The Aesthetics of the Tuxedo

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Chapter 1 — Basic Principles of Classic Black Tie

The elegance of the tuxedo is not arbitrary. Every man looks better in a tuxedo. Most women, surveys tell us, think a man looks better in a tuxedo than a suit. If the man is wearing Classic Black Tie, the percentage is even higher.

Why? The elegance of Classic Black Tie stands on two simple ideas. If you understand both, the rest is easy.

- First, formal is a “special” occasion and requires clothes unlike regular business dress. The more formal the event, the more the dress differs from regular business dress (e.g., a suit). This signals a separate and thus higher occasion. By tradition, formal also emphasizes past and older forms of dress. Thus, the first principle is this: the more a tuxedo varies from a regular business suit, the more it signifies a separate and special occasion.

- Second, in matters of dress, the modern eye emphasizes certain physical traits associated with an idealized male form. This includes, among others, broad chests, long limbs, and narrow waists. A classic tuxedo works because it emphasizes these features more than a business suit. A classic tuxedo uses tricks of the eye, many subtle, to make a man look taller, stronger, and younger. In short, a man looks better in Classic Black Tie because he looks more like a man. The second principle, thus, is this: when considering tuxedos, Classic Black Tie is better.

A tuxedo, therefore, is far from costume or “unmale” attire; in truth, it is very much male attire. When Ian Fleming wanted James Bond to be something special, he put him in a tuxedo. There is a reason.

Shades of Formal — Black Tie vs. White Tie

“Black tie” means tuxedo. It’s the accepted dress for what traditionally were called “semi-formal” evening events. “Formal” used to mean white tie and tails, what today is called “white tie.”
Meanings of Black Tie

Today, the word “formal” could mean many things. If an invitation says “black tie,” though, the meaning is clear: “black tie” means tuxedo. Hosts may use several different varieties of black tie, however. Here’s what each means:

- **Black Tie** = a tuxedo. No suits.
- **Black Tie Preferred** = host would appreciate a tuxedo, but a dark suit is acceptable.
- **Black Tie Optional** means either a tuxedo or a dark, conservative suit is acceptable.

“Tuxedo” tends to be an American word, too. What we call a tuxedo, the British call a “dinner jacket,” and the Germans a “smoking.” Americans, however, still often refer to summer tuxedo jackets, in white or cream, as “dinner jackets.”

The Basics of Black Tie

The tuxedo has been with us for well over a hundred years. If the invitation says Black Tie, here’s what you should wear:

- One-button peak or shawl lapel black tuxedo, either single or double-breasted, with satin or grosgrain facing on the lapels, no or moderate side vents, and jetted pockets.
- Matching trousers, with a side stripe matching the lapels.
- White shirt with turn-down collar, french cuffs, and either a pique or pleated front, fitted with shirt studs and double-sided cufflinks. A traditional detachable wing collar shirt also is an option.
- A self-tie black bow tie.
- A low-cut black formal vest or cummerbund.
- Balmoral oxfords, in patent leather with thin black wool (or silk) stockings. Black opera pumps in calf or patent leather are another option.

If you wear this, what is known as Classic Black Tie, you will look better. The reason is simple: wearing Classic Black Tie means using *every* sartorial trick — not just some or a few — the designers of the tuxedo devised to make formal events special and to make the
men attending them look more like men. As long as such tricks exist, a man would be foolish not to use every one of them.

If you wear Classic Black Tie, it won’t go out of style, either. As long as the tricks still work — and they’ve worked for a hundred years — Classic Black Tie will be in style.
Chapter 2 — The Aesthetics of Classic Black Tie

If Classic Black Tie works, then how does it work? Black tie is formal, powerful, and classic. But why?

In one way or another, Classic Black Tie is built on three different social rules or customs. While largely unspoken, almost everything about Classic Black Tie comes back to them.

# 1 — Formal is a “Special” Occasion

Formal is special. The more clothing differs from regular business dress, the more special it is. With Classic Black Tie, every element of dress is different from a regular business suit — jacket, pants, shirt, tie, and shoes. None of it would be used for business wear. As such, it signals a special occasion.

In the same way, the easiest way to weaken Classic Black Tie is to do what’s done on suits. The more changes are made, the weaker it gets. At first, it’s just a bad tuxedo, but soon it’s just a black suit. Even worse, it’s a black suit you have no place to wear.

# 2 — Formal Means Looking Backward

As a cultural notion, formal clothes look backwards, sometimes quite far. Classic White Tie, for example, is based on riding coats used 200 years ago. In turn, Classic Black Tie took on its present form in the 1920s and 30s, the critical formative years of modern men’s dress. In addition, some features of Classic Black Tie — such as court shoes or bow ties (as cravats) — go back over 200 years. None of formal is new. If it was, it wouldn’t be formal.

Formal also stresses — even if only for a short time and in an artificial way — traditional and older roles. In today’s egalitarian social settings, this “going back” may be just for fun or sport or a change of pace. But when done, even for reasons of social play, formal is still a place where gender is clear and separate by dress. No matter what happens elsewhere, at a formal event gender is clear, even emphasized: men look more like men, and women more like women.
The ideal male form has varied throughout history. For the last 150 years or so, the modern male esthetic has been tall, broad shoulders, long arms, and long legs, with special emphasis on the face.

The key to understanding why Classic Black Tie works is this: *the more formal the event, the more these ideal features are stressed.* The business suit, with its padded shoulders and four-in-hand ties, does this better than casual wear, such as khakis and polo shirts. Not to be outdone, Black Tie emphasizes does it even better than business dress.

In short, men are *supposed* to look more like men in tuxedos than suits and Classic Black Tie is so designed. In a proper tuxedo, a man looks bigger, stronger, and taller than he would in a suit. Once put in Classic Black Tie, a man looks more ideal than he really is. That’s why it’s formal. Most important, that’s why Classic Black Tie works.

### The Aesthetics of Classic Black Tie — General Principles

If the goal of Classic Black Tie is to make a man “look more like a man,” then how does it do it? Here, the basic plan is straightforward:

- Classic Black Tie uses various (and subtle) tricks of the eye to make a man look closer to the ideal — taller, broader and wider chest, and longer limbs — all the while drawing special attention to his face.

In practice, this means using such things as peak lapels, strong collars and showing cuff, covering the waist (e.g., formal vests or cummerbunds), high-rise pants, and pocket squares and studs. It also means such simple things as side stripes on the pants, no cuffs, and shoes with thinner shoes.

In the end, all formal wear is simple, not complex. Thus, when it comes to black tie, simple is better. Elegance, it is often said, is never far from simple.

### The Aesthetics of Classic Black Tie — Specific Tricks

The heart of Classic Black Tie is the deep and wide “V” of the chest drawn by the faced peak lapels. Once in place, this “V” tricks the eye into seeing a larger, broader chest and a narrower waist. In turn, the “V” is further complemented by the high contrast of black against white.

While the “V” is central, many other parts of pieces of black tie play important supporting roles. Some make the arms or legs look longer, while others draw the eye to
the man’s face. In the end, Classic Black Tie is final sum of a dozen small tricks, all working together. Before looking at the particular parts of Classic Black Tie (like jackets or ties), it’s good to see how all the parts fit together.

Organized by function, here are various sartorial tricks used by Classic Black Tie.

*Wider Chest, Broader Shoulders, and a Thinner Waist*

The deep “V” of the tuxedo — which echoes the wide chest and narrow waist of the male ideal — is a subtle combination of several features:

- **Peak Lapels.** Peak lapels create a strong, upward sweep, and make a man’s chest appear broader and higher.

- **Silk Facing.** Using contrasting silk facing on the lapels (rather than the same fabric as the body of the tuxedo) further underscores, visually, the upward sweep and “V” of the peak lapels.

- **One-Button Closure.** The lower button stance of the one-button closure on the jacket elongates the deep central “V” of the chest and gives a strong vertical (and upward) line.

- **White Shirt & Studs.** Once placed inside the peak lapels, the high contrast of the white shirt amplifies and anchors the deep “V” of the jacket and the upward sweep of the lapels. The shirt studs add a faint vertical line, drawing the eye upwards and to the face. The thick fabric of the front of the shirt also assures a deep white (and thus high contrast).

- **Pocket Square.** Placed in the chest pocket, a white pocket square draws the eye outward and makes the chest look broader.

