Oh, you happen to be bigger than that size? Well, unfortunately, the attitude of far too many bridal dress shops is “go lose some weight.”

Fortunately, there are a couple of solutions. The designer Bridal Originals (call 800-876-GOWN or 618-345-2345 to find a local store) actually encourages its dealers to stock samples in large sizes. Another idea: in “Step #4: Money-Saving Tips,” we’ll discuss off-the-rack bridal warehouses like David’s and other stores that carry large sizes in stock. Even if you don’t buy a dress there, many large-size brides told us they were happy to see what they looked like in various silhouettes.

Once you actually find a place that carries gowns in real world sizes, there are a few do’s and don’ts for full figures:

- ☉ **Fabrics.** Avoid bulky fabrics like velvets and heavy satins. Instead, consider lighter weight satins, chiffons, crepes and silk

shantung (more info on fabrics appears in the next chapter).

☉ **Finishes/Weaves.** Glossy fabrics are probably a fashion don't. Skip the shiny satins and instead go for the understated elegance of matte satins or silks and lightweight crepes.

☉ **Necklines.** V-necks, keyholes and scoop necklines help de-emphasize the bust-line.

☉ **Sleeves.** Fitted sleeves are a better choice than puff or full sleeves.

☉ **Silhouettes.** Empire waists and A-lines work well, while mermaid and form-fitting sheath silhouettes should be left on the rack. If you want to de-emphasize your hips, skip the large back bow (derisively called "butt bows" by some brides).

☉ **Accessories.** Bring attention to your face with beautiful jewelry or a stunning headpiece (although skipping the huge pouf veil is probably wise). Carry a small bouquet of flowers rather than a mass of blooms.

❖ WHAT IS EGGSHELL ANYWAY?

"I'm Hispanic and have rather dark skin. With all the different shades of white and ivory out there, what would best compliment my skin tone?"

While most gown designers seem to know what a white bridal gown is, there seems to be no agreement on what "ivory" should be. Heck, there isn't even agreement on what to *call* ivory gowns. Depending on the designer, ivory gowns are referred to as "eggshell," "candlelight," "ecru" and a series of other nonsensical names. In terms of color, some ivories are simply a pale off-white, while others are nearly tan.

A bride with a darker skin tone is actually in luck—most fabric colors will look great. The only exception: African-Americans, Hispanics and other brides with dark skin should stay away from ivory colors with yellow undertones, since that hue may not compliment a dark skin tone.

A great option to consider are the pale "rum pink" colors available from some manufacturers such as Mon Cheri and Bridal Originals (later in the designer section we'll note which designers carry different colors).

What if you have pale skin? Stay away from stark white gowns, which tend to wash out already fair skin. Instead, a better bet would be warmer natural and ivory colors. One designer who has one of the best ivory fabrics in the business is Bonny.

Whatever color you pick, make sure you see a fabric sample or swatch before you order. Since some shops only stock gowns in white or ivory, you may not be able to try on the dress in the color you want.

E-MAIL FROM THE REAL WORLD

Seasons change

Judy D. of Long Island, New York is a mother-of-the-bride who noticed a strange quirk to the seasonality of bridal apparel:



“Help! My daughter will be getting married at the end of October. Yet all the bridal gowns we see in the shops now (in February) are definitely styled for spring/summer—short sleeves, off-the-shoulder necklines and lightweight fabrics. How does one get an opportunity to see what will be available for fall? By allowing oneself ample lead time for ordering and alterations, it seems like early fall brides are in a no-win situation.”

Good point. Early fall brides do have a challenge on their hands. Why? This year’s “fall” gowns don’t arrive into stores until June, July or even August. When you consider most special-order dresses take at least three months to get in, there isn’t much time to spare.

The solution is to buy a “fall” gown from last year. Many designers still sell last year’s fall gowns as “carryovers,” which can be special-ordered like any dress. And trust us, the styling doesn’t change much from one year to the next. Go to the library and check out last year’s August/September bridal magazines for possible styles.

Other ideas: order a short-sleeve gown with long sleeves—in Part II, we’ll note which designers offer to do this for a nominal charge. Alternatively, you could wear a short sleeve gown with “opera-length” (long) gloves. 🍷

Meet the Bridal Magazines

It’s darn near a right of passage. As soon as you get engaged, you’ll probably be tempted to rush to your nearest newsstand to buy a bridal magazine. At \$5 an issue (which works out to a dollar a pound, sort of like rutabagas), they seem like innocent fun . . . cheap dress catalogs . . . and, as a bonus, you get those silly advice articles with breathless titles like “Six sex tips every honeymooner must know NOW!”

But all is not as innocent as it seems.

