

DRESS FOR DURESS

A Glossary of Personal Appearance Concepts

by Douglas B. Richardson

There you stand in your skivvies, assaying your closet for the right clothing choice for today's Big Job Interview. Yow, the stress. Last night your date reminded you that "you never have a second chance to make a first impression" just before you inverted your soup bowl into your lap. This morning you're still paranoid about torpedoing your employment prospects by choosing a suit or a dress that throws the interviewer into a jag of uncontrollable laughter.

The key to avoiding such a catastrophe is to borrow from the Hippocratic Oath what every med student is supposed to learn: "Above all, do no harm." In other words, the key to successful self-presentation isn't style, elegance, fashion or flair. It's to be above reproach, to understand what the interviewer expects and to project an impression of compatibility with those expectations. In short, the fundamental rule is: Be unremarkably remarkable.

In contrast to how you might dress for class, a date or a social gathering, you should be much less concerned with having your appearance make an individual personal statement. In interviews, your sartorial strategy is to show you understand and accept the interviewer's values, tastes and socioeconomic expectations about dress and demeanor.

The problem is that these expectations will vary by industry, job type and geography; what will fly in San Diego may not clear the runway in Philadelphia. Your interview preparation, therefore, should include some thought and research into an image that suggests you want to fit in, not stand out.

For example, people who manage money for others are expected to be conservative and to have that fact reflected in their appearance. Innovative, creative businesses tolerate and even welcome a more adventurous personal style.

Regardless of where you are or what you're interviewing for, there are some core attributes you want to project: cleanliness, attention to detail, credibility, authority, self-confidence. With these baseline virtues in mind, let's consider a glossary of sartorial concepts:

ASHEN: What the interviewer's face will be if you blow a heavy shot of your lunch-time Bermuda onions at him. Keep some breath mints in your attache or purse and assume you need them even if you have no reason to think you do.

BLOUSE: An expensive-looking item of women's business attire that doesn't shine too much, reveal too much or hide one's chin in an overabundance of frills. Can be set off nicely with a matching or contrasting bow, but tends to look sort of silly if matched with a man's necktie as a fashion statement. If you're short of money, buy expensive blouses and less expensive suits.

BROWN: A color occurring in nature and in golden retrievers but not generally indigenous to business and interview attire, at least in areas of the country where leaves fall off the trees in winter. A warm, friendly color

generally incapable of conveying the power, authority and go-for-the-jugular assertiveness crucial to becoming a successful takeover artist.

CONVENTIONAL: What the job market is. For better or worse, in the private sector (as opposed to the NBA or the Sausalito artists' colony), upper-middle-class norms prevail. Like it or not, your interviewing game face should suggest that you understand and accept what often are some pretty dreary and homogeneous expectations about personal behavior and dress.

COSTUME JEWELRY: Costumes of any sort are for Halloween and the occasional toga party. Large jangly things hanging from your wrist or neck—no matter what the gold content—are distracting and look affected on either gender.

CLASS: Something that is conveyed through your poise, articulateness, attentiveness and interpersonal skills. A positive attribute easily compromised if expressed through huge monograms, gold neck chains, chest hair peeping through an open-necked shirt, or even \$400 shoes. Class is as class does. You can't buy it with your VISA card.

FASHION: A concept the business community generally won't admit exists unless it's in the business of selling fashion to people who deny it exists.

GREEN: A color from which business clothing should not be made or worn unless

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Dress for Duress

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you are a woman. For interviews, be safe: Wear blue or gray. Men: Golf-pro green is not really a shirt color. It's a statement of a fundamental character defect that only Jack Nicklaus can get away with. Better to stick with white or, in more informal settings, blue Oxford cloth shirts.

GUM: Moscow's largest state-owned department store. Also something you put in your mouth to freshen your breath, make yourself look bored and assure that you aren't hired by anybody.

HAIR: Your hair should look like you care about it, not that you spent too much or too little time caring for it. Note that your interviewer may not be able to distinguish the currently popular disheveled hair styles from merely disheveled hair.

