ROBERT H. SMITH SCHOOL OF BUSINESS
OFFICE OF CAREER SERVICES

Professional Attire: Dressing for the Occasion

Robert H. Smith School of Business | Career Readiness Guide

Professional does not always mean a suit. The goal is to understand the setting, employer, and industry—and choose attire that helps you feel confident, polished, and prepared.

Start Here: Three Questions to Ask

- What is the event? An interview, career fair, networking event, employer visit, class, or social event may call for different levels of formality.
- What are the norms of the industry or employer? Expectations can vary across consulting, banking, accounting, government, technology, marketing, startups, manufacturing, and other fields.
- What impression do you want to make? When you are unsure, it is generally safer to be slightly more polished than the setting requires.

If an employer or event provides a dress code, follow it. If you are unsure, research the organization's culture or ask your career coach or recruiter.

General Guidelines

- Choose clothing that fits well, is clean, wrinkle-free, and in good condition.
- Keep grooming neat and professional, including clean hair and nails.
- Use fragrance sparingly or not at all, recognizing that others may have sensitivities or allergies.
- Choose accessories, bags, and footwear that are clean and appropriate for the setting.
- Professional attire can and should accommodate cultural, religious, gender-expression, disability, and personal needs.
- Comfort and mobility matter. You should be able to sit, stand, walk, and engage comfortably throughout the event.
- Avoid clothing or accessories with offensive, distracting, or inappropriate language or imagery.

Understanding the Dress Continuum

Business Professional	Business Casual	Smart Casual	Casual
Formal interviews; formal career fairs; conservative industries; events specifically designated business professional	Employer events; many networking events; company visits; conferences; less-formal interviews when indicated	Informal professional gatherings; some employer or alumni events; industry settings with relaxed norms	Class; informal student activities; social events; school-spirit activities
Coordinated suit or polished equivalent; dress shirt, blouse, shell, or other professional top; tie when appropriate to the setting	Polished separates such as trousers, skirts, dresses, blazers, sweaters, cardigans, polos, or collared/button-front shirts	Polished but relaxed separates; dark or non-distressed denim may be appropriate when the setting permits	Jeans (non-ripped), shorts (excluding cut-offs), T-shirts, sweaters, and other relaxed attire appropriate for the activity or occasion
Professional footwear that is clean and complements the outfit	Loafers, flats, boots, dress shoes, heels, or clean minimalist sneakers when appropriate to the workplace/event	Clean, polished footwear appropriate to the setting	Comfortable casual footwear



Examples of traditional business-professional outfits.

Business Professional

Best for: formal interviews, formal career fairs, highly traditional industries, and any event explicitly designated “business professional.”

- A well-fitting suit or similarly formal coordinated outfit remains the safest choice for many formal recruiting situations.

- Navy, charcoal, black, and other neutral colors are traditional and versatile, but professional attire is not limited to these colors.
- Pair with a polished shirt, blouse, shell, or other professional top. A tie may be appropriate depending on the outfit, industry, and event.
- Professional, closed-toe shoes are required for all attendees. Athletic shoes, flip-flops, and other casual footwear are not appropriate.
- Keep accessories professional and appropriate to the setting. A briefcase, tote, handbag, or clean professional-looking backpack can all be appropriate.



Examples of business-casual outfits; use current employer norms to guide your choice.

Business Casual

Best for: many employer information sessions, networking events, company visits, speaker events, conferences, and workplace settings—unless otherwise indicated.

- Aim for polished and professional without requiring a matching suit.
- Options may include trousers, skirts, dresses, blazers, sweaters, cardigans, polos, knit tops, or button-front/collared shirts.
- Footwear may include loafers, flats, boots, dress shoes, heels, or—where appropriate—clean minimalist sneakers.
- Avoid overly casual, distressed, or distracting clothing when the event is professionally focused.
- Industry and employer norms matter: business casual at a financial institution may look different from business casual at a technology company or startup.

Smart Casual

Smart casual sits between business casual and casual. It can be appropriate for informal professional gatherings, some alumni or employer events, and industries with more relaxed workplace norms.

- Think polished, intentional, and put-together rather than formal.
- Examples may include polished separates, knitwear, casual blazers, clean non-distressed denim when appropriate, and professional-looking footwear.
- If you are attending a recruiting event and are unsure whether smart casual is sufficient, choose business casual.

Virtual Interviews & Networking

- Dress with the same level of professionalism you would use for the equivalent in-person interaction.

- Choose clothing that presents well on camera and avoid patterns or accessories that are overly distracting on screen.
- Pay attention to lighting, camera angle, background, sound, and what is visible within the camera frame.
- Even when only your upper body is visible, dressing fully for the occasion can help you feel more prepared and professional.



Maryland spirit wear is a good choice for informal school activities.



Casual & Maryland Spirit Wear

Casual attire is appropriate for class, informal extracurricular activities, social events, and other settings where professional attire is not expected. Maryland or Smith spirit wear is encouraged for school-sponsored activities, sporting events, and other opportunities to show school pride.

When You're Not Sure

Ask. Dress expectations can vary by employer, industry, geography, event, and workplace culture. Review event instructions, research the organization, ask the recruiter when appropriate, or talk with your career coach.

Your goal is not to memorize fashion rules—it is to demonstrate professional judgment.

Photo note: Images are retained from the original Smith guide as illustrative examples. For a future redesign, replace these with current, diverse student outfit photos.