

Dressing for Success: Professional Wardrobe

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Dressing for success in Washington, DC can be challenging for interns who are used to casual dress on campus. Rebecca Gale (2014) offers this tip: “Learn the office dress code...and err on the conservative side of following it.”¹ She also constructed a quick guide for what to wear in DC office settings (see table 1), whether the setting is a Congressional office, a lobbying firm, or a nonprofit organization.

Table 1. Professional Working Attire Tips (Gale 2014)

- “Wear a suit the first day of work. Even if it’s recess. Or Friday. Or hot outside. Your first day sets the tone of your internship, and a suit shows you’re taking it seriously.”
- “Wear a suit (or jacket and tie, or blazer/slacks/skirt for ladies) every day Congress is in session.”
- “Dress up every day the boss is in town. Most offices have a relaxed dress code when Congress is out of session, but if the boss is there, take the extra time to dress in business clothing.”
- “Follow the office’s lead. Don’t be the first one to wear jeans or break out into casual Friday polo shirts unless you see your co-workers doing the same thing. And by co-workers, I don’t mean other interns. Take the cues from the higher-ups in the office.”
- “Cover up. Keep the short skirts and deep V-neck shirts at home. If you aren’t sure whether it’s office appropriate, it probably isn’t.”
- “Stay away from jeans, sneakers, T-shirts and yoga pants. No matter how casual Fridays get, you’re better off in khakis or dress pants than something more comfortable. Wait for the weekends to wear whatever you want. Or wait until your internship is over.”

Source: Gale, Rebecca. 2014. “The Quick Guide to ‘Best Intern Ever: How to Ace Your Capitol Hill Internship,” *Roll Call*, July 16, accessed April 29, 2021, <https://www.rollcall.com/2014/07/16/the-quick-guide-to-best-intern-ever-how-to-ace-your-capitol-hill-internship/>.

Comfortable shoes: It is important to find shoes that are comfortable (and look professional) for walking long distances on hard surfaces. One young congressional staffer experienced excruciating pain in her shins after about 6 months on the job. The doctor diagnosed her with shin splints, caused by walking on the marble floors in her stylish, but orthopedically deficient shoes.

Blazer, suit jacket, tie: When Congress is in session, the staff dress code is formal, modest (suits, jacket and tie, blazer or cardigan and slacks/skirts, dresses with sleeves), and tends to be gender-conforming. In the Senate Member’s Dining room, there is a closet with a selection of sportscoats and ties that are lent to any man who happens to arrive clad in slacks and a shirt. No jacket and tie; no service!

¹ Gale, Rebecca. 2014. “The Quick Guide to ‘Best Intern Ever: How to Ace Your Capitol Hill Internship,” *Roll Call*, July 16, accessed April 29, 2021, <https://www.rollcall.com/2014/07/16/the-quick-guide-to-best-intern-ever-how-to-ace-your-capitol-hill-internship/>.

Shopping tips

For students on a budget, finding professional clothing that is affordable and comfortable can be challenging. Some suggestions: check the campus career center to see if they have a “career closet” with donated professional clothing. In DC, Suited for Change collects women’s clothing which are available to individuals who need assistance in building a professional wardrobe. A similar organization, Sharp Dressed Man, provides similar services in Baltimore. Across the United States, there are similar organizations that can help students in need.

Programs can also work with consultants to advise students about creating a professional wardrobe. For example, Chanmuny Dy, founder of [The Stylery \(http://thestylery.co\)](http://thestylery.co), created a short video for the Archer Center at The University of Texas System that gives students helpful tips about maintaining a professional look.