IDENTITY ENHANCERS: You're supposed to be grown up now, with a sense of personal confidence and identity that does not rely on Messrs. Gucci, Lauren, Givenchy or Countess Mara for a boost. Except in areas where everyone wears them to signal group membership, avoid clothing or accessories that seek to make a statement: "I'm rugged." "I'm rich." "I'm classy." "Me 'n' Mr. Polo groom our ponies together." "I'll play in your league but show my independence through the buckskin fringes on the chaps I wear to work." They're hiring you, not Don Johnson.

IRISH SPRING: A soap, not a season. Sorry to go into this, but impeccable personal hygiene (includes nails and close shaves and stuff like that) reflects the attention to detail that speaks volumes about you. The interview season is not the time to save hot water.

LAPEL: A part of a man's suit that should be no wider than his necktie. No firm rule in the women's league yet.

MALLOY: The guy who wrote *Dress for Success*, the prescriptive book on personal presentation everyone loves to laugh at. Except he's right. Men: Buy yourself a copy and keep it hidden in the garage. Women: His women's dress-for-success book seems far less helpful, probably because the conventions for women's business dress are still evolving

and Malloy doesn't know any more about them than you do.

NECKTIE: (1) A decorative item of male apparel that should be made of silk, no wider than your lapels, and unobtrusive. Patterns should be subtle and repetitive. Stripes should be of a uniform pattern, and not a lot of different widths and hues. (2) An item not to be bought at K-Mart.

PERFUME: Not so as you'd notice.

POLYESTER: It's wonderful stuff, but you and the entire business world are obliged to pretend that it doesn't exist. Save your unwrinklable unshrinkable indestructible polyester stuff for after you're employed or are traveling. Dweebs, nerds and biophysicists may ignore this injunction; employers in their fields are too intelligent to care what someone's clothes are made of.

RINGS: (See: Costume Jewelry.) A wedding ring is nice (if you're married)—shows home, hearth and all those stable values employers like so much. Diamond pinky rings play better in Vegas than in corporate America.

SHOES: Yes, you should wear some. If you do, men, it's black or cordovan, preferably with laces, at least in the northern states. In the South and the West Coast, the rules are bit more relaxed. But skip the Hush Puppies and the brown penny loafers.

Women—your shoes should be sensible, understated. Long spike heels send the wrong signal, unless you're interviewing for an exotic dancer position.

SOCKS: (1) A black or very dark navy blue bit of camouflage that keeps any part of your ankle, shin or calf from being visible to the human eye (in warmer climates lighter tones may be acceptable, but flashing skin never is). (2) A gag item, manufactured in many festive patterns and colors and given to people for Christmas with the clear intention that they never be worn except to rake leaves.

SMOKING: Are you kidding? Go straight to unemployment.

STOCKINGS: Should be flesh-toned, or close to it. Avoid colors, texture and patterns that could cause your interviewer to break eye contact.

WATCH: A device strapped to your wrist that should not weigh more than your shoe, utter strange urps and beeps during the interview or suggest that you place a higher priority on timing your splits in the triathlon than catching the local train. Gold is nice. Round is nice. Thin is nice. Dummy Rolex knock-offs create a problem: If this is your first job and you're eager to start building a corporate career, where'dja get that \$8,000 watch?

WOOL: God's gift to corporate American clothing in the Rust Belt. Up North, every suit you wear should look like it's made

from it, unless it's July and 100 degrees, when something lighter may do. Poly/wool mixes are all right as long as the end result would make a ewe baah in recognition. In warmer climates, practicality wins out—but the suiting still should look professional and businesslike.

WOMEN: A major challenge to the equanimity of the male-dominated, basically chauvinistic and inflexible protectors of the American corporate flame and its time-worn clothing conventions. Should they pretend they're men? Dress like men? Be accepted as living, breathing, thinking organisms with minds and clothing standards of their own?

This much seems clear: What is regarded as an acceptable uniform on a male may look like a costume on a woman. Women seem to be able to wear different fabrics, more colors and more ruffles than men without appearing unprofessional. But where is the line drawn—and who draws it? The interviewer knows...

