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The Field Guide for Husbands

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The Field Guide for Husbands

A Hilarious, Genuinely Useful Course in Love, Marriage and Remembering the Anniversary

THIRD EDITION

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A Hilarious, Genuinely Useful Course in Love, Marriage and Remembering the Anniversary

Third edition, 2026. First published 2026. Earlier editions were published as *Husband University: The Field Guide*.

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This is a work of humour. The case studies and characters are fictional, and any resemblance to real people, living, married or recently asked to take the bins out, is coincidental. The book offers general, light-hearted guidance. It is not a substitute for professional counselling, medical, legal or financial advice. The Marriage College is not an accredited institution, and its degrees, though heartfelt, are not recognised by any government.

Published by The Marriage College, part of The Love Campus.
themarriagecollege.com · thelovecampus.com

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Typeset in Lora and Source Sans 3.

For the brave.

To the brave husbands whose forgotten anniversaries, ill-timed advice and heroic insistence that the route was shorter have illuminated the path for the rest of us.

Your fieldwork was not in vain.

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Orientation: A Word from the Registrar

Welcome to the Marriage College.

Being a husband is one of the most important titles a man will ever hold. Curiously, it is usually awarded after a ceremony whose main practical training consists of choosing a suit and standing in the correct place. Nobody checks whether you can load a dishwasher. Nobody examines your listening. There is no module on what to say when she asks whether this dress looks all right, and no practical assessment in remembering her mother's birthday.

This book fills the gap. It is a complete course in thirty short lectures, running from the first date to the fortieth anniversary. Along the way there are case studies, cautionary tales, scripts you can steal and small examinations you can pass in the bath. It is meant to make you laugh. It is also meant to make you better at the part of life that matters most, and the Faculty sees no contradiction between the two. Most men will take advice far more readily from a joke than from a lecture. The Faculty has simply put the advice inside the joke.

HOW THE COURSE WORKS

Each chapter is one lecture, coded like a real university module (MC 101, MC 102 and so on, because the Registrar has always wanted to issue course codes). Every lecture has the same parts:

- **A case study**, featuring one of our long-suffering alumni. All of them are fictional. Any resemblance to you is a coincidence that the Faculty finds very funny.

- **The lecture itself**, in short sections you can read between other commitments.
- **A ruling from the Registrar**, one line worth remembering or, in extreme cases, writing on the fridge.
- **Boxes**: scripts to try, errors to avoid and kit to assemble.
- **A cheat sheet** of three things to remember if you remember nothing else.
- **The examination**: three questions, one right answer each, one tempting wrong one and one that no man has ever chosen out loud. The Registrar's notes give the answers and the reasoning.
- **A field assignment**: one small, practical thing to do this week. This is the part that actually changes anything.

You can read the book in order, as a complete degree, or open it at the chapter that matches this week's difficulty. Both methods are recognised by the Examinations Board.

THREE RULES OF THE INSTITUTION

First, the jokes are on us. The comic target of this book is the husband: his habits, his certainties and his remarkable ability not to see a full bin. It is never his wife. She appears throughout as what she almost certainly is: intelligent, funny, busy and entitled to a partner who notices things.

Second, the advice is real. Underneath the silliness sit ideas that any good couples counsellor would recognise: listen before you fix, own the whole task, apologise without a legal appendix, respond to small moments of connection, fight about the actual issue, and keep asking questions long after you think you know the answers. None of it is complicated. All of it is harder than it looks on a Tuesday.

Third, you only need one idea at a time. Please do not read this book and then attempt thirty improvements by Friday. That is how

a useful book becomes an elaborate new source of stress. Pick one thing. Do it for a week. Then come back for another.

IF THIS BOOK WAS A GIFT

If someone gave you this book, thank them before deciding it was a hint. It may be both. A gracious response is an excellent opening assignment, and you can now consider yourself enrolled.

One last thing. However well you do, never begin an argument with the words "According to Chapter Eighteen…"

With academic affection,

The Registrar

The Marriage College

The Entrance Examination

Before enrolment, the Faculty asks every new student to complete a short diagnostic test. There is no pass mark. There is, however, a result, and you may not enjoy it. Circle the answer closest to what you would *actually* do, not what you would say you would do if she were reading over your shoulder.

