

Dress codes deciphered

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It's your first day at your new job. Your new boss told you the dress code at your new company is "your standard business casual." That sounded simple enough at the time, but now, as you stand wearily in front of your closet, you're at a complete loss.

You don't think you should wear a suit, but are khakis appropriate? Do you need to wear a button-down shirt and tie? How about a polo shirt? Whether you're just starting out in the working world, starting a new job or simply moving to another department or position, figuring out a new dress code can be a real gamble. Business casual... executive casual... mainstream casual... What's the difference? Fortunately, Susan Bixler, CEO of the Professional Image, Inc., and Nancy Nix-Rice in their book, "The New Professional Image" (Adams Media), break down the different levels of dress codes for men and women.

Baseline casual

Baseline casual is the norm in super-casual offices. It's also standard wear for employees in more buttoned up workplaces on days when they'll be cleaning their offices, taking a client to a baseball game or attending the company picnic.

- **Men:** Denim, cotton or corduroy pants paired with knit or plaid shirts and casual shoes/accessories are appropriate baseline casual attire.
- **Women:** Baseline casual means denim, cotton or corduroy pants or skirts, knit shirts or cotton blouses, and casual closed-toe shoes and accessories.

Mainstream casual

Mainstream casual is another word for your standard biz-casual attire. Bixler writes that most managers and staff wear this type of clothing because it's comfortable, but it has a down-to-business attitude.

- **Men:** Wear higher-quality khakis, microfiber or gabardine pants with solid or subtly patterned pressed cotton shirts. Polo-style shirts and pullover sweaters are also appropriate. Finish the look with leather loafers and casual, coordinated accessories.
- **Women:** Wool, blend or manufactured fabric skirts or slacks, combined with coordinating blouses or tops, are appropriate. You can also wear sweaters, cardigans or contrasting vests. Top off your outfit with flat leather shoes and casual, coordinating accessories.

Executive casual

Executive casual is the logical look for business owners and senior management -- basically formal business clothing with a relaxed attitude. Executive casual is the very dressiest of casual clothing, complete with luxurious fabrics and elegant tailoring. In some conservative fields, it's the only standard for those who have a lot of contact with clients.

- **Men:** Stick to high-quality fabrics. That means cuffed, lightweight wool trousers, long-sleeved, well-pressed shirts, fine-gauge sweaters, coordinated sports coats and blazers, woven leather loafers and high-quality accessories.
- **Women:** Wear high-quality pantsuits, silk or cotton blouses, fine-gauge cotton or silk shells, quality low-heeled pumps and high-quality accessories.

Traditional business

Traditional business wear can be summed up (generally) in three words: suit and tie. Despite the popularity of business casual, the traditional business wardrobe is still very much alive, and most businesspeople occasionally need to dress in this traditional attire.

- **Men:** Men should wear wool suits in medium-to-dark colors, white or blue business shirts with a button-down or straight color, and quality ties, belts, shoes and jewelry.
- **Women:** Women have a bit more flexibility in traditional business attire. They can wear suits, tailored separates or tailored business dresses and look appropriate. They should layer with silk, knit and cotton blouses or fine-gauge sweaters and quality low-heeled pumps and accessories.

Boardroom attire

Boardroom attire screams "I made it" to the outside world. Boardroom attire is made of the most luxurious fabrics, the best fit and the most exceptional accessories. It's standard for CEOs, and adopted by many second-level executives who hope to "dress for the job they want."

- **Men:** Wear only the highest-quality wool suits with pleated trousers and superior white cotton business shirts with straight collars. French cuffs are optional. You can show originality in your high-quality silk power tie and highest-quality gold or stainless steel watch or jewelry.
- **Women:** Clothing choices for women also are most traditional in this category. Women should wear the highest-quality suits in wool or silk, as well as the highest-quality silk blouses. Leather belts and silk scarves are optional, but be sure to wear the highest quality gold or stainless steel watch or jewelry.