Lurking beneath those glossy covers and lace-covered pages is a seamy business that has an agenda all its own. Stuffed with ads, each bridal magazine is a cash cow for the big magazine conglomerates that own them. And the publishers will do anything to keep the dollars flowing.

As a result, all the bridal magazines present a somewhat distorted view of the dress buying process. The bias is toward buying

a fancy, formal bridal gown—preferably an expensive one. Little mention is made of money-saving tips. Certain thrifty alternatives like renting or second-hand shops are omitted altogether.

While nearly every bridal magazine has lapses of taste, nothing beats the behavior of the two biggest magazines, *Bride's* and *Modern Bride*. Each has schemed to block ads from dress discounters, while confusing brides with articles on dress buying that are at best stunningly naive, and at worst intentionally misleading.

At this point, you may be asking, so what do I care about this? It's easy to dismiss the bridal magazines as useless pap. Yet, the huge dominance of the magazines in bridal advertising should concern every consumer. By virtually controlling the only national media that targets engaged couples, the magazine's publishers can effectively shut out discounters and off-price retailers. When you eliminate low-price competition, prices go up for everyone.

Since the magazines are in the business to make money and sell ads, you may wonder why they'd block anyone from advertising. The answer is simple: open up a bridal magazine and start counting the number of designer dress ads. Gown manufacturers make up the vast majority of advertisers in *Bride's* and *Modern Bride*. And the gown manufacturers want you, the bride, to buy a dress at full retail.

The designers not only dictate to the magazines *who* can advertise, but also *what* advice the magazines should give on dress buying. (This may come as a shock, but yes, there have been documented cases of editorial articles spotted in bridal magazines. Every 200 pages or so, the publishers throw one in just to break up the monotony of the ads.)

In the 11 years we've been researching and writing about the bridal business, we've seen numerous examples of heinous behavior by *Bride's* and *Modern Bride*. Here's our list of the four biggest lies perpetrated by the bridal magazines:

The Four Biggest Lies Told By Bridal Magazines

1 "Only white people get married."

Well, the major bridal magazines would never say that, but just take a look at the pictures. Page after page of Caucasian, size 8 models in \$2000 dresses. Just try to find a bride who's black, Hispanic or Asian. Go ahead, take as long as you need to search. While you're at, try to discover an ad that features a bride who's a size 22.

To illustrate this point, we poured over the February/March 1997 issue of *Modern Bride*. Out of 944 pages of wedded bliss, we found only *eleven* black brides. We did see 13 black bridesmaids models (always a bridesmaid, but never a bride?). We found even fewer Asians (seven) and Hispanics (four).

Sure, there are specific magazines for black brides (one of the best is *Signature Bride: For Today's Black Woman*; for subscription

information call 312-527-6590), but their limited distribution means black, Hispanic and Asian brides can only guess as to what a dress might look like on someone who looks like them.

When confronted with this disparity, we're sure the bridal magazine publishers would wave open palms and just say "we have no control over what type of models the designers want to use in their ads." Please. The magazines could start to fix this imbalance with their own editorial spreads, which features dresses picked by editors. How about an occasional Hispanic? A person who doesn't look like Kate Moss? By setting a good example, the magazines would go a long way toward establishing a standard for their advertisers to follow.

2 "You must buy an expensive dress from a full-price bridal shop."

When the bridal magazines aren't busy making sure their pages are lily white, they're busy giving out bogus consumer advice. *Modern Bride* is guilty of the most biased article we ever read on this subject. A piece in January 1991's issue titled "6 Tips on Where to Shop for your Dress" should have won the Pulitzer Prize for shameless propaganda.

The article suggested you should "make shopping for your dress a happy experience by following these guidelines." The magazine then spends the next several paragraphs trying to convince brides they should only buy a dress from a "full service" (read: full price) shop. If that doesn't work, the article then stoops to scare tactics. "Don't be fooled by what appears to be a bargain," it warns, adding that "many discounters order replica gowns from third parties, not from the actual manufacturer. Poor workmanship may be the result."

The whole piece is a thinly veiled attack on Discount Bridal Service (DBS), the country's largest mail order dress discounter (later in "Step #4: Money Saving Tips," we'll discuss them in detail). *Modern Bride* actually had the chutzpah to re-print DBS's contract in the article (although without attribution). The magazine interpreted clauses like "dye lots may vary" to mean the dress "may be very different than your expectations." Ooo, that sounds scary. What *Modern Bride* forgets to say is that every bridal shop (discounter or full-price) has this standard contract language because, quite frankly, dye lots *may* vary. And, for the record, Discount Bridal Service only sells first-quality, designer merchandise—no copies or "replica" gowns.

