

Do I Look Like a Professional In This Outfit?

Whether it's for an informational interview or a job interview, when you meet someone in a professional setting you want to make sure that the way you look conveys your professional credibility – even if you're still a student.

But different types of libraries and work settings have different expectations, so how do you know what wardrobe choices will best reinforce your professional image? Here are some basic guidelines (which you should feel free to ignore if your sense of style suggests an alternative approach):

Less is more. Unless you're considering any type of librarianship that involves working with children or teens, it's better to dress fairly simply and conservatively for a first-time meeting. Think three pieces: slacks, a shirt or blouse, and a jacket, pullover, or cardigan. Women may want to go with a skirt instead of pants. The more matched everything is, the more formal and conservative you look, whereas a blazer, sports jacket, or sweater is more casual. Consider the work setting to determine which direction to go.

Respect (and reflect) your audience. You'd dress differently if working with children or teens than you would for a management role, and possibly a bit differently for a marketing role with a start-up (more creatively) than for an Information Specialist role with a financial services firm (more conservatively). This isn't becoming something you're not, it's simply respecting the standards of the organization and/or its constituency.

Why? Because until someone has an opportunity to see your amazing skills in action, how you present yourself is one of the few clues they have with which to decide who you are and how to treat you. One way to think about this: never give someone a reason to doubt your judgment.

Do some reconnaissance. Generally, you want to dress in a manner reasonably similar to that of the person you'll be talking with. One of the best ways to figure out just what that manner might be is to check out the workplace you'll be visiting in advance. Is everyone in jeans, t-shirts, and sandals? Then slacks and a shirt/top might be a good approach. Everyone in matched suits? You do the same. (Advance reconnaissance is also a good way to check out how common tattoos and piercings are.)

Remember, if you're interviewing for a job, your goal is to make it clear that you'll be a good fit with the organizational culture.

Listen to hiring managers' comments. These include "avoid spike heels, too-tight jeans, low-cut tops, athletic shoes, anything with holes, missing buttons, spots, etc." On LIS listservs, job applicants' failure to dress appropriately (i.e., professionally) is a recurring complaint among hiring managers. So much the better for you when you show up looking polished and confident for your interview.

What about an informational interview? Assume the same standards apply. Although you're not going to be interviewing for a job, you're most definitely going to be making an impression and conveying your level of professionalism.

Part of this is showing respect for the person giving you his or her time, but another aspect is that you'd like this person to feel comfortable building a connection with you. Your interaction will start establishing your professional reputation with this person, and you want to start off by making a positive impression.

When can you break out the boa? Some people have a sense of personal style that lets them pull off any outfit, and if you're one of those people, by all means, follow your instincts. But for everyone else, assume that your first goal with your wardrobe choices is to demonstrate professionalism, respect, and good judgment. Then, after you've landed the job and people are dazzled by your LIS skills and expertise, you can start dazzling them with your fashion finesse!