- **Pockets.** Jetted pockets on the jacket stress a clean, narrow, and upward line. So do no vents (or modest side vents).

- **Waist Covering (Cummerbund or Vest).** The flat, broad band of the cummerbund flattens the stomach slightly and gives the hint of a higher, barrel chest. Similarly, the low-cut formal vest keeps the “V” of the chest in place. Both also extend the line of the leg.

*Added Emphasis on the Face*

A key feature of men’s dress: draw the eye to his face. The more formal the dress, the more it’s emphasized. It’s done mostly with collars and ties. In business wear, it’s done with various collars and long ties. In Classic Black Tie, though, it’s even more dramatic
and better done than business wear. Compared to business wear, Classic Black Tie frames a man’s face even more and thus draws the eye even more strongly to it. Once done, the man in Black Tie will hold the attention of people even more. He will look better, too.

- **High Collars.** A high and strong collar frames the face and quietly draws the eye to it. This could be either a higher than normal turn-down collar or a classic wing collar. This is particularly emphatic when the collar sits atop the deep “V” of the chest, which also draws the eye upward.

- **Bow Tie.** A bow tie (rather than a long tie) keeps the powerful “V” of the shirt and jacket in place across the chest, and also draws attention to the face.

- **Matching Black Bow Tie.** A black bow tie, since it is the same color as the jacket and pants, draws the eye to the face, almost as an underscore, without drawing attention away from it, as a different color would do.

- **The White Shirt.** The white “V” of the shirt front draws the eye upwards, towards the face. The bow tie, collar, and face sit atop this “cone of white.”

- **Studs.** Contrasting shirt studs, placed in center of the shirt, in line with the black tie above and the black waist below, draw the eye up towards to the face — like a light tracing — without breaking up the “V.”

**Longer Arms**

This elongates and slims the silhouette.

- **Cuffs.** The high-contrast of the white cuffs showing beyond the jacket sleeves makes the arms look longer. Cuffs on a tuxedo are slightly longer than on a suit, too, further emphasizing the effect.

- **Cufflinks.** The high-contrast black dot of cufflinks (on both sides of the cuffs) also draws the eye outward.

**Longer Legs**

This elongates the silhouette, and makes a man appear taller.

- **High Rise Pants.** Tuxedo pants fit on the natural waist. This extends the line of the legs.

- **Cummerbund or Vest.** The extra black cloth atop the waist extends the line of the pants and makes the legs look longer.
• **Pleats & Braces.** Modest pleats extend the line of the front creases, and braces (suspenders), anchored just above, keep the vertical line of the crease strong and taut.

• **Side Stripe.** The traditional satin or grosgrain stripe down the outside seam of the pants extends the vertical line of the pants and draws the eye upward.

• **No Cuffs.** Plain bottom pants (e.g., without cuffs), tilted slightly down in back, extend the line of the leg.

**Smaller Feet**

Small, slim, and narrow feet give a light, quick, and (and hence) young lift to the overall silhouette. This often is a feature of fashion drawings, too.

• **Balmoral Oxfords.** The shoes used most often for Black Tie are patent leather balmoral oxfords. Compared to more casual shoes, balmoral oxfords conform more closely to the foot (and thus make it look smaller). The balmoral oxford is longer (because of the extended toe), narrower at the base, and shows more of the “waist” or arch of the foot. Together, this gives a foot a lighter look.

• **Opera Pumps.** Small feet are emphasized even more with the opera pumps. The short front (vamp), narrow sides, and thin soles of opera pumps make the foot look even smaller. The bows help, too. A small piece put across the top front of a shoe (here, a grosgrain bow) makes the foot looker smaller.

**Evening Emphasis**

The high contrast and dominant dark color make a man look bigger and more powerful.

• The high contrast of black and white gives a dramatic emphasis to the assembled pieces.

• The use of black and white also sets black tie apart from daytime business wear, thus emphasizing a special occasion.

**Why Classic Black Tie Works**

The rules of Classic Black Tie thus are not arbitrary. They work and work well. Ultimately, they reflect a well-thought-out esthetic. They also use many interlocking tricks of the eye. When used, they all work in your favor. And they still are there, ready to be used.
The well-tested esthetic of Classic Black Tie is subtle, too. If done right, people will notice only the results, not how it was done. People will see you as taller and stronger, and pay more attention to your face. They will see you with a wider chest and longer arms and legs, too. And they will respond to it.

People may not *know* how it was done or even *that* it was done. But they will respond to it. People can’t help but see with their eyes. And Classic Black Tie simply makes those eyes see some things more than others. Much of effective dress, it has been said, “is to make you look like you have things you don’t.” Such is the power of clothes and aesthetics.
Chapter 3 — The Colors of Black Tie

The Emphasis of Black and White

Classic Black Tie uses only two colors: black and white. This is far from an arbitrary choice. The combination of black (no color) and white (all colors) gives the greatest contrast — and thus emphasis — of all. If the topic was printing rather than formal dress, Classic Black Tie would be the equivalent of putting words in bold.

In addition, one of the simple axioms of dress is this: people tend to dress based on the colors around them. Gray and blue suits are worn during the day (reflecting the colors of the city), just as browns, greens, and reds become welcome in the fall, or blues and white seem right for nautical clothes (reflecting the colors of the open sky and sea).

For similar reasons, black and white become common after dark. When the world goes to black and white, so do the clothes. In short, black and white are the colors of evening. At the same time, in the low, artificial light of evening, black — especially when softened with ample white around the face — can be dramatic. For similar reasons, this is why black is rarely worn during the day, since it draws color away from the face. That’s why black is worn at funerals, and rarely used by men for business wear.

Variations

To account for the effects of artificial lighting on colors at night, some sophisticated dressers use midnight blue (a very deep navy) instead of black. Under artificial light, black can take on a slight greenish tinge, while midnight blue looks rich and deep and thus has been said to look “blacker than black.”

Light and Reflection

The lower lighting at evening events (think classic candlelight) also puts a premium on reflection and light, something not at issue during the day. As a result, some limited and modest use of shiny surfaces at night (particularly when joined with movement), helps bring this out. For example, patent leather shoes allow some evening emphasis and glitter. The same can be said for high polished or cut stud sets. While the main cloth of the tuxedo itself is often matte (or dull) to avoid excessive shininess, some modest use of evening light can be welcome and elegant.
Colors for Men, Colors for Women

If the men are dressed in black and white, the women can wear any colors. No need to match colors (a bad practice left over from high school proms). This organizes the genders by color, too (if only for an evening, and if only for fun).
Chapter 4 — Tuxedo Jackets

The Jackets of Classic Black Tie — Peak Lapels, Shawl Lapels

By tradition, a tuxedo has either a peak or shawl lapel. It may be single or double-breasted. If single-breasted, it has one-button. The reason is simple: the tuxedo was largely derived from the peak lapels of the “tails” of white tie. All of this, in turn, was derived from riding coats in England 200 years ago. Watch Pride and Prejudice some time, and you’ll see. In part, too, the tuxedo also was derived from the smoking jacket (which has a shawl collar).

The traditional first choice for black tie is the single-breasted peak lapel tuxedo. It’s the most formal and the most flexible. It’s slightly more formal than the double-breasted peak lapel, another popular choice. And both, in turn, are more formal than the shawl tuxedo, whether single- or double-breasted.

Peak Lapels & Single-Breasted

Rarely seen on business wear — and thus special— the peak lapels on a tuxedo make a man look slightly taller and his chest slightly broader. The upward sweep of proper peak lapels draws the eye upward and out, and gives the illusion of a slightly broader and wider chest. ( \:/ )

- Wider and bigger lapels are a stronger statement here. This was a hallmark of the wonderful classic tuxedos from the 1920s and 1930s.

- This is not a place for narrow or wimpy lapels (one of the problems with tuxedos from the 1950s and early 1960s). Wide lapels are a strong statement and more classic, too.

Silk Facing on the Lapels

The upward sweep of the classic peak lapel tuxedo is further emphasized by facing them in black fabric with contrasting texture. On a tuxedo, the jacket lapels are faced (e.g., covered) with either black satin or black grosgrain (a type of ribbed silk). Grosgrain tends to give a better and more subtle emphasis than satin and thus is a favorite of traditionalists. The different facing gives an important emphasis to the lapels, again, similar to putting letters in bold or italics. As so emphasized, the sweep and upward look of the peak lapel is underlined even more.
**Tuxedo Suitings (Fabric)**

A traditional choice of fabric for tuxedos is wool barathea, a lightly ribbed or pebbled weave. Barathea is used for uniforms as well, but not for business suits. Against the dull or matte finish of barathea, the silk facing and sweep of the lapels is set off even more. Other weaves, such as light herringbone may be used, too, as well a serge or twill. Shiny fabric, however, is avoided.

