



The Prom.... That much anticipated and often much agonized rite of spring, which is often a young man's introduction to formal wear. Thankfully, the choices today are less complicated (and much more attractive) than they were in previous years. For instance, formal wear in the 1970's included a plethora of suit colors that would confuse Andy Warhol, ruffled shirts, which could give a pirate pause, and bowties the size of bats.

Today, black seems to be the color of choice, accompanied by a vest and tie that either match or complement the young man's date's dress. While black is the most popular option, navy and white are also acceptable choices.

A tuxedo jacket will have one of three possible lapels: Notch, Peak, or Shawl. A notch lapel has been the standard for decades, and includes an indentation (notch) where the collar joins the lapel. Those wishing to add a little more panache to their ensemble may choose a peak lapel, which includes a point of fabric that extends up and out toward the point of the shoulder, creating a more athletic look. A shawl collar is characterized by a smooth lapel edge which tapers from the collar to the jacket hem. While the least common of the three options, the shawl collar is more likely to provide distinction and make a sartorial statement.

Double-breasted jackets have had a recent resurgence. If you opt for this style, be sure to select a jacket that has a narrow lapel. Fortunately, the days of the six-inch lapel, which under a strong wind gust, could possibly lift the wearer off the ground.

Vest or cummerbund? A cummerbund is a broad sash worn at the waist and is typically pleated. To answer the age-old question of how this accessory should be worn, the pleats face up, as they were originally designed to hold theatre tickets, or to catch crumbs that may fall while the wearer is dining. (Seriously!) While a vest can be worn on most body types, a cummerbund is less forgiving and could disappear into the waist of a rounder physique when seated. Both accessories should be worn with a single-breasted jacket. Gentlemen, keep in mind that while you should take care to be immaculately dressed, the eye-catching aspect of the evening should be your date, but your vest or cummerbund should play a strong supporting role.

Once you have picked out the tuxedo and the accessories, it is time for the most important element of the ensemble – the fit! An improper fit can completely negate the efforts of your carefully planned outfit. The jacket should follow the contour of the torso, close enough that when buttoned, there should be no more than a 2-inch gap when pulled away from the chest. The jacket hem should align with where your fingers meet your palm when arms are extended down and the sleeve length should end where the natural break occurs at your wrist. The sleeve should NOT cover a portion of the hand! Too often, a poorly-tailored tuxedo or suit makes the wearer appear as if he is wearing his father's garment and is playing "dress up."

Pants length is another misunderstood or often overlooked area. The back of properly hemmed pants should hang to the top of the shoe heel. The front should have one fold or "break" near the ankle. Like a too long jacket, multiple breaks in the pants contribute to the "I just borrowed my dad's tuxedo" look.

By paying attention to these details, any young man will look outstanding and will catch the eye of his date. Because, as the song goes, "...every girl crazy 'bout a sharp-dressed man!"

David C. Wise is the owner of Top Shelf Menswear, Consignment of Distinction (now offering tuxedo rentals)