

WTF IS BUSINESS CASUAL: HOW TO DRESS THE PART

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As a college student and developing young professional, I'm constantly invited to events and meetings where the dress code reads 'business casual.' While I'm excited for these opportunities, in the back of my mind I am usually panicking and thinking, 'WTF does that even mean?' The good news is, I know I'm not alone. Time and time again, when I've asked peers, advisors, family, and professional colleagues, the answer to 'how do I dress business casual?' always produces an unclear set of guidelines like 'probably a skirt and shirt,' or an equally confused, 'I honestly don't really know.' It seems like this dress code wouldn't be hard, and for some who already have a fully stocked professional wardrobe, maybe it isn't. But for me, a student who has neither the time nor means to buy a new set of business clothes, dressing business casual often results in staring at the closet for hours, wondering which tops, skirts, and pants are juuuuust the right combination of both 'business' and 'casual.'

Ok, so WTF does business casual mean? In this sense, casual means something you could wear to work and then head to dinner with your parents in. It works in the office, but also could work for a nice brunch or a day of meeting your boyfriend's family. It's not the kind of casual you would wear every day or out to a club, but it is more laid back than what you would imagine a full-on business look to be. So then what is business? In this sense, the business part means something that is modest and mature, but not restricting, like a full suit and heels. It looks polished, age-appropriate, and presentable in front of higher ups, clients, or people you want to make a good first impression on.

These can be things you might already own, like knee or tea-length skirts, wrap dresses, slacks, blouses, cardigans, blazers, silk tops, loafers, boots, and flats. Or, you can opt to purchase a few versatile pieces that can be worn over and over. Regardless, here are some things to keep in mind when picking out your business casual pieces:

Color

Dark colors are often the best for business casual clothing. Not only because they tend to appear more mature, but because this makes the clothing more versatile, as it will be less obvious when they are repeatedly worn. It also prevents signs of wear and tear, adding to your put-together and polished look. Don't be afraid of color though — if you are the kind of person who likes to wear bright colors, consider buying a few statement shirts to go with your darker colored pants and skirts, or throwing on a few pops of color in your accessories. Overall, keep a subdued, but still unique look, by relying primarily on darks and neutrals, with hints of colors or prints.

Length

This can be kind of difficult when choosing from pieces you already have or when dressing for warmer weather. However, as far as business casual goes, it is always a good idea to select skirts and dresses that are on the longer side. This doesn't mean you should be boring or frumpy, just make sure you are wearing something that looks appropriate and flatters you. Try maxi skirts or dresses that graze the knee. If you do not have longer

pieces, go for something flowy to balance out the shorter length, and consider wearing tights to add a layer of coverage.

Fit

This is perhaps one of the most important aspects of a business casual outfit. Be sure you are choosing something that looks like it has been tailored to you. Make sure it is not too tight, and that it accentuates your best features and flatters your figure. This will make it clear that you put thought and care into your appearance, and will make you feel confident in knowing that others can tell how much you care about your job, interview, or the event.

Accessories

Accessories are another way to make sure your look is completed from head to toe. Keep nails polished or polish-free, but not chipped or unkempt. Style your hair, at least in some way, to show that you put effort into your look. Use a nice, sturdy purse rather than a sloppy tote or even a backpack, and throw on some jewelry, if you are the kind of person who usually wears it, to add a finishing touch. With all of that in mind though, feel free to play with your accessories, utilizing pops of color, unique combinations, or statement pieces. These will add subtle flairs of your own personality to your look.

Personality

Just because you are aiming to look professional does not mean you need to abandon your own personal style. Fashion is meant to be an expression of who you are, and that is something that can be translated even into a business look. Find pieces that speak to you, such as modern twists on classic styles, or pieces with lowkey patterns and subtle flair. Little bows, pleats, zippers, and asymmetrical hems can add fun to your basics that show off the real you, especially when paired in unique ways or in combination with your favorite accessories. Stay away from something that is trying too hard to be different, such as sequins, sheer, and excess lace, but don't shy away from tastefully fun and flirty styles that portray your glowing personality to the world!

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All of that said, it's a good idea to keep in mind that every event and workplace is different. Some may allow for jeans or shorts, while others may not. Some may allow for sandals and sneakers, while others may not. And even still, slight variations in unspoken dress codes can appear in ways you haven't even thought of or that I haven't listed. If you are trying to dress for the long term, like a job where the office is business casual, pay attention to those around you, and learn from their looks. However, if you are attending a one-time event and all these rules and variations still seem confusing to you, and you can't figure out what to wear, don't stress it! It seems like a big deal, but as long as you have a general idea of how to achieve the right business casual look (as I hope you now do), you will more than likely be just fine. When in doubt, go with something that makes you look sophisticated and polished, and, most importantly, that makes you feel confident. Plus, as they say, you can never be overdressed or overeducated. So just go out in your favorite combination of a silk top and slacks, or a wrap dress and loafers, or a skirt, tights, and cardigan, and wow their socks off! You are powerful, and now that you look the part, there is nothing that will get in your way!