

Dressing to Impress: Appropriate Professional Attire

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.

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 are what secure us the job, appearance does count. First impressions are made within five minutes of meeting someone and help to shape all future impressions. When it comes to your career, it is important to dress professionally. This allows the employer and professional contacts to focus on your skills and abilities, not your clothing.

Learn the Employer's Dress Style

Looking the part can help you make a good first impression in an interview or professional work environment. Knowing what is expected takes a little research and perhaps a shopping trip; however, you do not have to spend a lot of money to achieve a professional look. Below are some tips for learning an employer's dress style:

1. Research the culture of the employer. A more conservative employer (accounting, finance, law, etc.) will generally 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 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?" the answer should always be "No."
4. Err on the conservative side when in doubt about what to wear.



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5. Avoid extremes. Low-cut blouses, loud-colored ties, sky-high stilettos, and miniskirts are inappropriate.
6. Ask experts at a clothing store about the fit of your suit. It should not be too loose or too tight.
7. Purchase a quality suit. It is better to buy one good suit than several poorly made suits.
8. Always try on your entire outfit prior to the interview day, looking for any flaws or weaknesses in your appearance. Do not forget to look at the back of your outfit to ensure you have a polished look coming and going.
9. ASK! It is okay to ask an employer what their organization's dress code looks like.

Business Professional Attire

Business attire is the written (or unwritten) dress code of an organization. Business *professional* 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.

Standard Interview Attire

The Suit:

- Choose a classic, neutral suit in charcoal, black, navy, or gray. Avoid suits that conform to trends. Skirt suits are appropriate feminine attire as long as the skirt hits or covers the knee and there are no large slits at the side, front, or back.
- 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.
- Make sure the suit flatters your figure and fits well, not too tight or loose.

The Dress Shirt:

- Choose shirts in a pale, subtle color (i.e., blue, white, or ecru).
- Long-sleeved, button-up shirts are most appropriate. Your shirt sleeve should extend beyond the suit jacket sleeves by half an inch.
- Pointed collars give a more professional image than button-down collars, yet both are acceptable.
- Avoid shirts with insignias.
- Wearing a crew-neck undershirt or camisole under your dress shirt is advisable to preserve modesty and add finish to the look.

Shoes/Belt:

- Shoes that match your suit or are slightly darker are the best choice in colors such as brown, black, tan, or navy. The shoe should have a real sole (no sneakers, sandals, or street shoes) and a closed toe. Avoid platforms and heels higher than 2 inches.
- Shoes should be polished and in good condition.
- Socks/stockings should match the color of your suit and cover your calves.
- Belts should be in good condition and match the color of your shoes.

Masculine Considerations for Interview Attire

The Necktie:

- Wear a conservative tie with subtle patterns or solid colors.
- Ties should be of good quality and generally darker than your shirt.
- The tie should fall to the middle of your belt.



Accessories:

- Limit accessories/jewelry to three pieces.
- Masculine accessories may include a watch, ring, handkerchief/pocket square, lapel pins, cuff links (count as 2), and tie tacks. If wearing a watch, it should be a dress watch – avoid athletic styles.
- Avoid bracelets, necklaces, and visible piercings.

Grooming:

- Facial hair should be neatly trimmed (mustache, sideburns).
- Hair should be neat and conservative, not touching the collar of your shirt.
- Heavy cologne should be avoided.
- Nails should be clean and manicured.
- It is best to try to cover visible tattoos.

Feminine Considerations for Interview Attire

Variations of the Suit:

- If wearing a skirt suit, hemlines should be knee length or longer. Miniskirts are inappropriate.
- Choose a quality fabric such as wool or gabardine.
- Jacket sleeves should fall half an inch below your wrist.



Business Casual Attire

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. You can always ask your organization what "business casual" means to them. However, if you are unable to obtain this information, below are some examples of generally accepted business casual attire.

Appropriate Feminine Business Casual 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 an appropriate 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 remember 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.
- Skirts should still fall near the knee.
- Wear trouser socks with pants.

Appropriate Masculine Business Casual 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.

The Blouse:

- If wearing a blouse instead of a dress shirt, it should be neat and ironed, neither low-cut nor revealing.
- Do not wear a camisole or sheer blouse.

Accessories:

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

Makeup 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.
- Avoid perfumes or scented lotions.
- It is best to try to cover visible tattoos.

- Oxfords and loafers in brown or black are a good match for khakis and corduroys.

Inappropriate 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
- Miniskirts
- Low-cut tops

Summary

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

Career Center Library Resources

Backpack to Briefcase: Steps to a Successful Career...IA A7

Other Print Resources

- Bixler, Susan & Nix-Rice, Nancy. *The 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.

Websites

- Understanding Business Casual Dress — www.ecglink.com/library/ps/casual.html
- How to Tie a Tie — www.tie-a-tie.net

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