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How to Dress for an Interview

Work out how formally to dress for a specific interview, put together a suitable outfit from what you own (or buy as little as possible), adjust it for a video interview, and have it ready the night before.

3-day guide · 3 chapters · Self-Directed Learning Framework

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Every guide on this site is produced with the Self-Directed Learning Framework: instead of an article that explains a topic at you, it turns the topic into a structure you work through — each chapter with one outcome, a starting action under twelve minutes, the minimum you actually need to know, a worked example, a checklist, and exercises using your own situation. No filler, no re-reading required.

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Reading the Dress Code Before You Choose

> **Outcome:** "I know how formal the people at this company dress day to day, and I've decided on one level above that for my interview."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Open the company's website and social media pages and find three photos of real employees at work (not models in adverts). Note what they're wearing.

The minimum you need to know

Interview dress codes follow a simple rule: dress one step more formally than the people already doing the job. To know where that is, you need to see what they wear. Look at the company's careers page, its LinkedIn or social media posts, and photos from events or offices. Notice the real staff, not stock images. If you can, walk past the building at the start or end of a working day. You can also simply ask the recruiter or the person who invited you: "What do people usually wear for interviews with you?" It's a normal, practical question, and recruiters answer it all the time. Roughly, workplaces fall into three levels. Formal: banks, law firms, many corporate offices and client-facing sales roles. Here, a suit or a matching jacket with trousers or a skirt is expected. Business casual: most offices, schools, healthcare administration and public services. Here, smart trousers or a skirt, a collared shirt or a neat blouse or knit, and a jacket that's optional are the norm. Casual: start-ups, creative studios, trades, warehouses, retail and hospitality. Clean dark jeans or chinos with a plain shirt or a neat top are fine, and for practical jobs, clean work-appropriate clothes and footwear. Your interview outfit sits one step above whichever level the staff are at. When in real doubt, lean slightly more formal: a jacket you can take off solves more problems than one you don't have.

Worked example

Worked example: too formal for the warehouse. Someone invited to interview for a warehouse team-lead job plans to wear their only suit. On the company's social media, the team leaders in the photos wear branded polo shirts, work trousers and safety boots. Their own interview photo on the careers page shows a manager in a plain shirt and chinos. They settle on clean chinos, an ironed plain shirt and polished, sturdy shoes: one step above the floor staff, and right for the walk round the warehouse that's part of the interview.

Checklist

- [ ] Three photos of real employees at work found and looked at
- [ ] Workplace placed at one level: formal, business casual or casual
- [ ] Interview outfit chosen one step above that level
- [ ] Recruiter asked if the dress code was still unclear
- [ ] Practical parts of the interview considered (site walk, standing, outdoors)

Exercises

1. Write down the dress level of the company in one word, and the reason in one sentence.
2. Write the one-step-up version of that level for yourself.
3. If anything is unclear, send the recruiter the dress-code question today.

Building the Outfit From What You Own

> **Outcome:** "I have a complete interview outfit put together and tried on, mostly from clothes I already own, and adjusted if the interview is on video."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Lay out on the bed the clothes you'd wear for the level you chose in Chapter 1: top, bottom, shoes, and a layer if needed. Don't buy anything yet.

The minimum you need to know

Start with what you have. Interviewers notice fit, cleanliness and condition far more than labels or price. A plain, well-fitting outfit in neutral colours (navy, grey, black, white, light blue, beige) is safe at every level, and one colour or accessory you like keeps it personal. Try everything on together, including the shoes. Check that nothing is too tight when you sit down, that sleeves and trouser or skirt lengths are right, and that there are no marks, missing buttons or loose hems. If something essential is missing, buy only that one item, or borrow it. Charity shops and alterations are good options when money is tight. Tattoos, hair and jewellery are part of who you are. Keep them neat, and adjust them only as much as you would for the job itself. For a video interview, the camera sees mainly your top half, so the top matters most. Choose solid, mid-tone colours. Very fine stripes and small checks can flicker on camera, and bright white or black can confuse the camera's exposure. Dress fully anyway, including trousers. It changes how you sit and speak, and you might need to stand up. Check the outfit on your own camera beforehand, with the lighting and background you'll use, to see how it actually looks.

Worked example

Worked example: no suit, and an interview on Thursday. A career changer has an interview at a business-casual office on Thursday and owns no suit. They lay out grey trousers from a wedding, a light blue shirt that needs ironing, and black shoes. Trying it all on, the trousers are fine sitting down, but the shoes are scuffed. They polish the shoes, iron the shirt, and buy one plain navy knit jumper to wear over it, the only purchase. On camera for a test video call with a friend, the light blue reads clearly and the jumper keeps it from looking too formal.

Checklist

- [ ] Outfit put together from what you already own first
- [ ] Neutral, plain base with at most one personal accent
- [ ] Whole outfit tried on, including shoes, sitting and standing
- [ ] Marks, missing buttons and loose hems checked and fixed
- [ ] Only the one missing item bought or borrowed, if any
- [ ] Video outfit checked on camera: solid mid-tones, no fine stripes

Exercises

1. Try on the full outfit and take a mirror photo to look at with fresh eyes later.
2. Sit down in it for five minutes and note anything that pulls, gapes or creases.
3. For a video interview, do a test call and check the outfit and background on screen.

The Night Before and the Morning Of

> **Outcome:** "I have everything ironed, cleaned and laid out the night before, and a short morning routine that gets me there looking the way I planned."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Hang the complete outfit somewhere visible tonight, shoes underneath, so tomorrow you don't have to think about it at all.

The minimum you need to know

Prepare the outfit the evening before, not the morning of. Iron or steam the shirt or top and any trousers, and hang them up. Clean and polish the shoes. Check the weather and decide on a coat and an umbrella, because arriving soaked or frozen undoes the rest. Lay out the small things too: a belt, a bag or folder for your papers, a pen, and anything the invitation asked you to bring. If you'll travel by public transport or walk a long way, consider wearing comfortable shoes and changing into the interview shoes nearby. On the morning itself, keep grooming simple and familiar. This isn't the day to try a new haircut, product or fragrance. Go light on any scent, since interview rooms are often small. Pack a small backup kit: a few tissues or wet wipes, a stain-remover pen if you have one, a comb, and mints rather than chewing gum. Arrive a few minutes early so you have time to check your appearance in a bathroom mirror before you go in. Then forget about your clothes. If you dressed one step above the job and everything fits, you've done what an outfit can do.

Worked example

Worked example: a coffee spill at 8 am. On the morning of a 10 am interview, a candidate spills coffee on their shirt cuff while getting ready. Because the outfit was laid out the night before, with a second ironed shirt as backup, they swap shirts in two minutes. They still leave on time. At the building, they check their collar and hair in the bathroom mirror, put the mints back in their bag, and walk into the interview thinking only about their answers.

Checklist

- [ ] Shirt or top and trousers or skirt ironed and hung the night before
- [ ] Shoes cleaned and polished
- [ ] Weather checked: coat and umbrella decided
- [ ] Papers, pen and bag packed
- [ ] Small backup kit packed: tissues, comb, mints
- [ ] Familiar grooming only, light or no fragrance
- [ ] Mirror check in the building before going in

Exercises

1. Write your night-before checklist and tick it off the evening before the interview.
2. Pack the backup kit in the bag you'll take.
3. Plan your route and arrival time, with ten minutes spare for a mirror check.

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