

Graduation Party Checklist

Checklist · 69 items · 9 sections

A week-by-week plan for hosting a high school or college graduation party in May or June. Covers realistic guest counts, food math, the photo timeline display, parking signage, and the small day-of details that fall through the cracks once 60 people are in the backyard.

Open the editable, AI-powered version online:

<https://genechecklist.com/checklist/graduation-party-checklist>

6-8 WEEKS BEFORE

- Pick a date and start time, checking the school calendar and other grad families' dates
HIGH
- Set a total budget: \$500-\$2,000 for a home party, \$2,000-\$8,000 for a venue or catered event
HIGH
- Build the guest list in a spreadsheet: family, grad's friends, parents' close friends, neighbors, key teachers and coaches
HIGH
- Pick a guest count target: 30-50 intimate, 50-75 medium, 75-100+ open-house style
HIGH
- Choose the format: open house (3-4 hour drop-in window) or seated meal (fixed 2-hour slot)
HIGH
- Lock the venue: backyard, finished basement, church hall, park pavilion, restaurant private room, or rented event space
HIGH
- Reserve a rain backup if outdoors: 20x20 ft tent rental runs \$250-\$600
- Decide on co-hosting with 1-2 other grad families to split cost and combine guest lists
- Pick a theme or color palette: school colors, college-bound colors, or a personal interest

4-6 WEEKS BEFORE

- Order or design invitations: grad photo, date, time, address, RSVP method, dress code, parking notes
HIGH
- Send invitations 4-6 weeks out (paper for grandparents, Paperless Post or Evite for friends)
HIGH
- Set the RSVP deadline 2 weeks before the party so you can finalize food counts
HIGH

HIGH

- Book the caterer, food truck, or BBQ vendor

HIGH

Popular vendors fill up by mid-April for June dates.

- Hire help if budget allows: 1 server per 25 guests at \$20-\$30/hour
- Order the cake or dessert table
Plan 1 slice per guest plus 20% buffer. A standard sheet cake serves 40-50.
- Reserve rentals: tables (1 per 8 guests), chairs, linens, chafing dishes, drink dispensers
- Book a photographer for 1-2 hours (\$200-\$500 for a casual event shoot)

3-4 WEEKS BEFORE

- Order custom signage: 'Congrats Grad' banner, yard sign, welcome sign with grad's name and Class of 2026

HIGH

- Start collecting photos for the timeline display: baby through senior year, aim for 18-25 photos

HIGH

- Plan the menu: 2-3 mains, 3-4 sides, 1-2 desserts, plus a kid-friendly option

HIGH

- Order graduation-themed paper goods: plates, napkins, cups in school colors
- Buy or rent a memory jar and blank cards for guests to write notes to the grad
- Order a yearbook or signing board: matted school photo guests can sign around the edge
- Create a custom hashtag for photos (e.g., #SmithGrad2026)

2 WEEKS BEFORE

- Finalize headcount from RSVPs (text non-responders)

HIGH

- Place grocery and beverage orders based on final count

HIGH

- Calculate food quantities

HIGH

1/3 lb meat per adult, 4-6 oz per kid, 6-8 oz sides per person, 1 bun per sandwich plus 10% extra.

- Calculate drinks: 2-3 per adult for the first 2 hours, 1 per hour after

HIGH

- Print 4x6 or 5x7 photos for the timeline display from Walgreens or Shutterfly
- Shop decor: balloons, table runners, centerpieces, string lights
- Confirm rentals, caterer, and any hired help in writing
- Draft a short speech or toast (parents speak 2-3 minutes max)

1 WEEK BEFORE

- Walk the venue and mark parking, entrance, restroom, and gift table locations
HIGH
- Print parking instructions and 2-3 directional signs for the street and driveway
HIGH
- Prep make-ahead foods: marinades, dips, pasta salads, baked goods that freeze
HIGH
- Confirm pickup or delivery times with caterer, cake vendor, and rental company
HIGH
- Set out and arrange the photo timeline in chronological order
- Charge speakers and build the playlist: 3-4 hours mixing grad's favorites and crowd-pleasers
- Buy ice: 1 lb per guest if using drink tubs
- Assign a designated photographer or set up a tripod for group shots

DAY BEFORE

- Set up tables, chairs, and linens
HIGH
- Hang the banner, set out yard signs, place welcome sign at the entrance
HIGH
- Arrange the gift table with a card box, pen, and 'Cards and Gifts' sign
HIGH
- Chill all beverages (fridge plus 2-3 coolers with ice)
HIGH
- Set up the photo timeline, memory jar station, and yearbook signing area
- Pre-portion serving utensils next to each dish
- Set up self-serve drink station with cups, ice, and labels
- Walk through the space as a guest would (parking, entry, food, drinks, restroom, gift table, exit)

DAY OF

- Pick up the cake and any final catering 2-3 hours before start time
HIGH
- Set out cold foods 30 min before guests arrive, hot foods 15 min before
HIGH
- Post parking signs at the street 1 hour before start time
HIGH

- Designate 1-2 family members as greeters at the door
- HIGH**
- Refill food and drink stations every 30-45 minutes
- Take a posed family photo before guests arrive (outfits stay clean, grad is fresh)
- Do the toast and cake cutting 60-90 minutes in, once most guests have arrived
- Send guests home with a small favor: candy bag, mini diploma, or grad photo magnet

FOOD AND DRINKS

- Plan 1/3 lb pulled pork, brisket, or chicken per adult (33 lbs feeds 100 adults)
- HIGH**
- Plan 6-8 oz of each side per person: pasta salad, baked beans, slaw, fruit, chips
- HIGH**
- Plan 1.5 drinks per person per hour: water, lemonade, iced tea, soda
- HIGH**
- Add a signature mocktail or punch (1 gallon serves 16 cups)
- Offer 1 vegetarian main and 1 gluten-free side, clearly labeled
- Set up a coffee and dessert station for the back half of the party

DECOR AND PHOTOS

- Build the photo timeline: 1 photo per year of school, baby photo at the start, senior portrait at the end
- HIGH**
- Display the cap, gown, and tassel on a mannequin, dress form, or hung on a wall
- HIGH**
- Frame 3-5 milestone photos: first day of kindergarten, sports highlight, prom, senior photo
- Centerpieces: mason jars with school-color flowers, framed quotes, or stacks of books topped with a candle
- Hang a 'Where I'm Headed' sign with the grad's college, gap year plan, or job
- Print a custom photo backdrop or step-and-repeat with the grad's name
- Set out disposable cameras or a Polaroid for guests to use