Generally, stay clear of either hyper-masculine (chalk-stripe suits, men's neckties in half-windsor knots) or hyper-feminine affectations (six-inch heels, a plunging decolletage). They'll get attention, all right, but probably not the right kind.

If all blue serge and no flair makes Jack a dull boy, remember that you'll have a lot more freedom to express your individuality after you've survived the interview and won the interviewer's trust. Regardless of where you live or the kind of job you're interviewing for, the same principle applies: Your clothing, like your demeanor, should appear unaffected, unstudied and a natural extension of you—not the other way around. The most vocal proofs of your strengths should come from your mouth, your resume and your cover letter, not your loafers.

Mr. Richardson is a career development consultant based in Philadelphia.

QUESTIONS INTERVIEWERS ASK

Questions about your educational background:

1. Why did you choose to go to _____ University (or college)?
2. Why did you choose _____ as a major?
3. Did you change majors during school? If so, why?
4. What was your grade point average?
5. What were your best subjects in school? Your worst?
6. What subjects did you enjoy the most? Why? What did you enjoy the least? Why?
7. Did you participate in extracurricular activities? What were they?
8. Have you held position of leadership in any organization?
9. How was your education financed? Did you finance any of it yourself?
10. If you had your education to do over again, what would you do differently?
11. Did you do the best job you could while in school? If not, why not?

Questions about your work experience:

1. Tell me about a typical day at _____ company. (Answer for part-time, full-time, volunteer, and other paying jobs.)
2. What functions did you enjoy most? What ones did you enjoy least?
3. What did you like about your boss? What did you dislike?
4. What did you learn from each of your jobs?
5. Which job did you enjoy most? Why? Which job did you enjoy least? Why?
6. Why did you leave each of your jobs? If you are working now, why do you want to leave?
7. What accomplishments have you achieved in each of your jobs?

Questions about your career goals and desires:

1. What are your short-range and long-range career objectives?
2. What kind of starting salary are you looking for?
3. What kind of salary do you expect to be earning in five years? Ten years?
4. What position do you expect to have in five years? Ten years?
5. If you had your choice of jobs and organizations, where would you go?
6. Do you prefer a large or a small company? Why?
7. Do you have a specific geographical preference? Why?
8. What other types of jobs are you considering? What other companies?
9. Why haven't you obtained a job so far?
10. How do you feel about relocation, traveling, working overtime, and working on weekends?
11. What questions do you have about our company?
12. What do you know about our company? How did you find this out?
13. What interests you about our product or service?

Questions about your personality and other general questions:

1. What are your major strengths? Your major weaknesses?
2. What causes you to lose your temper?
3. What do you like to do during your spare time? What are your hobbies?
4. What types of books do you like to read?
5. What part does your family play in your life?
6. How well do you work under pressures and deadlines?
7. What is your philosophy of management, teaching, and so on?
8. What have you done that shows initiative and willingness to work?
9. What types of people do you like to most? The least?
10. Do you consider yourself to be lucky?
11. If you had your life to live over again, what would you do differently?
12. Are you creative, analytical, and a leader? Give examples for all.

QUESTIONS ASKED BY INTERVIEWERS WHEN THEY CHECK YOUR REFERENCES

An interviewee should be aware that a reference check may be made on he/she at some time during the interview process. These are some of the questions that may be asked. Numbers 8 and 9 are catch-alls. They can elicit responses relating to the candidate's moral character or other sensitive areas that an interviewer may not wish to query specifically. Number 10 is a method to get references from people not suggested by the interviewee. Interviewers recognize that an interviewee is not going to suggest as a reference one whom he/she knows will not give a good one. Therefore, by having the reference name some other references, the interviewer is getting to a more objective source--one who has not been preconditioned by the interviewee.

