Tips for Men on Dressing for Success

LCLD Connections Guest Column

By Andy Cao

Fall arrives soon, which means returning to campus. Unlike spring semester, Crocs and shorts won’t cut it because law school in the fall means on-campus interviews and callbacks. How should a gentleman and student dress for success?

Browse a law firm’s web site and you’ll notice the attorneys seem to be dressed similarly. This is not a coincidence. The suit is their uniform and it will be yours. The prevailing question in an interviewer’s mind is, “Can I imagine this candidate working here?” Your uniform will be part of a package answering, “Yes!” Even with a limited budget, you can look great for multiple interviews.

**The Shirt:** Solid white and light blue shirts are the most versatile. Broadcloth and oxford are durable, breathe well, and look nice. Spread and straight collars are dressier. Button-down collars are sportier, but nobody will fault you for it.

It’s good to own at least two shirts. You may need these shirts multiple times a week, so make sure they are washed and ironed. Dry cleaning is expensive and harsh, so it’s fine (and preferable) to gently machine wash your shirt (or hand wash), air dry it, and iron.

For comfort, the shirt collar should allow two fingers to fit between the collar and your neck. As a practical matter, most of the shirt remains under a jacket so sleeve length, taper, and options are not crucial at this stage.

**The Suit:** Like shirts, your suits should be staples rather than sartorial adventures. Two wool suits is plenty. Your student suits don’t need to be expensive, but they need to be tailored. Budget less for the suit purchase and more on tailoring. Every off-the-rack suit is made assuming it will be tailored, so even the right sized suit will be presumptively too long in the sleeves and pants and too full in the body. A tailor can make an inexpensive suit look great on you.

The most versatile suits are single-breasted, and solid navy or dark grey. Solid black suits are too severe except for Reservoir Dogs and limousine drivers. Stripes and patterns are harder to reuse without people noticing.

Avoid sending suit jackets to the cleaners. Your jacket might survive two trips to the cleaners before showing damage. If your jacket gets soiled, spot clean it with water. Send the pants to cleaners only when soiled. Unless soiled, air the pants inside out for a day and return them to the hanger. Use a clothes brush to clean the suit after each wearing.

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1 Based on how I dress my three-year-old daughter, I have nothing to offer when it comes to female attire.
Ties: If the suit and shirt are the background, the tie and your face are the foreground. Solids, repp stripes, dots, and madder are patterns that won’t distract from you. Whimsical prints, bright florals, and bow ties are riskier, but if you are compelled to have a personal touch, this is the place to do it. Half-windsor and full-windsor knots are symmetrical and look neater than four-in-hand knots. If you can get the dimple underneath the knot, that will be all the embellishment you need.

Footwear: The easiest approach to socks is to coordinate them with the pants for a continuity of color from the pant down to the top of the shoe.

Black leather shoes pair easily with grey and navy suits. Oxfords are dressier than bluchers, and loafers border on casual. Tooling like on a wingtip also make the shoe more casual. Keep shoes reasonably shined and use shoe trees. If there were one item on which to splurge, it would be shoes because there is no relief from uncomfortable shoes and because a good shoe can outlive its owner, with care.

A dress belt should be leather coordinating with—not necessarily matching—the shoes. Belt hardware should be polished metal.

Business Casual: An array of business casual is tough on a budget. It’s better to err on being overdressed rather than underdressed. The easiest approach is to simply omit the tie. For something more properly business casual, the most budget-friendly tactic would be to add a navy blazer and grey slacks, and reuse items from above.

Interviewers do not expect you to be as well dressed as them, nor do they want to evaluate you on your appearance. But attire is part of your non-verbal message, and the goal is to convey that you have good judgment, and that you’re respectful and employable, all on a budget.

Summary:
- Two single-breasted wool suits (navy and/or grey)
- Two dress shirts (white or light blue)
- Black dress shoes
- Black dress belt
- Socks (navy, grey, and/or black)
- Ties

Author Note: Andy Cao is a Member at McGlinchey Stafford PLLC and a 2012 LCLD Fellow.

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