**Peak Lapels & the Double-Breasted Jacket**

The esthetic of a double-breasted peak lapel is similar, but slightly different from a single-breasted jacket. A popular choice in England, this Classic Black Tie option was first widely used in the 1930s. The classic double-breasted front tricks the eye into seeing broad shoulders and narrow waists in two complementary ways.

- First, the overlap on the front of the jacket allows the lapels to sweep down lower, giving a longer line to the upward sweep of the lapels.

- Second, the traditional button placement on a double-breasted jacket, subtly echoes the desired narrow waist and broad chest. The silhouette of the classic six button placement looks something like a wide cocktail glass — a four-button square on the bottom, with two wider spaced buttons on top. This combination both draws the eye in around the waist and out around the shoulder. Once transferred to a tuxedo, this complements and reinforces the “V” of the peak lapels.

- While the 6x2 (six buttons, two buttoned) is classic, other configurations such as 4x1 (what Bogart wore in Casablanca, with a shawl lapel), are seen as well.

**Complementary Features of the Tuxedo Jacket**

Together, the peak lapels and silk facing create the dramatic “V” of Classic Black Tie, especially when combined with the high contrast of the white shirt. The upward sweep of the peak lapels draws the eye upward and outward. A seemingly wider and broader chest is the result, along with a slightly taller appearing man. While this “V” is the central and strongest part of Classic Black Tie, other parts of Classic Black Tie play subtle, secondary roles in creating a long, lean silhouette:

- **One-Button Front**. A classic tuxedo has a one-button front. In contrast to the two- or three-button fronts seen on business suits, this allows the “V” to go slightly lower, and thus be more dramatic. For this reason, two- or three-button tuxedos, and certainly five-button ones aren’t as powerful. Such high silhouettes tend, instead, to make a man’s torso resemble a tree-trunk. Often, it looks more
like an overcoat than even a suit. The more buttons used, the greater the unwanted effect.

- **Breast Pocket.** The breast pocket on some tuxedos is tilted slightly up on the outside. This tiny change complements and reinforces the up and out sweep of the peak lapels.

- **Jetted (Besom) Pockets.** A classic tuxedo has jetted or slit pockets, unlike the usual flap-covered pockets used on business suits and overcoats. Jetted pockets are more formal, because they give a smoother, cleaner look to the line to the jacket. If you have flapped pockets, though, there’s an obvious fix: just tuck them in and, if you’re really serious, have them basted shut.

- **Jacket Vents.** Typically, a tuxedo is unvented. This gives a smoother, cleaner line to the jacket, especially when the back is pulled in (“cupped”) at the back waist. While an unvented tuxedo is the most traditional, side vents (if small) are used by some. A single back vent, the typical vent on business suits, is not used.

- **Closer Cut.** Physique permitting, a tuxedo tends to be cut slightly closer to the body than regular business dress. A slightly slimmer cut, closer to the body, not only gives a hint of youth, but also reinforces, just a bit, the classic “V” look.

**Covered Buttons**

Typically, buttons on a tuxedo are rounded (and semi-spherical) and covered in the same fabric as the facing of the lapels. This differentiates the jacket from business dress, where bare, flat buttons in plastic or horn are the norm. Flat buttons sometimes are used with less formal options, such as the self-faced cream tuxedo jacket for summer or some double-breasted tuxedos.

**Fabric Weight and Tuxedos**

Today, tuxedos tend to be made of slightly lighter cloth than business suits. The venues for evening formal events, even in the winter, tend to be warm and dancing is common, too. Summer jackets may be even lighter.

Some traditionalists, however, still like a slightly heavier cloth (often barathea). One reason is because winter months are the prime time for black tie events; another is because a heavier cloth often drapes better and is less likely to wrinkle.

In the end, it’s as much about personal choice and comfort as aesthetics.
The Aesthetics of Open or Closed Jackets

Open or Closed Jackets

Unlike a regular suit jacket, a single-breasted tuxedo jacket can be worn buttoned or unbuttoned. Why the difference? The tailcoat of white tie was designed to be worn open. For some people, this practice carried over to black tie. So long as the waist is covered, therefore, it’s acceptable to wear your tuxedo jacket unbuttoned.

At the same time, keeping the jacket buttoned is fine, too. Some men prefer to close the jacket, reasoning one-button jackets look best closed and were so designed and cut. Aesthetics also matter here. As Tom Ford has pointed out, buttoning a jacket takes twenty pounds off the silhouette. It matters slightly less with a tuxedo since a vest helps keep the “V” in place, but opening the jacket also widens the waist.

Open Jackets and Uncovered Waists

The worst thing to do, though, is to leave your vest or cummerbund at home and then open your tuxedo jacket, an all-too-common event today. If you do, the only thing emphasized (doubly) will be your stomach. The practice makes your legs look shorter, and your stomach and waist bigger. That’s not a way to make a man look good.

Double-Breasted Tuxedo

You can skip all the usual rules about waist coverings if you use a double-breasted tuxedo. Double-breasted tuxedos always are buttoned (except, perhaps, when you sit down). Since the waist is already covered on a double-breasted tuxedo, a vest or cummerbund is not necessary.

The Shawl-Lapel Tuxedo

Tuxedos with shawl lapels — while equally acceptable — are slightly less formal. Derived from smoking jackets, the rounded nature of shawl lapels — (·) — isn’t as angular or upward as the peak lapel. For this reason, shawl lapels often are avoided by rotund men, just as they are sought out at times by very thin men who want to look at bit wider.

The association of the shawl lapel with the smoking jacket, an elegant but less formal jacket, also comes into play. While shawl lapels are not used on business suits, and thus are special, the smoking jacket’s first home was the private and intimate setting of the home or social club rather than public formal venues. In short, while the peak lapel
tuxedo is a step-down from the tailcoat, the shawl lapel tuxedo is a step-up from the smoking jacket. Of course, a shawl tuxedo can look great — as Bogart proved in *Casablanca* — but it has a slightly different history. The distinction still matters.

The shawl tuxedo also doesn’t have as big a “V” as the peak lapel. Much contrast is still provided by white shirt against the low-buttoned jacket, but it is slightly less dramatic than the peak lapel. This, too, is part of the reason a shawl lapel is slightly less formal. It’s still a classic. And it’s an option enjoyed by many well-dressed men. In fact, a shawl-lapel tuxedo often is the sure sign of a sophisticated dresser. But this also helps explain why a shawl lapel is just slightly less formal than a peak lapel.
Chapter 5 — Tuxedo Trousers

Tuxedo Trousers vs. Suits

The Tuxedo Waist

Formal trousers sit on the natural waist, not below it. This is more comfortable. It also makes the legs look longer. The long leg is critical to the traditional look, both for white and black tie.

Tuxedo pants don’t have belt loops, either. A belt is not worn or needed with tuxedo pants.

Side Adjusters

Some tuxedo pants have side adjusters, tiny cloth belts on either side of the waist. These let you adjust the waist size slightly without making alterations. While often seen on rented pants (to adjust to different customers), side adjusters may be seen on well-made pants as well, since they let you quickly adjust for a few extra pounds, up or down, in the months between each wearing.

Pleats

Tuxedo pants typically have pleats. Modest pleats extend the front crease and thus heighten the line of the pants. That’s why they tend to be seen on more formal pants. Going without pleats (especially if you have a flat stomach) is not wrong, but pleats also make it easier to sit, and reduce wear on the pants.

Pleats, too, are of two types. The first are forward pleats, where the edge or crease of the pleat opens forwards. The second are reverse pleats, where the crease opens backward. Between the two, forward pleats are more formal. This goes back to Classic White Tie where — because of the high waist and prominent open jacket — the front pleats played a prominent role in the overall esthetic. In this setting, forward pleats worked better because the line of the pants was disturbed less when men put their hands in the side pockets, something the design of Classic White Tie openly invited. In contrast, most pleats on suits and regular pants today have reverse pleats.
Side Stripe

Tuxedo pants have a single side-stripe down the outside seam of the pants. The stripe has a military origin and comes from a time when riding pants were worn tight on the legs. Two hundred years ago, buttons were needed to close the outside of the pants around the leg and the stripe originally covered them. This feature still matters today, though, because the stripe gives a vertical line to the side of the pants and thus makes your legs look longer.

