# A Guide for New Ritualists

Congratulations! You’ve taken a brave and bold step by signing up to lead a ritual at Turning Circle. Whether you’re leading a High Rite or something much more informal, this guide can help you avoid some pitfalls that new ritualists often face.

## Ritual Timing

The clock is always ticking! We start gathering at 7:30 PM. However, if you’re leading the service, it’s better for you to arrive at 7:00 PM so that you have time to set up the altar and to do any pre-ritual meditation or grounding exercises that are meaningful to you.

However, the ritual really starts later than that. At 7:45PM, one of the Coordinators will typically read a “welcome” script. After that, the shared time of “Joys and Concerns” typically takes ten minutes or so (depending on the number of attendees). Your ritual, therefore, will likely start around 8:00PM. At this point, you may wish to offer a pre-ritual briefing (no more than a few minutes).

Ideally, a ritual should be concluded between 8:45PM and 9:00PM. This offers a decent amount of flexibility in the length of your ritual. Keep in mind that you will need to be packed up by 9:30PM.

If you’re unsure of how long a ritual takes, you can always try practicing it at home and timing it. Of course, keep in mind that a ritual practiced in solitary form will take somewhat less time compared to a group setting.

## Ritual Planning

Depending on your Pagan tradition, your ritual may have a variety of components. If you choose to run a Wiccan ritual, the event sequence typically runs along these lines:

* Altar Blessing (optional)
* Casting the Circle
* Calling Elemental Spirits and Deities
* Guided Meditation
* Magical Working
* Cakes & Ale
* Releasing the Elemental Spirits and Deities
* Releasing the Circle
* Final Blessing (optional)

This is just one example. If you are running a different sort of Pagan rite like a Druidic ritual , Norse Blot, or a Hellenic Polytheist ritual, for instance, your ritual sequence will be different. We do have some past rituals to share for inspiration, or a Coordinator can work with you to set up the sort of rite you want to lead.

As most rituals have a variety of speaking roles, it’s good to include people by sharing the parts around. It’s best to have these parts printed out in advance, or emailed to people who volunteer before the ritual begins.

## Casting the Circle

Not all Pagan faiths use circle casting at the beginning of their rituals. For instance, Druids may set aside an offering to the Outsiders as a ward against unhelpful spirits. If you choose to perform a traditional circle casting, there are a few things to consider. If the ritual is indoors and you plan on using incense as part of the casting, please extinguish it immediately following the completion of the circle. This will keep the room from filling up with smoke. You may want to consider alternatives, such as sprinkling salt, or walking the path with the incense unlit. Also, if you use an athame, take safety into account – especially if the gathering is in a small room. If you own more than one athame, consider using one with a dull edge. Alternatively, you could leave the blade sheathed.

If you want people to stand for the circle casting, please use something along the lines of “Rise as you are able” or “Stand as you are able”. This gives consideration to members with mobility limitations and those who simply cannot stand in place for long periods of time.

Some practitioners walk the path of the circle once, while others walk it three times. The choice is yours. When casting the circle, walk clockwise, starting in the east. When lifting the circle at the end of the ritual, walk counter-clockwise, starting in the east.

There are several schools of though as to what a magic circle actually accomplishes. Liturgically, it defines the area in which the ritual will take place (i.e. sacred space). It serves as a ward to repel any unhelpful spirits that may be attracted to our spiritual light. Finally, the magic circle serves as a lens for enhancing the potency of any magical working that may be conducted during the ritual.

If someone needs to leave the circle during the ritual, the practitioner who cast the circle can use his/her athame to open a temporary portal in the circle. This is accomplished by touching the athame to the floor, tracing an arc big enough for the person to walk through, and then touching the floor again with the athame. When the person who was excused returns, just repeat this procedure with an opposite gesture.

## Meditations

A lot of rituals include guided meditations. Your ritual doesn’t have to have one. However, if you choose to add this feature, there are a few aspects to consider. New ritualists may feel tempted to speak too quickly. Resist that urge! You may wish to practice reading the guided meditation out loud several times until you reach a point where you are comfortable with the text. You don’t have to memorize the script word-for-word. But you should become sufficiently familiar that your voice sounds natural when you read.

Don’t be afraid of pauses. A strategic pause gives the listeners time to create images in their minds that are based on your story. There may be parts of your meditation wherein a longer pause is needed. For instance, you may have written a meditation based on fire that might have a passage like ‘And now, you look into the depths of the bonfire. Look carefully at the flames. Fire is illuminating and inspiring. You take a few moments to consider the message of the fire.” To give your listeners enough time, try counting to seven, but take a breath in between each number. This will force you to give your listeners a full minute of silence.

## Cakes and Ale

Many Pagan/Wiccan rituals have a portion of the ritual set aside for helping the attendees commune with the gods. A common way to do this is through sharing food and beverages. Depending on the theme of the ritual, the cakes can vary a lot. For example, for Lammas, you could share cornbread. For Mabon, sliced apples or apple-shaped cookies would work well. Some members may have dietary restrictions and allergies. For example, if you are using cookies for “Cakes”, you might also want to have a small selection of gluten-free cookies, or cookies that don’t have nuts.

For ale, pretty much any beverage will work. It can be seltzer water, juice, iced tea, or anything that suits your fancy. If you chose to go with individual beverages, aluminum cans recycle easier than plastic bottles. Please do not serve real alcohol. Doing so could prove disastrous for individuals with certain medical conditions and for people who are recovering alcoholics.