1. Your wife comes home and says, "What a day." You:

a. Offer three solutions and a spreadsheet before she has taken her coat off.

b. Say, "Tell me about it. Mine was mad too," and tell her about it.

c. Say, "Mm," from behind your phone, in a tone intended to cover all eventualities.

2. The bin is full. You:

a. Take it out, then mention having taken it out at least twice before bedtime.

b. Press the rubbish down firmly, like a man compacting a problem for future generations.

c. Do not see the bin. There is no bin.

3. She asks, "Does this look all right?" You:

a. Give a detailed assessment, with suggestions for accessories.

b. Say, "You always look great," without looking up.

c. Freeze, like a deer that has been asked a question about a dress.

4. It is your anniversary next week. You:

a. Have a plan. The plan has a plan. There is a laminated itinerary.
b. Know it is "around now" and are waiting for further information.
c. Will find out next week, at approximately the same time she finds out that you forgot.

5. You have a disagreement about something small. You:

a. Win it, with evidence, and then wonder why winning feels like this.
b. Move smoothly from the small thing to a holiday in 2019.
c. Say, "Fine," go to the shed and fix something that was not broken.

RESULTS

Mostly a: The Fixer. You are keen, capable and slightly exhausting. You treat every feeling as a fault to be repaired and every conversation as a meeting with actions. The Faculty admires your energy and prescribes MC 116 (Advanced Listening) and MC 118 (Disagreeing Without Opening a Court) to go with it.

Mostly b: The Keynote Speaker. You are warm and sociable, and you are always, somehow, talking. Your stories are good. There are simply rather a lot of them, and they have a habit of becoming

about you. Begin with MC 103 (Conversation Without a Personal Keynote) and MC 120 (The Ten-Minute Conversation).

Mostly c: The Man in the Shed. You are calm, loyal and occasionally invisible. You would do anything for her, if only you had noticed it needed doing. Report immediately to MC 112 (The Household Is Not an Escape Room) and MC 128 (The Calendar You Own).

A mixture: The Normal Man. Congratulations. You display the full range of classic husband behaviours, in rotation. You are exactly who this book was written for. Proceed to Chapter One.

PART ONE

Admissions

First dates, clear intentions and the questions before the ring.



MC 101 Before You Apply for the Position

MC 102 The Invitation, Not the Summons

MC 103 Conversation Without a Personal Keynote

MC 104 Chemistry, Pace and the Very Useful Word “No”

MC 105 The Conversations Before the Ring

“Entry requirements: a clean shirt, an open mind and the ability to ask a follow-up question.”

LECTURE ONE · MC 101

Before You Apply for the Position

You are not a renovation project

CASE STUDY

Oliver prepared for his first date in three years by buying a jacket and learning eleven interesting facts about octopuses. Neither was a terrible idea. The difficulty was that he had also decided to become an entirely different man by Thursday.

This new Oliver would enjoy hiking. He would understand wine, or at least hold a glass as though it had disclosed something. He would have strong but approachable opinions about architecture. The real Oliver cooked a very good risotto, watched football with the intensity of a hostage negotiator and repaired things that had not asked to be repaired.

By the second drink, the new Oliver had claimed to "basically live outdoors". By the third, his date had suggested a walking holiday in the Lake District. By the fourth, Oliver was privately researching the price of boots.

The jacket fitted. The personality did not.

Send the real candidate

Dating goes much better when the man who turns up resembles the man who will still exist in November. Present your good qualities, by all means. Wash. Iron something. Make an effort. But do not

advertise a lifestyle you would need a production crew to maintain.

A first date is not a trailer, and you are not trying to sell the film to a distributor. Somebody who likes your real company is a far better prospect than someone who loves your remarkably convincing trailer and then walks out twenty minutes into the actual feature.

There is also a practical problem with impersonation: you have to keep it up. Every invented hobby is a subscription with no cancel button. Oliver is now, as far as the Faculty knows, three years into a hiking habit he does not enjoy, and has developed opinions about waterproof trousers purely in self-defence.