Cuffs

Tuxedo pants are not cuffed. Why? The tuxedo is older than the cuff, a relatively new invention. Plus, this gives a clean line to the pants and makes the legs look longer, something shorter men tend to do with their pants anyway.

Break

When properly done, the pants should have a slight break. The bottom will be slightly lower in back, just enough to cover the back of the shoe (but not onto the heel). This helps the pants stay in place better. The extra length in back also extends the line of the pants and makes the legs look slightly longer.

Accessories for Tuxedo Pants — Braces (Suspenders)

Braces with buttons (not clips) are standard with a tuxedo. Belt loops are not used or needed on tuxedo trousers.

Braces & Buttons

Make sure the six standard buttons — two in back, and two over each front pleat (right and left) — are affixed on the inside waist of the tuxedo trousers. When vests were standard decades ago, the buttons for braces often were on the outside of the trousers, but now inside is standard. If your tuxedo trousers don’t come with buttons for braces, a tailor can easily add them. Clip-on braces are not used.

Why Braces Work

If done right, braces are better than a belt. With braces, you’ll be more comfortable and your pants will hang better, too. Here’s why:
• By using braces, you can have the waist an inch or so bigger. Not only is this more comfortable, but it also helps the pants drape better. This is just basic physics: braces suspend pants *around* your waist, while belts cinch pants *to* your waist.

• Braces keep the front crease tighter, too. The front braces buttons are directly above the pleat line on the pants and thus pull it taut when you stand.

*Aesthetics of Braces*

When used on a tuxedo, braces thus maintain the vertical line of the crease and reinforce, once again, the important upward line of black tie.

*Formal Braces*

Consistent with the formal/business divide, formal braces are different from those used for business wear. Braces for black tie typically are solid black silk, often in a moiré pattern (which has the look of ripples or watered silk). White braces usually are reserved for white tie or for wearing under a cream or off-white dinner jackets in the summer.

Some formal braces also have braided ends rather than the usual leather ends used on business braces. This gives the ends a slightly slimmer footprint and also makes them less likely to show through the vest or cummerbund. This mattered more when buttons for braces were on the outside of the trousers, but the feature still is used today. This is yet another way to distinguish formal braces from those used for business wear.

*Options*

More adventuresome braces can be worn, too. Black and white patterns could include anything from polka dots to skulls & cross bones.

Since the tuxedo jacket is not removed, the metal levers (or adjusters) on the braces typically will not be seen. Still, there’s no reason not to match the color of the levers (usually nickel or brass) with the metal, usually silver or gold, used on the studs or cufflinks.

*Sizing*

Braces are sized, based on the size of the chest. When braces are properly fitted, the metal levers on the front of the braces should sit on the bottom ½ or ⅓ of the chest. If fitted high on the chest, a double-thick layer covers the entire chest and takes up more space.
Chapter 6 — Tuxedo Shirts

Three Options for Tuxedo Shirts — Wing Collars, Marcella, and Pleats

The tuxedo shirt plays a central role in Classic Black Tie. Once placed inside the black of the jacket and the upsweep of the silk-faced peak lapels, the high-contrast white shirt solidifies and further underscores the dramatic “V” of the chest. Any deviation from this reduces the formality and power of the look.

Tuxedo shirts, of course, are separate from business shirts. Three different tuxedo shirts are used:

- The classic wing-collar shirt.
- The turn-down collar marcella shirt.
- The turn-down collar with pleated front.

Each has a different level of formality. None would be used with a suit.

While the classic wing collar is the most formal, most men today (even traditionalists) use a turn-down collar with either a marcella shirt or the pleated front. A case can be made for the special elegance of the classic wing collar. It’s not for beginners (so it will be left to the end), but it has a special place in black tie.

Common Features of Tuxedo Shirts

By tradition, tuxedo shirts start with features of the most formal business shirts and then upgrade some or all of them:

White

All are white. This provides a high-contrast to the black tuxedo.
**Cufflinks**

No buttons here. No barrel cuffs, either. Tuxedo shirts have either a french cuff (e.g., doubled-over) or a single, linked cuff (the most formal).

**Shirt Studs & Buttons**

Tuxedo shirts can use studs. This separates them from business shirts, which use only buttons. The most formal tuxedo shirts use only studs in front. Less formal tuxedo shirts are convertible and are fitted for either buttons or studs. One common technique is to sew the front buttons onto a removable cloth ribbon. Once done, you then have two options: leave the strip in and button the front or remove the button ribbon and use studs instead. The best buttons on tuxedo shirts often are mother-of-pearl. You can test this by pressing the button to your cheek or lip. If the button feels cool to the touch, it’s mother-of-pearl.

**No Pockets**

Tuxedo shirts don’t have pockets. The reason: the fewer pockets, the more formal the shirt.

**Fabric**

Thinner and finer cloth is more formal. Tuxedo shirts are made of high quality, high thread-count cotton. Broadcloth fabric is commonly used. There’s a practical element at work here, too. Formal events tend to be warm and often involve dancing. Cool is important here, especially since the jacket won’t be removed. For this reason, the backs and sleeves (which won’t be seen) are thinner and cooler than the front, collar, and cuffs (which show with the jacket on).

**Special Fronts**

All tuxedo shirts have special fronts. The deep “V” of the tuxedo also means a large exposed shirt front. The exposed parts of tuxedo shirts (e.g., front, cuffs, and collar) typically are made of heavier, dressier fabric than the back and sleeves. The thicker front also keeps the deep white needed for high contrast (since it’s less likely to show through). Some shirts have a pique front, while for others (often less formal) have vertical pleats. Neither are used for business shirts.
Higher Collars

The higher, wider, and stiffer the collar, the more formal the shirt. Thus, all tuxedo shirts show have higher and wider collars and also show more cuff than business shirts. At the top of the hierarchy is the classical detached wing collar of white tie. Even on tuxedo shirts with turndown collars, however, the collar tends to sit slightly higher above the collar than the ½ inch typically found on business shirts.

Option # 1 — The Marcella Shirt — Turn-Down Collar with Pique Front

One of the most widely used shirts today (and one of the most flexible) is the marcella shirt. A marcella shirt keeps the pique fabric of the classic wing collar shirt, but combines it with a less formal shirt, here one with a turn-down collar and double (or french) cuffs.

Pique Front

The front of the marcella shirt has a special pique weave (almost like a fine polo shirt). The pattern resembles a small honeycomb pattern and gives surface interest to the shirt. The pattern is found only on the exposed parts of the shirts, e.g., the collar, front bib, and cuffs. The body of the shirt remains a lighter fabric, typically broadcloth, to make the shirt cooler.

Turn-Down Collar

While less dramatic than the classic wing collar, the turn-down collar on the marcella shirt still is quite formal. It’s taller than the usual business collar and it’s also a semi-spread collar (e.g., turned slightly outward). Both features, plus the pique fabric, mark the shirt as formal.

Cuffs

The marcella shirt has double (or french) cuffs. These look best with double-sided cufflinks.

The result is a comfortable, classic shirt. The marcella shirt can be used with peak or shawl tuxedos. Because of its flexibility, it’s a good choice for a first tuxedo shirt. It’s a particular favorite with a double-breasted peak label tuxedo or as a slightly less formal option for a single-breasted peak lapel.
Option #2 — The Pleated Shirt — Turn-Down Collar with Pleated Front

The Pleated Shirt

The second classic tuxedo shirt, also widely used, is the pleated shirt with the turn down collar. The least formal of tuxedo shirts, the pleated shirt was first popularized for black tie by the Duke of Windsor in the 1920s. It has a turn-down collar and french cuffs, like the marcella shirt, but uses a pleated soft front rather than the pique. The cuffs and collar are plain as well.

Fabric

The fabric usually is a fine cotton broadcloth or voile, a thin cotton fabric. Both keep you cool, especially if your evening includes dancing.

Collar Height

The turn-down collar, while similar to a business collar, still should be high enough to frame the face. While less dramatic than the classic wing collar, a turn-down tuxedo collar on a good pleated shirt will be higher (and thus better) than a contemporary wing collar.

