Business Professional Attire versus Business Casual Attire

It takes only a few seconds for someone to form a whole list of impressions you during a job interview. Make sure your physical appearance isn’t the one thing that has a recruiter thinking, “This person is not for us.” The time frame in which to make a first impression is very limited, as little as 30 seconds. The initial key first impression element noticed is typically manner of dress, with the completion of the first impression immediately after you begin speaking.

It is recommend students dress as professionally as possible for presentations and interviews. It’s better to be a bit overdressed than to be underdressed and to therefore come off as unprofessional. There is an adage that is may serve you well: “Always dress for the job you want, not the job you have.”

A few general rules regarding professional attire:

- When in doubt, always go the conservative route. You want YOU to stand out, not the clothing, jewelry or makeup you wear.
- Ensure you are well-groomed before an interview. This means having clean and manicuring your nails, showering, wearing deodorant/anti-perspirant, brushing your teeth and neatly styling your hair. Males should be clean shaven or have neatly trimmed beard and/or mustaches.
• Whether male or female, your jewelry should be understated and should complement your outfit. Men should stick to no more than a wedding band and a watch, while women should choose conservative jewelry.
• Bring a briefcase, portfolio or simple tote bag to carry your work samples, a notepad, pens, research materials, etc.

**Interview Attire Tips for Men and Women:**

• Well-tailored, clean, pressed suit in conservative shades, such as navy blue, gray or brown.
• Pressed white or light-colored, long-sleeved shirt underneath suit.
• Shoes should be plain black or brown leather and should coordinate with outfit.

**Interview Attire Tips for Women**

• Pants or skirt suits are acceptable. Skirt suits should be no longer or shorter than knee-length.
• A sweater set with a knee-length skirt or dress pants is also acceptable.
• Hosiery (neutral nylons or tights, depending on the season) is a must.
• Shoes should be sensible pumps or low-heeled dress shoes.
• Natural-looking makeup.
• Hair should be out of your face. A neatly placed bun is a good way to ensure hair isn’t distracting.
Interview Attire Tips for Men

- A tie that coordinates with your suit and that avoids wild colors and patterns is necessary.
- Dark socks should be worn and should be long enough to cover legs fully at all times.

You should avoid...

- Low-cut necklines
- Mini-skirts
- Loud prints and patterns
- Open-toed shoes and spike heels
- Dramatic makeup
- Fragrance of any kind
- Excessive or flashy jewelry
- Baseball or any other kind of hat
- Low-cut necklines
- Sleeveless tops and sheer fabrics
- Mini-skirts
- Loud prints and patterns
- Open-toed shoes
- Dramatic makeup
- Excessive or flashy jewelry
- Gum, mints or other objects
- Flaunting designer labels too much
Business Casual Guidelines for Men and Women

Business casual is crisp, neat, and should look appropriate even for a chance meeting with a CEO. It should not look like cocktail or party or picnic attire. Avoid tight or baggy clothing; business casual is classic rather than trendy.

Basics
Khaki or dark pants, neatly pressed, and a pressed long-sleeved, buttoned solid shirt are safe for both men and women. Women can wear sweaters; cleavage is not business-appropriate (despite what you see in the media). Polo/golf shirts, unwrinkled, are an appropriate choice if you know the environment will be quite casual, outdoors or in a very hot location. This may not seem like terribly exciting attire, but you are not trying to stand out for your cutting edge look. You want to be noticed for your good judgment in a business environment.

Shoes/belt
Wear a leather belt and leather shoes. Athletic shoes are inappropriate.

Cost/quality
You are not expected to be able to afford the same clothing as a corporate CEO. However, do invest in quality that will look appropriate during your first two or three years on the job for a business casual environment or occasions.

Details
Everything should be clean, well pressed, and not show wear. Even the nicest khakis after 100 washings may not be your best choice for a reception. Carefully inspect new clothes for tags, and all clothes for dangling threads, etc. (as with interview attire).