1. How long did he/she work for you?
2. What was the quality of his/her work?
3. How much responsibility did he/she have?
4. How did he/she get along with people?
5. Did he/she require close supervision?
6. Was he/she prompt? How was his/her attendance?
7. Why did he/she leave your company?
8. Do you know of anything that would disqualify him/her for the job?
9. Can you think of anything I should know about him/her that I haven't asked about?
10. Do you know anyone else to whom I could speak about him/her?

ILLEGAL PRE-EMPLOYMENT INQUIRIES

Dr. Jan E. Kilby

Adapted from Career Planning and Placement materials written by Dr. Jan E. Kilby, Assistant Dean for Student Affairs in the College of Education at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities.

In pre-employment interviews or other communications with potential employers, you have rights to protect you from being asked questions that might be used to discriminate against you for non-job related reasons. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the Office of Civil Rights of the Department of Education serve to ensure compliance with these acts and provide information about your legal rights.

These acts are as follows:

- * The Equal Pay Act of 1963
- * Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964
- * The Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967
- * Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972
- * The Equal Opportunity Act of 1972
- * The Rehabilitation Act of 1973

Though all states must adhere to the federal guidelines, individual states may enact additional items. The following represent the most commonly reported items of information that employers may not inquire about during the pre-employment process. You should check with your placement office for information concerning your state's regulations.

- * Marital status and social living arrangements
- * Spouse's profession
- * Race, religion, or national origin. Any inquiries about place of birth, native language, or club affiliations are generally permissible
- * Age may only be asked to establish that you are of age to work
- * Financial information regarding bankruptcy, car or home ownership, credit rating, social security, or bank accounts may not be requested

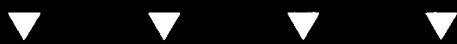
- * Arrests--You need not provide information about past arrests but you may be asked to provide information about criminal convictions
- * Height and weight questions may be asked only if they are necessary requirements for the performance of a job
- * Pregnancy status and childbearing plans
- * Number and ages of children (parental status)--Also illegal to request information about daycare provisions for children
- * Foreign citizenship--You may be asked if you are a U.S. citizen: if you intend to remain permanently in the U.S., if you are not a citizen, or if visa or immigration status prohibits you from becoming lawfully employed
- * Academic degrees--information about earned academic degrees may not be required unless they are required for the job
- * Military service and discharge information
- * Social activities--information may not be requested regarding membership in social clubs, religious groups, non-professional organizations, or other non-job related groups
- * Handicaps--You are not required to disclose information about a handicap you may have. However, you may be invited to indicate this information voluntarily for affirmative action purposes

You should be careful when preparing your resume. It probably is wise not to include information such as that listed above, which might be used to discriminate against you. If you provide the information without being asked to do so, it is not illegal for the employer to discuss this information.

Questions to Ask Employers

1. Please describe the duties of the job for me.
2. What kinds of assignments might I expect the first six months on the job?
3. Are salary adjustments geared to the cost of living or job performance?
4. Does your company encourage further education?
5. How often are performance reviews given?
6. What products (or services) are in the development stage now?
7. Do you have plans for expansion?
8. What are your growth projections for next year?
9. Have you cut your staff in the last three years?
10. How do you feel about creativity and individuality?
11. Do you offer flextime?
12. Is your company environmentally conscious? In what ways?
13. In what ways is a career with your company better than one with your competitors?
14. Is this a new position or am I replacing someone?
15. What is the largest single problem facing your staff (department) now?
16. May I talk with the last person who held this position?
17. What is the usual promotional time frame?
18. Does your company offer either single or dual career-track programs?
19. What do you like best about your job/company?
20. Once the probation period is completed, how much authority will I have over decisions?
21. Has there been much turnover in this job area?
22. Do you fill positions from the outside or promote from within first?
23. What qualities are you looking for in the candidate who fills this position?
24. What skills are especially important for someone in this position?
25. What characteristics do the achievers in this company seem to share?
26. Is there a lot of team/project work?
27. Will I have the opportunity to work on special projects?
28. Where does this position fit into the organizational structure?
29. How much travel, if any, is involved in this position?
30. What is the next course of action? When should I expect to hear from you or should I contact you?

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