Pleats

The best shirts have hand-folded pleats. Less expensive shirts have an extra piece of pleated fabric sewn onto the front of the shirt. While the size of the pleats can vary, larger men tend to look better with larger pleats, usually ¾ inch.

A Note on Cuffs and Collars

“Showing linen” (e.g., cuffs) is a part of men’s dress. This one simple thing gives balance, depth, and definition to the silhouette. Without it, the hands literally drop away, leaving a single unbroken mass of black with a head atop, almost puppet-like.

For business dress, the normal guideline is ½ inch of cuff. This matches the ½ inch of shirt collar usually showing above a suit. Depending on the length of your arms, slight adjustments might be made, up or down. Tuxedo shirts have even higher collars than business shirts, however. To offset the higher tuxedo collar, some recommend a tuxedo
cuff of ¾ to 1 inch, instead. On a tuxedo, the combination of higher collar and longer cuff can be quite striking.

**Accessories for Tuxedo Shirts — Cufflinks and Studs**

A stud set is a great black tie accessory and a wonderful way to add a twist of personal style. It should include double-sided cufflinks and at least 3 shirt studs.

**Cufflinks**

All tuxedo shirts require cufflinks. The thick and highly-starched cuffs on traditional formal shirts made it impractical to use buttons. Cufflinks also add a nice accent to the cuff.

**Double-Sided**

Formal cufflinks should be double-sided. While often seen, cufflinks with posts (e.g., a single link on one side and a locking device on the other) cover only the outside cuff and not the inside and thus look half-finished. Cuff “links” are just that — two matched pieces linked together with a small chain or link.

**Cufflink Options**

Simple is best. Black (often, onyx) with either gold or silver trim is a popular option. Plain gold is also an option. White or mother-of-pearl typically is more appropriate for the “extra-whiteness” required by white tie. The most informal option might be simple silk knots. Owning multiple sets also is an easy way to vary the look and accent of your tuxedo.

**Shirt Studs**

Studs are more formal, since business shirts use only buttons. They also give nice accent to the shirt and provide a light upward line, further complementing the overall vertical line of Classic Black Tie. The fewer the number of studs, the more formal it is. 3 or 4 is common; 2 is elegant; and 1 is sometimes seen on wing collar shirts used for white tie.
Varieties of Shirt Studs

A stud set will include shirt studs (at least three) as well as cufflinks. More studs are better here, because any extras always can be used as spares. Shirt studs typically come in two different styles. Some have a screw-off top to accommodate the thick front of the typical tuxedo shirt (and need to be securely tightened). Others use a shank with tiny springs to secure the stud to the shirt. On some sets, the studs are linked together with a fine chain to prevent pieces from being misplaced.

Half & Full Stud Sets

Studs come in half or full sets. A half set includes shirt studs and cufflinks, while a full set adds 3 or 4 matching studs for the vest or waistcoat as well. While not widely sold today, many older full sets from the heyday of formal wear some 60-100 years ago are available on eBay.

Option # 3 — The Case for the Classic Detachable Wing Collar Shirt

The Collar

The most formal collar is the classic wing collar, now used for only the most formal occasions. It’s the only collar used for white tie and the most formal collar used for black tie. While somewhat rare today, it is the most elegant tuxedo shirt and the standard from which all modern tuxedo shirts ultimately were derived.

Formality of the Wing Collar

Traditionalists favor the detachable wing collar for the most formal of events. A detachable collar can be higher, firmer, and harder than an attached collar. The classic wing collar is made of highly-starched cotton or linen and has a firm, smooth, almost bone-like hardness. High around the sides of the neck, with a “V” in front, it draws the eye directly to the face. As a result, the classic wing collar carries a special elegance and power. The deep “V” in front also makes it surprisingly comfortable to wear.

The classic wing collar is attached to the body of the shirt with collar studs, the standard practice for all dress collars a hundred years ago. Two collar studs are needed, one (slightly smaller) for the back of the shirt and one for the front. A variety of styles for front studs are available. It’s always good to have extras. Putting on the collar is straightforward, much like buttoning a regular shirt. Once done, it’s buttoned for the night. Casual late-night open collars are not an option here.
Wing Collar Options

While classic wing collars take a little extra work, they also come with advantages. Since wing collars come in different sizes, heights, and shapes, you can change collars out from event to event, depending on the level of formality you want. You also can select the particular wing collar best suited for your face and neck.

The Bib Front

The classic wing collar shirt has a front bib, made either of thick pique or highly-starched smooth cotton. The bib shows as the front of the shirt and is thicker (and firmer) than the plain front of a business shirt. The extra thickness makes it difficult to use buttons, so studs are used instead. The result is a firm, flat front, almost like a stiff window shade. This gives greater formality.

Bib Dimensions

The bib on a good tuxedo shirt is firm and thick and somewhat unbending, almost like a small mat. As a result, two practical considerations come into play. First, the bib should be narrower than the braces (suspenders). Otherwise, the braces may make it buckle, and add an unwanted ridge of fabric. Second, the bottom edge of the bib should end several inches above the waist. Otherwise, the stiff fabric might buckle upward when you sit. This is one more reason a vest or cummerbund is used. Either will cover the area between the bib and waist and thus let you sit in comfort.

Cuffs

A traditional wing collar shirt has single, linked cuffs rather than double french cuffs on other tuxedo shirts. A single link is the most formal cuff.

Additional Features of the Classic Wing Collar Shirt

The classic wing collar shirt has other wonderful features, too, each of which adds to the elegance of the shirt:

- **Tie Loop.** A loop, just under the back collar. This keeps the black tie from riding up the collar, and keeps the tie in place. The loop also can be used to keep the top of a formal backless vest in place.

- **Bib Pocket.** A classic wing collar shirt has an opening or slit, much like a vertical pocket, on the front upper left of the shirt, just outside the bib. This feature helps when putting in studs. You put your left hand through the slit and inside the shirt
to hold the bottom of the stud when inserting or tightening the top of the stud with your right hand. Of course, this also allows your valet (or date) to do it as well.

- **Alternating Eyelets for Studs.** Vertical holes for studs on the left center of the bib and horizontal holes on the right center. Once placed over each other and put together, this criss-cross of vertical and horizontal slits keeps the studs in place.

- **Trouser Tab.** This is a tab, several inches long, attached to the shirt front just below the waist. Made with several buttonholes, the tab lets you button the bottom of your shirt to the inside waistband of your pants and keeps the shirt from riding up.

**Sources for Classic Wing Collar Shirts**

The classic collar shirt is easier to find in England than the United States. A traditional detached wing collar shirt with all the features described, however, is still sold by Brooks Brothers.

**Bow Ties for Classic Wing Collars**

The classic wing collar requires a fitted or exact-length bow tie. While bow ties typically are adjusted to different collar sizes, using a set of loops and clips (which are hidden under the turn-down collar), the open wing collar is less forgiving. An exact-size formal bow tie, with its continuous solid construction, guarantees a clean line with no visible gaps. The size of a fitted bow tie usually is ½ inch bigger than your collar.

**The Problem with Contemporary Wing Collar Shirts**

**Contemporary Wing Collar Shirts**

While the classic wing collar shirt is elegant, most shirts sold today as wing collar tuxedo shirts are not. Virtually all wing collar shirts rented or sold today have attached wing collars instead. Even worse, the collar itself is low and weak with tiny wings. These are poor substitutes for the classic wing collar, even though such shirts are widely used, especially by first-time tuxedo wearers.

**The Problem with Collars**

The worst feature on such shirts, ironically, is the collar height. The classic wing collar is formal (and elegant) because it’s higher than a regular business collar and frames the face better, too. The collars on almost all wing collar shirts sold today, however, are lower
than business shirts. These low collars (almost like mandarin collars) make a weak statement.

A few attached wing collar shirts made today (typically expensive higher-end shirts) do have relatively high collars. Even here, though, other features of classic wing collar shirts — such as single-cuffs, trouser tabs, and collar loops — often are missing. Moreover, no attached collar, regardless of height, ever can be as firm as a classic wing collar. While a few traditionalists find these acceptable, largely because of the collar height, many don’t. For the same price, it’s just less impressive than a classic wing collar shirt.