Use common sense
If there are six inches of snow on the ground and/or you are rushing to get to an information session between classes and you left home 12 hours earlier, no one will expect you to show up looking ready for a photo shoot — they'll just be happy you made it. Just avoid wearing your worst gym clothes and jeans. If you show up at an event and realize you're not as well dressed as you should be, make a quick, pleasant apology and make a good impression with your interpersonal skills and intelligent questions.
Specifics for men's business casual

Ties
Ties are generally not necessary for business casual, but if you are in doubt, you can wear a tie. It never hurts to slightly overdress; by dressing nicely, you pay a compliment to your host. You can always wear the tie and discreetly walk by the room where the function is held; if no one else is wearing a tie, you can discreetly remove yours.

Shirts
Long-sleeved shirts are considered dressier than short-sleeved and are appropriate even in summer. Choosing white or light blue solid, or conservative stripes is your safest bet. Polo shirts (tucked in, of course) are acceptable in more casual situations.

Socks
Wear dark socks, mid-calf length so no skin is visible when you sit down.

Shoes
Leather shoes should be worn. No sandals, athletic shoes or hiking boots.

Facial hair
Just as with interviews: Facial hair, if worn, should be well-groomed. Know your industry and how conservative it is; observe men in your industry if you are unsure what's appropriate or are considering changing your look.

Jewelry
Wear a conservative watch. If you choose to wear other jewelry, be conservative. Removing earrings is safest. For conservative industries, don't wear earrings. Observe other men in your industry to see what is acceptable.

Specifics for women's business casual

Don't confuse club attire with business attire. If you would wear it to a club, you probably shouldn't wear it in a business environment. If you look in the mirror and think to yourself: “I look hot/sexy…” Go change your clothes, it is most likely not appropriate. Also, most attire worn on television is not appropriate for business environments. Don't be deluded.

Pants/skirts
Women can wear casual pants or skirts. Neither should be tight. Fabrics should be crisp; colors should generally be solid; navy, black, gray, brown and khaki are always safe bets. For the most business-like appearance, pants should be creased and tailored; neither extreme of tight or flowing. If you are pursuing a conservative industry and are in doubt, observe well-dressed women in your industry on the job, at career fairs, at information sessions, etc.

Skirt length and slits
Your skirt should come at least to your knees while you are standing. While you are seated, your
thighs should be covered. If your skirt comes to just below the knee, a slit to just above the knee might be acceptable. A very long skirt should not be slit to above the knee. Generally slits in the center back of a skirt — to facilitate walking a stair climbing — are acceptable. Slits to facilitate a view of your legs are not appropriate for business purposes. Slips should not be visible.

**Shirt/sweaters**
In addition to tailored shirts or blouses, tailored knit sweaters and sweater sets are appropriate business casual choices for women. Cotton, silk, and blends are appropriate. Velvets and shimmery fabrics suitable for parties are not appropriate. Fit should not be tight. Cleavage is not appropriate to business and job search occasions.

**Jewelry/accessories**
Wear a conservative watch. Jewelry and scarf styles come and go. Keep your choices simple and leaning toward conservative. Avoid extremes of style and color. If your industry is creative, you may have more flexibility than someone pursuing a conservative industry.

**Cosmetics**
Keep makeup conservative and natural looking. A little is usually better than none for a polished look. Nails should be clean and well groomed. Avoid extremes of nail length and polish color, especially in conservative industries.

**Shoes**
Should be leather or fabric/microfiber. Appropriate colors are black, navy and brown (to coordinate with your other attire and accessories); white and pastels are not appropriate. For the most conservative look, toes should be covered. Sandals, which are neither extremely dressy nor extremely casual, might be appropriate. Thin straps and high heels are not appropriate. Chunky heels and platforms are not appropriate. Make certain you can walk comfortably in your shoes; hobbling around a job fair in shoes that are pinching your feet does not convey a professional image.

**Hose**
Not essential for business casual, but are recommended if your skirt is knee length (rather than calf length) and in more formal environments such as hotels or private/country clubs.

**Purse/bag**
If you carry a purse, keep it small and simple, or carry a small briefcase or business-like tote bag in place of a purse. A structured bag tends to look more professional that something soft or floppy. Purse/bag color should coordinate with your shoes. A briefcase is certainly not necessary for most business casual events. Leather, microfiber and fine wovens are appropriate. Canvas and straw are not appropriate.

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*Adapted from the Career Services Web sites of Virginia Tech ([www.career.vt.edu](http://www.career.vt.edu)) and St. Bonaventure ([www.sbu.edu](http://www.sbu.edu)).*