

# Dressing to Impress: The Secrets of Proper Attire

*Myrna Hoover*

*Clothes and manners do not make the man;  
but, when he is made, they greatly improve his  
appearance.*

*-- Henry Ward Beecher*

## Objectives

1. To recognize the importance of proper dress as it relates to interviewing and business situations.
2. To understand the difference in business attire and business casual.
3. To understand the guidelines for proper attire.

## Activities

Activities to achieve the stated objectives include:

1. Read this guide to understand proper dress.
2. Refer to additional resources that are available.
3. Attend a workshop on Interviewing or Dressing for Success.
4. Ask Career Center staff for additional information available on proper dress.

## The Importance of Proper Attire

Making the BEST possible impression is paramount when seeking employment! Even though we would like to think that our skills and abilities get us the job, appearance does count. First impressions are made within five minutes of meeting someone, and help shape all future impressions, so it is important to dress professionally. This allows the employer to focus on your skills and abilities and not your clothing. The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) surveyed 457 employers who recruit new college graduates and an overwhelming 92 percent believed a candidate's overall appearance influences their opinion about that candidate. It can be helpful to always dress for the job you want!

## Learn the Employer's Dress Style

Looking the part can help you a good first impression. Knowing what is expected takes a little research, a shopping trip, and a full-length mirror.

1. Research the culture of the employer. A more conservative employer (accounting, finance, law, etc.) will require more conservative dress. A more creative employer (retail, advertising, etc.) might offer more flexibility in dress.
2. Look at the brochures, websites, and employees



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of the organization to guide your dress style. What style of clothes are being worn by the people who work there? What image are they projecting with their clothing?

3. Trust your instincts when selecting your interview attire. If you have to ask the question "Can I wear this?", then the answer should always be "No."
4. Err on the conservative side when in doubt about what to wear.
5. Avoid extremes. Low-cut blouses, sky-high stilettos, and miniskirts are inappropriate.
6. Ask experts at a clothing store about the fit of your suit. It shouldn't be too loose or too tight.
7. Purchase a quality suit. It is better to buy one good suit than several inexpensive suits.
8. Always try on your entire outfit prior to the interview day, looking for any flaws or weaknesses in your appearance. Don't forget to look at the back of your outfit to ensure you have a polished look coming and going.

## Business Attire

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Business attire is the written (or unwritten) dress code of an organization. Business attire suggests a formal, conservative dress style. It is expected when interviewing with an employer unless stated otherwise. Attention to detail, impeccable grooming, and a well-fitted suit are vital to make a good lasting impression.

### Men's Interview Attire – Back to the Basics

#### 1. The Suit:

- Choose a neutral suit in charcoal, navy, or gray. Black suits, while in style and acceptable, are less appropriate for an interview.
- The pant leg should touch the front of the shoe and fall just above the heel in the back.
- Pants can be cuffed or uncuffed.
- The fabric of the suit should be gabardine or wool. Blended material is acceptable, but avoid cotton blends as they wrinkle.
- The suit jacket should be buttoned while standing and unbuttoned to sit. Do not button the bottom button of a three or two-button suit.
- Avoid suits with double-breasted jackets.

#### 2. The Dress Shirt:

- Choose shirts in white, ecru, or light blue.
- Have your shirt professionally laundered.
- Always wear a long sleeve shirt.
- Pointed collars give a more professional image than button down collars, yet both are acceptable.
- Avoid shirts with insignias.
- Your shirt sleeve should extend beyond the suit jacket sleeves by ½ inch.
- Always wear a crewneck undershirt as they give the appearance of a finished look.

#### 3. The Tie:

- Wear a conservative tie with subtle patterns or solid colors.
- Ties should be of good quality and made of 100% silk.



- The tie should be darker than your shirt.
- The tie should fall to the middle of your belt.

#### 4. Socks, Shoes and Belt:

- Wing tips or lace up conservative shoes are the most appropriate. Loafers should be used for business casual.
- Choose black, brown or cordovan shoes. Shoe color should match your suit or be slightly darker.
- Shoes should be in good condition and polished.
- Socks should match the color of your suit and cover your calves.
- Belts should be in good condition and match the color of your shoes.

#### 5. Accessories:

- Men should limit accessories/jewelry to three pieces.
- Accessories include watch, ring, handkerchief, lapel pins, cuff links, and tie tacks. A dress watch should be worn – avoid athletic styles.
- Avoid bracelets, necklaces, and visible piercings.

#### 6. Grooming:

- Facial hair should be neatly trimmed (moustache, sideburns); beards are not recommended for an interview.
- Hair should be neat and conservative, not touching the collar of your shirt.
- Heavy cologne should be avoided. Soap and antiperspirant will allow the interviewer to remember you, not your scent.
- Nails should be clean and manicured.