The average attendance has been 12-15 people, with occasional high attendance of 20. So, plan on having enough cakes and ale to serve 20 individuals.

## Altar Décor and Ritual Tools

You may want to determine in advance what kind of items you will need for an altar setting. For instance, for Mabon, you could set a few apples on the altar. Or, for Samhain, a replica of a skull (to honor the ancestors). For Yule, holly and representations of snowflakes could work nicely.

If you choose to perform a ritual that is specifically Wiccan, certain tools will be placed on the altar in specific locations. The Athame (black-handled knife) is placed on the side of the altar facing east (for Air). The wand is placed on the side facing south (for Fire), the chalice is placed on the side facing west (for Water), and the pentacle is placed on the side facing north (for Earth). You can have the God and Goddess represented by figurines, or you can simply denote them with candles. The Goddess figurine/candle is placed to your left, while the God figurine/candle is placed to your right. If you are calling the ancestors, a skull replica or a black candle can be placed in-between the God and Goddess candles.

It is probably wise to not spend too much money on altar cloths. While it is nice to have an altar cloth that matches the theme for the ritual (black for Samhain, or yellow for Litha), just keep in mind that altar cloths invariably get damaged from candle wax and other contaminants (spilled juice from cakes & ale, for instance). In other words, feel free to buy something pretty, but don’t get too attached to it.

Pagan rituals tend to use a lot of candles. Some ritualists are meticulous in observing the color correspondences, while others just use plain white candles. Do as you see fit! If you choose to go with color correspondences, the key is below:

* East – Yellow – Air
* South – Red – Fire
* West – Blue – Water
* North – Green – Earth
* Center of Altar – Black – Ancestors
* Right of Center – Gold – God
* Left of Center – Silver – Goddess

It’s probably a good idea to have two candle lighters. They tend to run out of butane at the most inopportune moments. Also, make sure you have a candle snuffer. While some ritualists eventually master the art of snuffing a candle with the wave of a hand (and it certainly looks dramatic), that feat takes some practice!

## A Cautionary Note Concerning Incense

If you choose to light incense for an indoor ritual, there are several factors to be aware of: 1.) You do not want to risk triggering a smoke alarm; 2.) Some people have significant allergies to strong fragrances; 3.) A little incense goes a long way.

A good compromise for the use of incense is to have it burn only for the moments that it is needed. For instance, if your ritual calls for burning incense for casting a circle, simply extinguish the incense once that specific part of the ritual is completed.

Another thing to avoid is the use of the word “smudging”. That word has a specific meaning in a very specific context for a culture that only a tiny minority of individuals have legitimate claim to. Instead, use terminology like “cleansing”, “sanctifying”, or “purifying”.

## Magical Workings

New ritualists are often tempted to devise an ornate, multi-step magical working. Some ritualists even attempt more than one magical working in the same ritual. This might not be the best idea in most circumstances. The effective ritual time is about 60-75 minutes. So if your magical working is too complicated, you will run out of time. Also, the average attendance at Turning Circle is presently 12-15 people (sometimes as many as 20 people). So, if your magical working involves consumables or give-away items, just keep in mind that you will need supplies for 20 people. Of course, give-away items like stones can be saved for a later ritual if the gathering is closer to 12 people than 20.

You might want to avoid magical workings that create a lot of smoke. If the working involves burning paper, please consider “magician’s paper”, as it flares dramatically when burned and leaves no smoke or ash. Ask any of the Coordinators where to buy it. Likewise, if your magical working involves lit candles, it’s better to keep the lit candles on the altar or a side table rather than having the attendees hold the candles. The practical matter is that spilled wax is astonishingly difficult to remove from carpet, and Turning Circle would likely get billed for the renovation.

## Maintaining Ritual Space

One thing to keep in mind is that group rituals have a different energy than solitary ones. If your ritual involves individuals doing something in turn, like coming to the altar to do a magical working, consider what the rest of the circle will do as they wait. If people start to chatter or fidget, ritual space can be broken. Give people a task, or something to meditate on, or use music to keep the focus together. Chanting, singing or drumming are all good ways to keep the ritual on track.

## Cultural Appropriation

At Turning Circle, we strive to be an open and welcoming place to all. We encourage new people to get involved, and welcome input and help with crafting and running rituals. Being an eclectic Pagan circle, we are open to a variety of Pagan practices, and encourage people to explore and try new things. If it honors the Pagan path, we embrace it. We also ask those leading circles to be mindful of avoiding cultural appropriation when designing their rituals.

Cultural appropriation can be defined as “the act of taking or using things from a culture that is not your own, especially without showing that you understand or respect this culture.” Neopaganism is a syncretic faith that draws from many sources, but we never want to do something disrespectful that might offend people. We ask those running a ritual to not lift elements or practices like sacred texts, chants, or dances, etc. from cultures or religions that they are not intimately acquainted with. When in doubt, speak to a Coordinator as we work to create a safe space at Turning Circle for all who come.

In general, try to credit any sources that you draw from. If you borrowed something from another author or group, please mention them when sharing your ritual with the group.

## Cost of Supplies

While it is possible that ritual leaders can be reimbursed a small sum for anything they need to buy for their ritual, we encourage people to use things they already own or borrow if they can. Let the group know if you need something in particular before you go out and purchase anything new.

## Cleaning Up

At the time of this writing, we have four Officers (three Coordinators and a Scribe). At least one of us will be available at every ritual. While it is ultimately your responsibility to reset our space to its pre-ritual condition, we will certainly help you get cleaned up and packed up.