The Problem with Pleats

Another feature of the contemporary wing collar shirt bothers some traditionalists, too — the pleated front. Pleats were not used on classic wing collar shirts, only on less formal shirts with turn-down collars. For traditionalists, therefore, a pleated front on a wing-collar shirt is a sartorial non sequitur. Allan Flusser describes them as “a mixed metaphor” and “a mutt” of a shirt.

Many traditionalists thus don’t use contemporary wing collar shirts at all. If not using a classic wing collar shirt, they use either a marcella shirt with a turn-down collar or a traditional pleated shirt with a turn-down collar. Both will have more impressive collars than the modern wing collar shirt.
Chapter 7 — The Tie of Black Tie

The Tie of Black Tie — A Black Bow Tie

Bow Tie vs. Long Tie

A tuxedo demands a bow tie. Why? While bow ties today often are associated with less formal dress, the solid color bow tie is older (and thus more formal) than the four-in-hand necktie. Long ties are a relatively recent fashion. Those actors you see with long ties at the Oscars don’t know the difference. Adding a long tie makes a tuxedo less formal, not more formal.

A little history here explains a lot. Two hundred years ago, men had elaborate “cravats” tied around their necks, often white in color. Classic White Tie, with a tie made of white pique, echoes this older look. A black bow tie is one step removed, but still mimics this older look, and thus is used in formalwear. That’s why black bow ties are more formal than four-in-hand ties.

Color

“Black tie” means black tie, too. No one will likely turn you away at the door if you show up with a red bow tie instead. At the same time, it just won’t look as good, either. Most important, it will draw attention away from your face.

Fabric

If possible, the fabric of the bow tie should match the facing used on the lapels. For satin lapels, this means a satin bow. For grosgrain (or ribbed silk) lapels, the complementary weave of grosgrain, faille, or barathea is used.

Shape

Bow ties come in different shapes, too. The so-called “butterfly” is most common, often with bows around 2 ½ inches.
Sizing
Self-tie bow ties typically are one-size-fits-all. A loop on the inside edge, marked with sizes, can be adjusted and secured with a small hook to match your neck size. The turn down collar covers this once the bow is tied. In contrast, the exposed classic wing collar requires a fitted or exact length bow.

The bow should be sized properly for your face, too. If extended upward, the outer edge of the bow should fit between your eyes and the edge of your face. If narrower, the bow may seem weak; if wider; the bow may seem clownish.

How to Tie a Bow Tie
Self-Tied Bow Ties

Of course, you tie the bow tie yourself, just like two hundred years ago. This is a matter of honor. A pre-tied bow tie can be spotted at a distance. It also looks too perfect. In contrast, a hand-tied bow tie displays, in its slight imperfections, the hand and style of the owner.

Learning how to tie a bow tie has other benefits as well. At the end of the evening, you can untie it and let it hang around your neck. Not knowing how easy it is, other people will think you’ve mastered some exotic art.

The Easy Way

The really good news: you already know how to tie a bowtie. The simple truth is this: the knot for a bow tie is the same knot you use to tie your shoes. You just tie it under your chin instead.

Once you know this, only a few minutes are needed to master the art. Start by sitting down and tying the bow around the top of your knee for practice. This way, you can watch what you are doing. Pretend you’re tying your shoes and you’ll be fine: twist one end over the other and tighten, then make the bow; slide the other end around the bow and through, and you’re done. Practice a few times, and then tie it under your chin for real. Use a mirror to check for final adjustments.

For adjustments, just think shoelaces again. It’s exactly the same. Note the shape of the tied bow. Just like your shoelaces, each side of the tied bow has two pieces: one single, one double bow. Once tied, note the order of the bows as well. On one side, the single is in front with the double behind it, while on the other side, the order is reversed. Now, you are ready to make adjustments. You already know what to do. To lengthen one side of the bow, just pull on the double (just like your shoes). To tighten the tie, pull on both doubles.
(just like your shoes). To untie the bow, pull the two singles (just like your shoes). Now, you’re done.

Resources

Once you’ve done it, check out a how-to-tie a bow tie site or a video and see what you’ve learned. If you just pretend you’re tying your shoe, you’ll be fine. In fact, looking at diagrams or movies at first may complicate things. But once you have it mastered, you’ll watch these seemingly quick contortions of tying and realize just how simple it is.
Chapter 8 — The Black-Tie Waist

The Covered Tuxedo Waist

The waist is never exposed with a tuxedo. With a single-breasted tuxedo, wear either a vest or a cummerbund. You can skip this with a double-breasted tuxedo, since the waist already is covered.

Formal Vests

A vest (a waistcoat, for the British) for a tuxedo is different than a vest for a suit. A formal vest is low-cut, usually with three buttons, while a regular suit vest is cut higher, usually with six buttons. A formal vest also has shawl lapels. The formal vest for black tie is derived from the deep-cut white pique formal vests used with white tie. This allows you to show more of the shirt, and gives a greater vertical line (and thus height) to the look.

A high-cut vest does not work well here. The power and formality of the look is reduced, since it mimics regular business dress. It also eviscerates the deep “V,” so important for black tie.

Vest Backs

Formal vests often are backless (to be cooler, if you dance). The backless formal vest is yet another innovation associated with the Duke of Windsor. Formal vests with full backs are preferred by some, but harder to find. The extra layer of cloth, while slight, matters for fittings, too.

Vest Tab

A good formal vest also has an elastic loop or tab sewn inside on the bottom front. This secures the vest to an inside button on the trousers and keeps the vest from riding up.
Vest Buttons & Studs

All vest buttons on a formal vest are buttoned. While the low button on a traditional six-button business vest by custom is left unbuttoned, the practice does not apply to formal vests. Formal vests often come with buttons that can be swapped out for studs. This allows a full matching stud set (including waistcoat studs) as well as the usual shirt studs and cufflinks.

Vest vs. Cummerbund

A vest is more formal than a cummerbund. The formal black vest is derived from the formal white vest used with white tie, while the cummerbund is a more recent addition. While either a vest or a cummerbund can be worn with a single-breasted tuxedo, a vest tends to look best with a peak-lapel (because both are angular), while a cummerbund tend to work best with a shawl tuxedo (because both are rounded).

Cummerbunds

A cummerbund first was brought to formal wear by British military officers who used it in India. First used for summer wear because it was cooler than a vest, cummerbunds soon were used year-round.

Aesthetics of the Cummerbund

The black band of the cummerbund plays several important esthetic functions. Once placed atop the black trousers, a cummerbund extends the line of the leg and makes a man’s legs look longer. It also covers and pulls in the stomach and gives the hint of a higher, barrel chest. The deep band of the cummerbund smoothens the front, further accentuating a clean look.

Pleats

The first formal cummerbunds were a single piece of cloth wrapped three or four times around the waist. This explains the folds we see on cummerbunds today. The pleats on a cummerbund are worn up. The wonderful reason: you could carry theatre tickets in the fold.

Cummerbund Features

A good quality cummerbund has several other wonderful features, too:
• A small pocket (sometimes called an opera pocket) often constructed on the top seam, typically on the right side, so you can carry a ticket or key. Some early versions of tuxedo pants did not have pockets, so this feature was necessary.

• A small loop on the inside front, so you can secure it to the pants. Typically, this is done is by fixing the loop to a button on the top inside of the front waist of the pants. Another option is threading the French extender (a short cloth “belt,” that extends across the waist on good pants) through the loop as you close the pants. However it’s done, the loop prevents the cummerbund from riding up or moving out of place. It’s easy to have a tailor add a loop if a cummerbund doesn’t come with one. It works wonders.
Chapter 9 — Black Tie Shoes

Black tie deserves special shoes, too. Not only are they different from regular business shoes, but they also make the foot seem smaller (and thus more elegant) than business shoes.

Patent Oxfords

The most widely used shoe for black tie probably is the balmoral oxford in patent leather. In essence, this takes the most formal business shoe (an oxford), removes all decoration (which makes it more formal) and then uses patent leather to distinguish it from business wear. The balmoral oxford is sleek, thin, and elegant. Bluchers, even in patent leather, are not as formal. While hard to find, flat silk laces are a wonderful touch.

Other Shoe Options

Some men use other types of plain black slip-ons, too. Above all, though, formal shoes are black, plain, light, and simple. Plain black balmoral oxfords in calf, can work, too, since they are slim and narrow. Whatever you do, don’t wear anything with extra decoration (like wingtips), or anything big, wide, or heavy (like Doc Martens), or anything with big square toes. Paired against the tuxedo, your all will make your feet look big. This is not an elegant look. And that will be noticed.