## Women's Interview Attire – Fit in, Don't Stand Out

### 1. The Suit:

- Choose a classic suit, avoiding trendy suit styles.
- For a conservative organization, a skirt suit is still considered the appropriate interview attire. A pantsuit, while acceptable for some organizations, is still considered less formal.
- Hemlines should be knee length or longer. Miniskirts are inappropriate, and give the impression that you are not serious about the interview.
- Choose wool, gabardine, or rayon.
- You are not limited to a dark-colored suit, but remember the rule – if you have to ask yourself “Can I?”, then don't.
- Make sure the suit flatters your figure and fits well, not too tight or loose.
- Jacket sleeves should fall ½ inch below your wrist.



### 2. The Blouse:

- Blouses should be current, but neither low-cut nor revealing.
- Do not wear a camisole or sheer blouse.

### 3. Shoes and Hose:

- Wear pumps or sling backs. Avoid sandals or shoes with open toes or ankle straps.
- Shoes should be of good quality.

- Shoe color should match your suit or be slightly darker.
- Heels should be 1-2 inches; higher heels should be saved for after hours.

### 4. Accessories:

- Jewelry should be minimal and conservative. Remove all facial piercing except earrings.
- Wear only five accessories. Earrings count as two and a watch is the third, allowing two additional accessories. Do not over-accessorize.

### 5. Make-up and Grooming:

- Makeup should be natural and conservative. Avoid overly dark or bright eyeshadow and lipstick.
- Nails should be clean and manicured. Avoid very long nails, nail art, and trendy or bright nail polish.
- Hair should be clean and neat.
- Perfume should be applied very lightly if at all. A good soap and antiperspirant will allow the interviewer to remember you, not your scent.

## Business Casual

Business casual is an oxymoron! Dress code policies have been changing for the last decade. Dressing more casually is meant to make life easier, but confusion over appropriate attire has caused many employers to adopt some type of business casual standard. Whether it is casual Fridays, shirts with the organization's logo, or a guide for acceptable dress, the casual dress code is becoming more defined. Candidates seeking employment with an organization may be instructed to wear “business casual” to a particular event during the interview process without receiving any guidelines to follow. Read on for examples of acceptable business casual attire.

### **Women – Acceptable Attire:**

- Pantsuits are a wise choice for a business casual event (information session, facility tour, etc.).
- A classic sheath paired with a cardigan or a blazer in the same fabric and color is a good choice.

- Crisp cotton shirts in white, chambray, and chartreuse paired with dress pants, khakis, or skirts make a casual outfit.
- Cardigan twin sets are also an easy way to dress more casually while still looking professional.
- Jewelry, scarves, and other accessories will add polish to any outfit, but keep in mind that less is more.
- Shoes should still be well-made and close-toed. Flats are appropriate.
- Hose are not essential for business casual, but recommended for shorter skirts.
- Wear trouser socks with pants.

### Men – Acceptable Attire:

- A sports coat creates a pulled together look in a business casual environment and eliminates the need for a tie. Pair the sports coat with khakis or dark slacks.
- Traditional dress slacks (khakis, Dockers, corduroys, wool, and linen) are appropriate with or without a blazer. Be sure to press them beforehand.
- Casual, button-down oxford shirts are a great alternative to dress shirts, with or without a tie. Choose basic white, chambray, or pinstripe.
- Oxfords and loafers in brown or black are a good match for khakis and corduroys.

### Unacceptable Attire:

- Jeans, denim pants, or shorts
- Leggings, stretch or stirrup pants, sweats, spandex, or other form-fitting attire
- Athletic shoes, hiking boots, sandals, or flip flops
- Flannel shirts or T-shirts
- Hats/caps

## Putting it all Together

Regardless of the occasion, dressing appropriately is one of the easiest ways to impress potential employers. It may not guarantee you a job, but it should prevent your elimination from the candidate pool.

## Additional Resources

### Books

Bixler, Susan & Nix-Rice, Nancy. *The New Professional Image: From Business Casual to the Ultimate Power Look*. 1999.

Greenleaf, Clinton. *Attention to Detail: A Gentleman's guide to Professional Appearance and Conduct*. Greenleaf Book Group, 1998.

Molloy, John T. *New Woman's Dress for Success Book*. New York, New York: Warner Books, 2002.

Molloy, John T. *New Dress for Success Book*. New York, New York: Warner Books, 2002.

Morem, Susan. *How to Gain the Professional Edge: Achieve the Personal and Professional Image You Want*. Ferguson Publishing Company, 2005.

### Web Sites

#### Business Attire

- [www.cba.uni.edu/buscomm/](http://www.cba.uni.edu/buscomm/)

#### Casual Attire

- [www.cba.uni.edu/buscomm/](http://www.cba.uni.edu/buscomm/)
- [www.ecglink.com/newsletter/casual.shtml](http://www.ecglink.com/newsletter/casual.shtml)
- [www.business.missouri.edu/337/default.aspx](http://www.business.missouri.edu/337/default.aspx)

#### How to Tie a Tie

- [www.tie-a-tie.net](http://www.tie-a-tie.net)

