



# HOW (NOT) TO PROPOSE

**In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth rejects marriage proposals from both Mr. Collins and Mr. Darcy—though she graciously gives the latter a second chance. But what did these suitors do wrong? Was there a right way to pop the question in Austen’s time?**

“You can hardly doubt the purport of my discourse. Almost as soon as I entered the house I singled you out as the companion of my future life,” Mr. Collins tells a bewildered Elizabeth not long after they meet for the first time. *Almost* indeed—he originally had Elizabeth’s older sister Jane in mind as his bride-to-be, but changed his plans instantly once he learned that she was expected to be courted by Mr. Bingley. To Mr. Collins, marriage is a mathematic formula involving wealth, family background, and social connections. Romantic feelings take no part in the equation, which is why his proposal is so comically blunt and passionless. Mr. Collins has calculated that Elizabeth has every reason to accept him; therefore, he cannot understand her courteous yet firm rejection. “I shall choose to attribute it to your wish of increasing my love by suspense,” he announces, “according to the usual practice of elegant females.” He then moves on to the next prospective match.

Mr. Darcy’s proposal is equally blunt, but comes from genuine feelings of love. He barges in on an unsuspecting Elizabeth, blurting out: “In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.” Although Darcy does not state it explicitly, this confession

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WRITTEN BY:  
KEE-YOON NAHM  
(FESTIVAL DRAMATURG)

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amounts to asking for her hand in marriage. His timing could not have been worse, as Elizabeth had just found out that Darcy dissuaded Bingley from courting Jane because of the Bennets' low social standing. Unlike Mr. Collins, however, Darcy takes Elizabeth's rejection seriously. After his failed first attempt to win Elizabeth's love, Darcy apologizes and atones for his behavior. His second proposal, couched in humility and respect, is happily accepted.

But setting aside their flaws in character, why did Mr. Collins and Mr. Darcy decide to propose out of the blue? Elizabeth was caught completely by surprise in both instances, as neither men had made their intentions known to her in advance. It would have saved them a lot of embarrassment if they knew beforehand that Elizabeth was not interested. Yet, it was perfectly normal for men to propose without warning in Austen's time. Sexual relationships outside of marriage were frowned upon among the gentry, meaning that you did not tell someone you love them unless you were also proposing to them at the same time—which is why Lydia's elopement with Mr. Wickham is such a scandal. While the sudden proposal probably did not help either suitor's chances, those were the unwritten rules that eligible young men and women had to abide by in the period.

Before you treat this convention as a Regency-era contrivance, however, consider how we still have the romantic idea that a marriage proposal should be unexpected. In popular culture and on social media, there are countless examples of surprise proposals: people getting down on one knee at a sports game or hiding engagement rings in the dessert. As clichéd as the trope may be, it can still be emotionally powerful: an expression of surprise, followed by tears of joy. Of course, in these modern examples, it is probably not the case that the proposer is also declaring their love for the first time. (That would really be awkward.) But *Pride and Prejudice* reminds us that surprise proposals always run the risk of backfiring, because you can never be sure how the other person will respond.

Would it make things a lot easier for everyone if marriage proposals are not so wrapped up in secrecy? Would it make more sense to bring up the idea in a calm and open manner? Perhaps, but it would not be as dramatic!