



## **Dress for Success: PROFESSIONAL INTERVIEW DRESS**

### **IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSION DRESS**

First impressions DO COUNT when we are evaluating someone, particularly for a professional position. Professional dress is an important component of that first impression. People make assumptions about professional credibility and potential performance based upon appearance during a first meeting, and it is difficult to overcome a first impression, regardless of your knowledge and expertise.

As an interview candidate, you have your foot in the door, but so do all of the other candidates. An interview can distinguish between qualified candidates and the “perfect match.” Professional dress is part of that match.

### **INTERVIEW ATTIRE**

Professional dress is not just about clothes, but an overall professional appearance. You want an employer to be impressed with your look; however, your clothes should not upstage you in an interview. All attention should be on your interview presentation, not on your clothing and accessories.

The following are dress requirements needed for formal interview attire, as well as suggestions on how to achieve an overall professional look.

#### **CLOTHING**

##### **Men**

Men should wear a well-tailored suit in traditional colors such as navy blue, charcoal gray or black, in solid or subtle stripe patterns (e.g., pinstripe). The shirt needs to be a long-sleeve and button-down, preferably in a solid color such as white or a light blue. The tie can have a small print or color; however, its overall appearance should be conservative. Socks need to be a dark solid or a small pattern. Shoes need to be leather, and in a wing tip or loafer style.

##### **Women**

Women should wear a well-tailored suit in colors such as navy blue, charcoal gray or black. Possible shades of green, maroon or purple can be worn if the color goes well with skin and hair coloring, but be cautious of wearing non-neutral color pallets. While more conversation workplaces or industries may still prefer that women wear a dress suit (i.e., matching suited skirt and blazer), a pants suit is now also appropriate for the majority of settings. Skirt lengths always need to be knee length or slightly below the knee. Blouses should be cotton, silk or a nice looking artificial fiber in a conservative color that goes appropriately with the suit. Wear low to medium leather, heeled shoes. Never wear open toe shoes. Always wear pantyhose (even in the summer!).

##### **For Men and Women**

##### **Overall**

While nearly every industry calls for formal interview attire it is also important to be aware of the norms of your profession. In creative fields such as advertising and the arts, for example, while a suit is always a safe bet you may have some more leeway in selecting a bright colored top. However, when in doubt, ALWAYS err towards formal and conservative dress. It is better to be overdressed than underdressed.

## **Hair/Makeup**

Keep hair nice and neat. There is no specific hairstyle recommended, only that your hair is clean and well groomed. Women, wear natural looking makeup that will flatter and compliment, not overpower, your outfit. For men, beards and other facial hair should be neatly trimmed. Also be aware that some industries and organizations may frown on long hair or facial hair.

## **Nails**

Nails should be clean and manicured. Women do not have to wear nail polish; however, if polish is worn, make sure that it is a natural, conservative color and not chipping off.

## **Perfume**

Do not wear perfume or cologne as many people have strong, adverse or even allergic reactions to it.

## **Jewelry**

Wear only a conservative amount of jewelry. Also, wear jewelry that flatters but doesn't overpower. For example, a pair of stud earrings versus chandelier earrings or a gold or silver band versus a large turquoise ring would be appropriate choices.

Obey the thirteen rule: no more than thirteen accessory pieces – this includes accessories such as earrings, rings or a watch, but also accessories we don't typically think about such as buttons on jackets.

## **Tattoos/Piercings**

If you have any type of tattoos or body piercing, consider how it will be perceived during a first impression. In fact, there are some career fields and organizations where having a visible tattoo or body piercing is unacceptable and may eliminate you as a candidate.

## **Purse/Briefcase**

While you would never bring in your backpack, it is fine to bring in a professional looking purse, briefcase or attaché to an interview to carry necessary items. Women – only bring in a purse or a briefcase, not both. Never take a cell phone into an interview.

## **Professional Items Can Include:**

- **A tablet or some type of notebook to take notes or jot down information**

Many students like using a portfolio notebook that includes a notepad, penholder, file pocket and business card holder.

- **A good pen or pencil**

The last thing you want is an ink spill.

- **At least one copy of your resume and list of your references**

- **Portfolio**

This can be a formal portfolio or samples of your work that you can share with the interviewer(s).

## **Personal Items Can Include:**

- **Wallet & Car Keys**

If your car keys are on a ten pound key ring take your car key off; or, if your wallet is the size of a bag itself, just bring in your drivers license and a little money. Leave the rest at home or in the trunk of your car.

- **Kleenex**

- **Breath mints**

## **DRESSING ON A BUDGET: HELPFUL HINTS FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS WANTING TO LOOK PROFESSIONAL WITH LIMITED FUNDS**

Looking professional does not necessarily mean expensive. Of course there is some expense to buying professional interview attire, but you can learn some easy lessons to shopping that can save you a considerable amount of money while still looking good.