The Case for Opera Pumps

Patent leather oxfords always are proper for black tie. But the piece of Classic Black Tie with the oldest history is the opera pump (sometimes called a court shoe). These black, slipper-like pumps go back over 300 years when they were used for court dress, often paired with breaches and silk stockings. In England, all court dress was regulated by the Crown until 1939. Court shoes are still sold today, even the original pumps with buckles. Given this history, the adoption of a slightly less formal bow for the same shoes in social settings was not surprising.
The opera pumps used with black tie (and required for white tie) come with bows, typically small pinched ones of grosgrain silk. The bows echo the gold or silver buckles used on court shoes.

*Why Pumps and not Oxfords?*

Why is a slipper-like shoe formal and why would a man choose to wear a pump? More reasons than you might think:

- Opera pumps always have been worn by real men. Two hundred years ago, many types of official uniforms used them. These included judges and lawyers as well as military officers. Some English judges and members of the elite Queen's Counsel still wear them today.

- Pumps are only an inside shoe, thus further distancing it from business wear. This makes them more formal than oxfords.

- The thin sole and narrow silhouette of pumps make your feet look smaller compared to regular oxfords, particularly under trousers without cuffs. A short front on the shoe (what’s called a low vamp) also makes the eye see a smaller foot.

- Pumps are particularly good for dancing. Freedom of movement is why you see pumps on the feet of acrobats, dancers, and fencers.

*Why Bows?*

“Why would a real man wear shoes with bows on them?” In truth, there are several good reasons:

- The pinched bow on the shoes bookend, in a wonderful way, the bow tie under your chin. This adds to the aesthetics of the overall look.

- The grosgrain bows also pair well with the stripe (typically of the same fabric) on the outside of the trousers. The end result is a subtle, integrated look.

- The bows make your feet look even smaller. One of the tricks of shoe design is this: if you put a strap or other item across the top of the vamp of a shoe, it tricks the eye into seeing an even smaller vamp (and thus smaller foot). This is standard technique seen on penny loafers and other slip-on shoes. Here, the cross piece just happens to be a bow.

Thus, opera pumps do have bows, but real men continue to wear them for good reason. Once put in the overall context of black tie, the opera pumps integrate well with the other
elements of Classic Black Tie. Thus, while used mostly with white tie, opera pumps are a nice and classic touch with black tie.

Sizing

Since opera pumps are worn with thin (often silk) stockings, you may need a ½ size or so smaller than your regular shoe. Plus, if not fitted well, the short vamp on the opera pump makes it slightly more likely to slip off. (The short vamp makes your foot look smaller, so it’s a good thing.)

Patent Leather or Not

Opera pumps are available both in patent and calf leather. While harder to find, calf pumps are more understated and arguably more elegant for that reason. The basic design of the pumps, some argue, differs enough from the most formal business shoe (e.g., the oxford) so that the extra flash of patent leather is not needed. Both calf and patent leather, however, are equally acceptable.

Other Features

Some opera pumps have a thin quilt lining. This extra bit of padding on the thin soles makes them even better for dancing.

Accessories for Shoes — Tuxedo Hosiery

Fabrics

Classic Black Tie requires formal hosiery. The traditional choice is black silk in an over-the-calf length. This goes back, once again, to court dress where pumps were worn with breeches and long silk stockings.

Formal stockings are thinner than those used for business dress. They also are made of silk rather than the usual wool. Because formal silk stockings are thin, almost sheer, you also may need to wear a slightly smaller (e.g., ½ size) shoe.

Length

Over-the-calf length is standard. Showing bare skin never is acceptable here. This could happen with ankle-length stockings when you sit.
**Design**

Plain ribbed stockings free of design are one choice. Another is plain black with some design (called “clocks”) or textured pattern up the side. Here, the pattern up the side complements and extends the visual line of the side stripe on tuxedo trousers.

**Other Options**

As a second option, thin wool hose could be used instead. (Thinner socks are more formal — think casual crew socks versus thinner business socks once removed.) The silk hose, however, remain an elegant choice.
Chapter 10 — Other Accessories

Pocket Squares

As with regular business dress, a white pocket square in linen or silk placed in the breast pocket draws the eye across the chest. This makes the chest look slightly bigger. While a standard part of business dress, the pocket square is even more important for Classic Black Tie.

Edges

A good pocket square has hand-rolled edges. This forms a tiny tube around the edge of the fabric and gives body to the fabric, allowing it to stand up better in your pocket.

Folds

You have at least 10-14 different ways you can fold the pocket square. Some folds, such as those with points, are viewed as more formal than others.

Placement

The square should show 1 to 1 ½ inches over the top of the pocket. Any higher and it becomes a distraction. If tilted slightly to the outside, even more emphasis is added.

Pocket Square Colors

While white is classic and the most formal, the pocket square offers one of the few options for a slight splash of color, if desired, in the black and white palette. Deep red, or purple, among others, can work well.
Boutonnières

_Boutonnière_

The flower itself is nice, but a _boutonnière_ works much like a pocket square. And, yes, it’s proper to use both.

_The Boutonnière Loop_

A proper tuxedo will have a short piece of _thick thread_ on the _underside_ of the lapel, just underneath the buttonhole on the upper left lapel, to hold the stem of the flower in place. No need to use a pin. If your tuxedo doesn’t have one, it’s easy (and cheap) to have one _added_ by a good tailor.

_TYPES OF FLOWERS_

_Carnations_ are a favorite, in red or white, in part because carnations remain fresh long after cutting. _White gardenias_ sometimes are favored, too, because of their lovely smell. A _blue cornflower_ is another option.

_Watches_

_Watch Pockets_

Part of the tradition of formal wear is not to be concerned about the time. Thus, watches — or at least watch faces — are not on prominent display. Don’t be surprised if your tuxedo trousers have a watch pocket on the waist. This is an older, more formal touch, and it gives you a good excuse to use an older pocket watch, with fob or chain, rather than a wristwatch.

If your trousers don’t have one, there’s an easy second option: have a tailor put a small pocket (like a small change pocket) inside a regular side pocket. This keeps the watch in place and protects it. The watch chain, in turn, can be clipped to the waist or slipped through the bottom braid of one of the front braces.

_Wristwatches_

If you use a wristwatch, it should be thin with a black band and match your other jewelry. Ostentatious, clunky wristwatches get caught in the cuff, stress the fabric, and distract the eye.
Chapter 11 — Black Tie Variations

The Shades of Formality — Mixing and Matching

Classic Black Tie comes in many flavors. You have many options to mix and match. Here are some traditional guidelines:

- A single-breasted peak or shawl lapel tuxedo can be worn with either a vest or cummerbund.

- A vest is more formal than a cummerbund. A white pique vest (what’s used for white tie), is more formal than a black silk vest.

- Peak lapels, because of their association with the tail coat, are more formal than shawl lapels, which come from the smoking jacket. Because of this, shawl lapels tend to be seen on less formal options such as white dinner jackets in summer or in more intimate social affairs.

- The physique of the wearer matters, too. Shawl tuxedoes tend to make rotund men look bigger, while particularly thin men may benefit from the extra width. The angular nature of peak lapels, in contrast, can make a round face look slightly thinner.

- Vests tend to complement peak lapels (especially when worn with a classic wing collar), since both are angular. Cummerbunds tend to complement shawl tuxedos, since both are rounded.

All of this can be mixed and matched to fit the formality of the occasion, though, as well as the style or whim of the wearer. For example, at the most formal of events, you could wear a single-breasted peak lapel, classic wing collar, and a black (or even a white pique) vest. At one less formal, you could wear a shawl tuxedo, a pleated turn-down collar, and a cummerbund. Whatever you do, if you stay with Classic Black Tie, you really can’t go wrong.
Black Tie Variations — Seasons and Station

Summer

In the summer, when more faces are tanned, a cream dinner jacket, along with the white shirt against the face, can be a wonderful alternative. In this case, the cream or ivory (not white) jacket plays up the added color of the tan. One of the other colors sometimes used, a Sahara tan — a light tan color — works for the same reason.

The summer dinner jacket can be peak or shawl, as well as single- or double-breasted. The classic, though, tends to be the single-breasted shawl with self-facing lapels (e.g., same cloth as jacket rather than silk) and mother of pearl buttons. Both features complement the slightly lower formality associated with summer events, evenings outdoors, or cruises.

