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## Why “What to wear” Matters for Communication in Science; by Tracey Holloway

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[Why “What to wear” Matters for Communication in Science; by Tracey Holloway](#)

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Tracey Holloway is an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin—Madison in the Nelson Institute’s Center for Sustainability and the Global Environment (SAGE).

As scientists, most of us expect to be evaluated on our degrees and publications. We know what goes into a winning curriculum vita, and we know how to write manuscripts for leading journals. A successful career, however, demands making a good impression in person as well as on paper. In fact, many people you meet will know little or nothing about your credentials, and instead will judge you on how you present your ideas and yourself. How you dress significantly affects this self-presentation, along with your attitude, speaking style, and body language.

Although fashion and science are rarely discussed together, there are clear “dos and don’ts” across most research laboratories, universities, and conferences. Here are a few guidelines for building a professional image and dressing like the scientist you want to be – the one admired by students, respected by colleagues, and invited to interview for that superstar job.

1. Know the Basics

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Your mother probably told you this, but it never hurts to revisit the fundamentals. Clothes should be clean, no rips or frays, and fit you well. Anything stained, smelly, or too short should be taken to the cleaners, the tailor, or to a local charity. Jeans, shorts, sport sandals, sneakers, and hiking boots are often okay for casual work environments, but not for important meetings, job interviews, or visits to other workplaces. Avoid anything that shows midriffs and of course, underwear!

Keeping in mind your climate and culture, neutral “business casual” dressing is usually a good bet. In cool climates (or air conditioning) a safe version of such an outfit would be leather shoes, nice pants, a button down shirt, and a jacket. Take the time to consider how your outfit will carry you through the day comfortably. Sore feet or a sweaty shirt can be distracting and undermine your self-confidence.

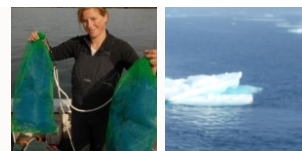
## 2. Consider your audience

You want your audience to focus on you and your science – not on your clothes. A good rule is to consider what others will be wearing, and dress similarly. Meeting your audience’s expectations style-wise ensures that your clothes won’t stand in the way of your message. Avoid “loud” prints, t-shirts with funny sayings or company logos, or anything that would compete against you for the audience’s attention.

A few common audiences for atmospheric scientists to consider: 1) Other scientists: go for professional but relaxed; 2) Teaching: more formal than your students, keeping in mind that professors deemed good-looking by students tend to get better evaluations; 3) Conference groups: a bright colored top or tie can help audience members spot you in a crowd after your talk; 4) Media interviews: consider your image on screen, and remember that you are talking to the public (not just your interviewer) – avoid stripes, white, and hair that might inspire fidgeting; 5) Anyone working in Washington, D.C.: a suit is always a good idea; 6) A group you’re unfamiliar with: just ask the organizer.

For men, the formality scale may be linearly approximated: shorts, sandals, and t-shirts are very casual; suits are very dressy. Most scientific workplaces and meetings fall in the middle. In general khakis or slacks are more formal than jeans, button-down shirts more formal than polo/golf-shirts, and ties more formal than no-tie. In all cases, heavy cologne, tight pants, and anything that reveals chest hair should be avoided.

For women, the calculation is trickier. The dimensions of formality run from casual to dressy, but also day to night, conservative to sexy, youthful to sophisticated, and subdued to high fashion. Although a man might wear the same suit to a wedding and a job interview, a woman’s outfit would be totally different for the two occasions. Fortunately, because women’s fashion is more complicated than men’s, the norms are more



flexible. Women can wear tailored pants, a simple top, and nice accessories to almost any event, fitting in with men wearing jeans to suits. Be wary of anything too sexy or too feminine. Lace, cleavage, very high heels, shiny fabrics, or strapless tops are all on the “don’t” list.

Women also should anticipate the logistics of clip-on nametags and microphones at conferences. Both are designed for men with button-down shirts, so choose a top with a place to attach the clips and avoid necklaces that may scratch against the mike.

### 3. Keep up to date

In writing a paper or proposal, checking the literature for recent additions is a key first step. Keeping current on the literature ensures that you won’t be perceived as out-of-date in your science, and the same holds true for your dress.

To inform your shopping, keep an eye on stylish people you know, display windows of popular stores, catalogs, newspaper fashion sections, and magazines. A few things are always changing, but so subtly that you may have missed it: the length and cut of pants, skirt styles, hair, and popular colors. To avoid looking dated, beware of anything more than ten years old. Staying up to date conveys a sense of confidence and power.

### 4. Be prepared

Most scientists don’t want to sacrifice comfort or ease with what they wear. Luckily, you don’t have to. You do, however, need to allocate a little time and money to update your work wardrobe. Taking time to think about what you wear will ensure that you have pieces that you like and that work together. At least once a year – especially before a big conference or talk – take stock of your look and update key items.

You should always have a few items on hand to pack for a talk or meeting: 1) Comfortable black or dark brown shoes (for women, a slight heel makes your whole outfit a little dressier); 2) Two or more trousers or skirts in tan, khaki, or a solid, dark color (jeans, capri pants, or mini-skirts don’t count here); 3) Four or more basic tops to wear with the bottoms – for men, long-sleeve button down shirts are the best bet; women can also wear button down shirts/blouses, or other types of tailored tops; 4) One or more high-quality, tailored jacket or, for a more casual look, a sweater; 5) Important details: dark-colored socks or stockings, lap-top bag/briefcase/purse, bras that are invisible under your tops, tasteful jewelry, and a watch (or pocket for your phone) to keep on schedule. If you travel regularly, pack-able knits, wrinkle-free fabrics, and a rolling suitcase are all great investments.

If you are on the job market, start thinking early what you would wear for an interview, and shop for needed items. When the invitation comes, you may be so busy preparing that shopping

is impossible. Plus, if you start early you can get a great deal on a suit or other basics that can be expensive if bought under pressure.

#### 5. Be authentic

Even while dressing professionally, you should feel like yourself. Science is a relaxed culture, so you have a lot of leeway to express your personality and select items that fit your tastes and lifestyle. If you venture out of science to meet with the policy or business communities, or university deans and presidents, keep in mind that formality goes up and suits are often the norm.

Overall, your clothes should communicate that you respect yourself, your colleagues, and your work. I have met a number of professors and high school teachers who consistently wear a jacket and tie to teach, a move that communicates the teacher’s respect for the students, while also ensuring the teacher’s role as leader is visible. Alternately, I have faculty colleagues who cultivate a relaxed feeling around their offices in the summer by wearing shorts and inviting their lab groups out for Friday beers. As long as the messages your clothes are sending support your role in your organization and your work as a scientist, you are making the right fashion statement.

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