Check what you are actually offering

Before asking whether someone meets your standards, it is worth asking what an ordinary week with you feels like from the outside. Can you keep a plan? Hear a different opinion without treating it as a hostile takeover? Feed yourself, wash your clothes and book your own dentist?

These are not dazzling achievements. Nobody will write a song about your ability to buy toilet roll before it runs out. They are, however, the floor on which all the dazzling achievements will stand. A man who can organise a romantic weekend in Paris but cannot organise a clean towel is offering a very uneven building.

You do not need your whole life arranged. Most adults are running at least one department on a temporary system held together with hope and a drawer of miscellaneous cables. Be honest about yours. A demanding job, a disability, caring responsibilities or a recent upheaval may shape what you can offer, and that is fine. Readiness is not perfection. It is enough self-knowledge to say, “This is where I am,” and enough responsibility not to make a stranger the solution to everything you dislike about it.

THE REGISTRAR RULES

A partner is someone to share your life with, not someone to finish assembling it.

Curiosity beats a casting brief

A useful list of hopes might include kindness, a sense of humour, compatible plans and feeling comfortable together. A less useful list specifies height, hair colour, preferred holiday temperature and an uncanny resemblance to someone who has already declined your application.

Know the few things that genuinely matter to you. Do you want children? Does it matter where you live? Are you looking for something serious? You don't have to settle these on a first date. You would, however, be surprised how many people discover them at the altar.

Then leave room for surprise. The quiet woman across the table may be hilarious once she relaxes. The sparkling first impression may conceal a spectacular inability to ask a follow-up question. Attraction matters, but so does how you feel on the bus home. Ignore whether you performed well. Did you actually enjoy being there?

Common Exam Errors

- Describing yourself as “a bit of an adventurer” on the strength of one kayak.
- Arriving with a list of requirements longer than the menu.
- Treating the date as a job interview, and then conducting it as the interviewer.
- Mentioning your ex more often than the waiter.

Leave the sales department at home

A dating profile can be clear without sounding like a listing for a mid-range dishwasher. Use recent photographs, and don’t use a group photo in which she must guess which of four men in sunglasses is you. Describe things you really enjoy. Write something another human being could reasonably ask about.

“I make a very good curry and a deeply average playlist” gives her something to work with. “Work hard, play hard” gives her nothing, and neither does “Just ask”. The same goes for almost any sentence that could also appear on a protein shake.

Avoid complaining about previous dates, issuing warnings (“No drama!”) or announcing that people must earn your attention. You are introducing yourself, not drafting the terms and conditions of a private car park.

Here is your practical task. Find one impressive but vague statement in your profile, or in your usual first-date patter, and replace it with something true and specific. Then show it to a friend who knows you well. If they ask who this interesting stranger is, try again.

CHEAT SHEET

- ☑ Turn up as the man who will still exist in November.
- ☑ Get your ordinary week in order before you advertise your weekends.
- ☑ Know your few essentials and stay curious about everything else.

MC 101

The Examination

1. **Oliver's date suggests a walking holiday. What should he say?**
   a. "Wonderful! I'll bring my crampons."
   b. "I have to confess: I'm more of a risotto man than a mountain man. But I'd love to hear what you like about walking."
   c. Nothing. He should fake a sprained ankle before the dessert menu arrives.

2. **Which of these is a genuine relationship essential?**
   a. Whether you both want children.
   b. Whether she shares your view of the 2009 Champions League final.
   c. Whether she is exactly 5 ft 6 in, in flat shoes.

3. **The best line for a dating profile is:**
   a. "Work hard, play hard."
   b. "Fluent in sarcasm."
   c. "I make a very good curry and a deeply average playlist."

REGISTRAR'S NOTES

1 (b). Honesty and a question. Crampons are not a personality, and ankles should never be sprained for strategic purposes. 2 (a). Essentials shape a life; the 2009 final shapes only your evenings. 3 (c). It is true, specific and gives her something to ask about. "Fluent in sarcasm" is not a language, and the Faculty has checked.

FIELD ASSIGNMENT

Make one practical improvement to your ordinary week before improving your dating profile. Clean the bathroom, book the dentist, buy a second towel. The successful applicant will eventually meet that week, and it is better if the week is ready for her.