

To the Nines

Unraveling the complexities of formal attire.

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Guys have it easy. When invited to a black-tie event or anything with the word “formal” on the invitation, the hardest dilemma they’ll have to face is tux vs. suit or necktie vs. bowtie. Ladies, on the other hand, come up against a host of factors, from color and length to fabric and feel. That’s part of the reason it can take us more than an hour to get dressed (patience, dear husband).

In an effort to speed up the primping process, here are some tips to keep in mind before throwing open your closet doors:

Basic formalities

Formalwear can mean many things. Cocktail attire, for example, is less fancy, requiring heels and nice pants or a dress, but not a full-on gown. Invitations that specify “black tie” or “formal attire” are ripe for a gown and dramatic accents like sequins, long gloves and an updo.

Color theory

Many events pop up over the holidays, from annual charity galas requiring maximum glamour to less formal work parties in which a cocktail dress does the trick. In either case, it’s best to sport seasonally appropriate colors without looking like a Christmas card. Don’t wear green and red together, but do embrace rich jewel tones and other dark colors.

Fancy pants

If the invitation so much as hints at a formal dress code, do not wear jeans. It’s OK to pair chic slacks with heels (for cocktail attire only), but in jeans you risk looking like a slob. Remember, it’s better to be overdressed than underdressed — there’s nothing wrong with being the fanciest person in the room.

Weather or not

Selecting the appropriate outerwear for formal events is just as important as what you’ve got on underneath. Consider investing in an elegant pea coat with a fur collar or a fur stole, coat or cape. We like Neiman Marcus for new options or any vintage shop for gently used styles.

Footloose

Killer heels are the icing on your outfit, but they can also hurt like hell after three hours. Thankfully, several shoe companies have come out with foldable flats small enough to fit in a clutch bag. Pick up a pair at Walgreens and thank yourself at 1 a.m.+

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Monique Lhuillier wisteria multi-print taffeta gown (\$5,990), available at her 50th and France salon.