### **Do Not Buy Interview Attire When You Need It**

If you start shopping for your interview clothes the week of your interview, guaranteed you will pay more for something you really don't like and possibly not the best quality. Plan ahead and buy clothes during sales seasons. At the end of a season you can typically find clothes 30% - 75% off original prices. Also, the more time you have, the better your options are – rather than picking the first blouse that fits you because your interview is the next day, you can wait until you find that perfect blouse. This has an effect on interviewing, since the more comfortable you are in your clothes, the better you will interview.

### **Buy “Seasonless” Clothing**

As a student, you are going to have one suit, possibly two, but not much more than that. You want to buy a suit that you can wear in the winter and the summer, and also travels well. Do not buy the heaviest wool suit imaginable, even if it is on sale. Instead, buy lighter wool, or a combination of wool and another fabric, such as cotton. Look for clothes that are advertised as “seasonless.”

### **Invest in the Right Pieces**

If you want to invest in a piece of clothing, it is better to invest in a higher quality suit than any other item. Shirts, blouses and shoes can be easily changed out, but you will only have one or two suits. Also, a formal suit can easily turn into a business casual outfit by pairing the suit jacket with khakis or the suit pants or skirt with a nice sweater.

### **Good for Birthdays, Holidays, Graduation, etc...**

Let family and friends know that if they want to buy you a present, they can help chip in to your “interview suit fund.” If you can't keep a money fund without breaking into it, ask them to get you a gift card to a department store or have them go shopping with you, and you can pick out an item with them.

## **BUSINESS CASUAL**

Many students get confused by the difference between formal, interview attire and business casual. Defined, business casual is professional clothing that is not as formal as the interview suite. Many times an organization will state that an event is “business casual;” however, if you are unsure of the dress, ALWAYS err to the more formal and conservative.

For men, a pair of khakis or slacks and a button down shirt or sweater define business casual. For women, business casual can be slacks or a skirt paired with a blouse or sweater. As always, wear appropriate shoes. No sneakers, sandals or open toe shoes.

Remember, the key is to look polished and professional. You should not draw attention to a specific area of clothing or accessory; thus, the same rules for hair, makeup, jewelry and all accessories apply to business casual just as they do with formal, interview attire.

## **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

### ***I have never bought a suit or professional dress wear before and do not know where to even start.***

A good place to start is UNM Career Services to discuss what professional dress is and get information such as this handout. As a professional candidate, you will do a mock interview at Career Services, which can include a critique of your professional outfit. Also, alumni are good sources to get information and suggestions on professional dress, particularly tailored to the specific field and/or company you are interviewing with. For the actual shopping trip, take friends and family members you know will offer you sound advice on clothing choices. Use the professional department store staff to get ideas, suggestions and their knowledge of the merchandise.

***I am interviewing with a very casual company that typically does not wear suits as a standard of dress to work. Should I still wear a suit or should I wear something more casual to blend in?***

Wear the suit. There is no need to feel uncomfortable or overdressed if you are a candidate. Once you are hired, you can wear clothing that blends into the organization's atmosphere. The key is you are not hired yet, and as a candidate you do not have the right to dress in the casual, company style. As a candidate you are putting your best foot forward, which means you are dressing more formal than normal. Remember, it is ALWAYS better to be overdressed than underdressed.

However, it is appropriate to dress less formal if the company specifically tells you not to dress formally. For example, in arranging a dinner interview, a company representative may let you know that the dress code is business casual, which is your signal that it's okay to dress in business casual.

***I just got my interview agenda and I am scheduled to stay and interview all day at the organization. Is this going to have an effect on what I wear?***

Yes and no. No matter how long an interview takes, a candidate always needs to look professional. However, if you are doing a day long interview you need to wear something that will wear well all day and will be comfortable. For example, if you know you will be doing a large amount of walking, make sure your shoes are comfortable as well as professionally appropriate. For a day long interview, chances are you will take off your suit jacket, so wear a blouse or top appropriate to wear alone.

***I have an interview and the weather forecast is snow. What should I do?***

If an interview is scheduled on a day of bad weather, be realistic and don't wear your brand new leather shoes in the snow or get your brand new suit completely soaked. For the trip to the interview, wear appropriate shoes and outer wear and bring your professional items in a bag. Get to the interview a little earlier than planned so you have time to find a bathroom and change items. Don't be afraid to ask the receptionist or front desk attendant for a place to store your items since it is appropriate, due to weather, that you would be bringing these additional items. Always be prepared for inclement weather. For example, bring a small, compact umbrella on a cloudy day. This will showcase you are someone who thinks ahead and prepares for unexpected events.