A more recent example of biased consumer advice came from the April 1996 issue of *Elegant Bride*. In the subtly titled piece, "Shopping for Your Gown at an Outlet (A Real Life Disaster)," the author contrasts her own experience shopping for her bridal gown at a full price shop in 1982 with her sister-in-law's recent trip to a bridal outlet. "The day I bought my wedding gown was magical," the writer opines, recalling the pampered ser-

vice she received from a full-price bridal shop. Fast forward to today, when the author decides to help her sister-in-law go gown shopping. “Visions of my own magical day floated in my head as we headed out of town to help her. But she had other ideas.”

The author and her sister-in-law visit a nameless off-the-rack dress discounter (presumably a David’s, mentioned later in this book). The shop was crowded, the dresses damaged and the service non-existent, the author claims. Her poor sister-in-law, the writer sighs . . . in order to save a few bucks, she cheated herself out of the magical experience of spending an amount equivalent to the Federal Deficit on a bridal gown.

3 “Women don’t want to rent bridal gowns or bridesmaids dresses.”

Why don’t you see any ads in the bridal magazines for dress rentals? It is not by accident.

In 1992, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that *Bride’s* magazine has a policy that blocks ads from dress discounters or companies that rent gowns. Why? The official position of many bridal magazines is that women don’t want to rent dresses. And renting is such a low-brow business that it would sully the magazines’ glossy, high-dollar image.

We suspect another reason: the magazines’ biggest advertisers (dress designers and their allies, the full-price shops) want you to *buy*, not rent for half the price. In an amazingly stupid move, the publisher of *Bride’s* actually sent a letter that said as much to full-price retailers. We obtained a copy. There it was in black and white: “*Bride’s* has NEVER accepted these [rental] ads,” the publisher said, “[We] believe that these can only hurt your [the retailers’] business.”

We found this to be highly ironic, because every bridal magazine (not just *Bride’s*) has lots of ads from companies that rent tuxes for *men*. But what if you want to rent a bridesmaids dress and spare women the expense of having to buy these taffeta monstrosities? Sorry, that isn’t allowed.

This policy has a devastating effect on the gown rental business. After being denied access to this crucial national advertising vehicle, two major gown rental companies have had to close up shop or curtail operations. While a few dress rental shops exist in scattered cities, no company has been able to break-out on a national level. The result: even if you want to, you may not be able to find a shop that rents bridal gowns or bridesmaids dresses.

4 “We’re here to serve you, the bride.”

Bridal magazines rake in millions of dollars for all those dress ads. In their zeal to line their pockets with ad dollars, the bridal magazines are famous for selling out to their advertisers, often at the expense of their readers.

A good example: blatantly deceptive “no dress ads” that appear in many bridal magazines. Here’s a little known practice the bridal magazines hope you don’t discover: *just because a gown ad has listings of local shops, it doesn’t mean that those shops actually carry the pictured dress.*

That’s right—you might find the perfect dress in a bridal magazine ad and think all you have to do is visit the listed stores to find it. Well, we’ve discovered a disturbing number of cases where dress designers don’t require shops to buy the advertised dress in order to get listed in the ad. (In the business, they’re called “no dress ads”). In a way, this is a bridal version of the old bait and switch scheme. You see an ad, go to the store that’s listed and then discover the dress isn’t in the shop. But the shop would be glad to show you other dresses that are “just like it.”

Bridal magazines share part of the blame for “no dress ads.” That’s because the magazine’s ad reps actively pitch “store listing” ads (at \$100 to \$200 a pop) to bridal retailers at the industry’s wholesale markets. Unfortunately, the magazines line their pockets with ad revenue, with little concern as to whether their readers are being misled.

The flip side of this scam are “no dress editorials.” Bridal magazines have editorial spreads that feature gowns picked by editors as the “best of the best.” The only problem: *sometimes the dresses just don’t exist.* They are merely mock-ups or prototypes that never go into production!

While it technically isn’t the bridal magazines fault that a dress is axed before it ever makes it to the stores, it’s just another source of frustration for consumers. Why would any consumer magazine feature a product that its readers will never be able to buy? At the bare minimum, bridal magazines could at least feature gowns they know are in production.

ELUSIVE EXCLUSIVES

The flip side of “no dress ads” are designers who run ads in bridal magazines that imply the listed stores have an exclusive on a particular dress. Bridal shop owners love exclusive gowns (sometimes called “confined” dresses) because they’re the only shop in their area that carries them . . . and that often means they can charge a huge mark-up on the gown.

But how exclusive are these exclusives? Surprisingly, some designers will quietly sell confined dresses to other shops. Even though the shop is not listed as an exclusive dealer, you may find that special dress hanging in a competitor’s shop.

The bottom line: just because a designer lists only two stores in your area that carry a certain dress doesn’t mean you won’t be able to find it elsewhere.