The lower formality of summer may also bring out more colorful cummerbunds (such as burgundy or red) and other fun options.

Winter Holidays

Christmas and New Year’s often are favorite times for black tie events. The special holiday time often may be a time for special colors (say red formal vests) or black velvet bow ties. When entertaining, black velvet jackets (often shawl-lapel) or even blue, green, or burgundy smoking jackets may make an appearance. Tartan cummerbunds (in seasonal red and green) are another option.

Military Mess Dress

Military units have special uniforms for formal events, often with a special dash. Mess Dress gives a special twist on traditional formal wear. Often, these are quite striking, particularly the Marines. The British are even more exacting and have a distinctive (and usually quite stunning) set of formal dress for each regiment.

Scottish Formal Dress

As part of highland dress, the Scots have a distinctive formal dress complete with kilts as well as special jackets and shoes.
Red Sea Rig

Another interesting option for warm climates is Red Sea Rig. Originally used by military and diplomatic personnel stationed in extreme climates in the days before air conditioning, Red Sea Rig is a stylish informal black tie. As a concession to the heat, the tuxedo jacket is dropped (and sometimes the tie or long-sleeve shirt as well). A cummerbund assures a level of formality, often with a dash of added color such as a red cummerbund or trouser stripes. A matching bow tie might be used in this special setting as well. Because of ease of use (and a certain sartorial snap), it spread to some civilian settings as well.

Servants

If you watch older movies, you’ll see servants dressed in “almost” black tie or white tie. The dress code was subtle, but straightforward: dress the servants well, perhaps even at a higher level of formality than the guests, but with key mismatches — such as a black bow tie with white tie or evening clothes during the day — to mark them as servants. There’s a practical lesson here, too: dress incorrectly and you may be mistaken for the staff.
Chapter 12 — Deviations from Classic Black Tie and Why They Don’t Work

The “rules” of Classic Black Tie are not about telling people what to do. You can wear anything you want. At the same time, the guidelines are based on certain well-accepted Aesthetics. Men don’t use them because they “have” to. Instead, they use them because they work.

Errors here are not sins or mistakes, but lost opportunities. If the rules help you look “more like a man,” why not use them? In turn, if you deviate from Classic Black Tie, you should understand what you give up.

Here are some frequently deviations from the rules and, most important, why they don’t work.

Notch Lapels

If you want to excite a traditionalist, ask him about notch-lapels on a tuxedo. It’s the feature of a tuxedo first noticed and often the most prominent. Most rented tuxedos have notch-lapels, as do most lower-priced ones. It is not, however, part of Classic Black Tie.

Why are tuxedos with notch lapels sold and why are notch lapels such a sore point with traditionalists?

The selling point is easy. Notch lapels are easier and cheaper to make. If manufacturers can use the same patterns as they use for business suits, it saves them money. (The same goes for flaps on the pockets, and 2- or 3-button fronts.) For rental stores, stocking mostly one style of tuxedo cuts down on inventory. As a practical matter, too, notch lapels tend to hold up better under heavy wear. Peak lapels (at least the rented variety) are slightly more vulnerable to damage given the heavy use (and casual care) of customers.

In turn, rental customers often are inexperienced and rely on advice from the store. Notched-lapel tuxedos are given to customers. The customers have fun at the event (it’s often a wedding or prom, so why shouldn’t they) and are happy.

The interesting truth, though, is this:

- Not one man in a hundred who wears a tuxedo with notch lapels decided to favor notch over shawl or peak lapels.
• In contrast, most men who wear peak or shawl did choose it over notch lapels. And most men who didn’t had an experienced tailor or salesperson pick it for them.

The traditionalists have a point here. It’s just not explained to people. Notch lapels on a tuxedo aren’t wrong in the sense it’s improper or never chosen by an experienced dresser. But it just doesn’t work as well, either. Why are notch lapels particularly ill-suited to Classic Black Tie? Two good reasons:

• A notch-lapel tuxedo is not as flattering. If the purpose of a formal dress is to make a man look more like a man, then the notch-lapel falls short, especially when paired against the power of the peak lapel. As the standard lapel on business suits, a notch lapel points outwards, almost like two turn signals (<<>). So long as the notched lapels are self-faced (as standard on business suits), this isn’t terribly dramatic. Once faced (and thus emphasized) in satin or grosgrain, however, notch lapels draw the eye outward, not upward. In short, notch lapels on a tuxedo make a man look wider and thicker (and thus older).

• It weakens the special nature of formal. If a tuxedo is meant to emphasize the special nature of formal, notch lapels do not help. As a staple of business wear, notch lapels lower the formality of a tuxedo. If a peak lapel is a step down from a tail coat, and a shawl lapel a step-up from the smoking jacket, then a notch lapel is reaching even lower.

If asked about “peak versus notch lapels” most men wouldn’t know the difference. Instead, if asked, “Would you like your shoulders and chest to look bigger?” or “Would you like to look slightly fatter?” the answer would be clear. The question, though, is rarely asked.

This is why experts on classic men’s dress recommend only peak or shawl tuxedos. The views here are clear:

• “A dinner jacket with notch lapels is a sartorial oxymoron.” Alan Flusser, Style and the Man 98 (2010).


Other “Suit” Features

While notch lapels are the most prominent example of “tuxedo as suit,” adding other business wear features reduces the power of the tuxedo, too. The impact is cumulative. Any of these features reduce formality, because they’re common on business suits:

• Multiple front buttons.
- Flap pockets.
- Single, back vent.
- High, six-button vest.
- Long tie.

Combined with notch lapels, it’s a far less powerful look. It may make a nice suit, but it’s a suit without the power of the tuxedo. The very tricks of the eye men want are gone.

With Classic Black Tie, *everything* is different from a business suit. That’s why Classic Black Tie is formal, powerful, and classic.

A man arrives in a warmed-over version of the business suit — say a three-button, notch-lapel “tuxedo,” with pocket flaps, a six-button vest, and a four-in-hand tie — is saying “I think this occasion is a little special, but not too much.” This, of course, is exactly what happens at the Oscars. (Other factors here, of course, are a need to be noticed and product placement.)

On the other hand, if man arrives in a tuxedo unlike anything he would wear at work — say, a one-button, peak-lapel tuxedo with grosgrain lapels, a formal vest, shirt studs, hand-tied bow tie, and opera pumps — he is saying “This is unlike anything else I do during the day; *this* is special.” You still see this in parts of American society; they just aren’t televised.

## The Long Tie

With a tuxedo, wearing a long tie borders on ill manners. Two bad trends explain the practice. First, many men believe (wrongly) tying a bow tie is high art. On rumor alone, many men avoid bow ties entirely. Second, some men (wrongly) think a long tie is more formal. Award shows originating in California are prime culprits for some reason.

For Classic Black Tie, however, a long black tie is devastatingly bad, especially with a peak lapel tuxedo. Once used, the all-important “V” chest is split in half, removing much of the power of the classic “V” of the tuxedo. Even worse, once placed inside the silk-faced peak lapels, the long tie forms a prominent down-pointing arrow. As a result, the eye is drawn to the stomach, not the face. Once paired with a long tie, the silk facing on the lapels becomes the edges of a big arrow ending in a man’s middle. This gives emphasis exactly where it’s *not* wanted.
The Bane of Matching Sets — Bow Ties and Cummerbunds

First-time tuxedo wearers often think about matched sets — bow tie and cummerbund — in bold colors or patterns. While often seen, these don’t work well. Why? In the context of Classic Black Tie, they distract and weaken the power of the tuxedo.

The reason, again, is simple. A single eye-catching bow tie under the chin distracts, since it draws the eye down and away from the face. When paired with a cummerbund of a similar color, however, the disruption is even more dramatic. A paired set, one under the chin and one below, creates a “ping-pong” effect. The eye moves up and down — waist to chin, chin to waist, time and time again. This distracts even more. The brighter the color, the worse the problem.

No one will send you home if you wear a matched set, but understand what you lose if you wear one.

Low Contrast

The power of Classic Black Tie comes in part from the high contrast of white shirt against black tuxedo. Using other combinations makes it weaker and less formal. While a light pastel pleated shirt (say blue or pink) may fit the lower formality of cream dinner jacket in summer, other variations — particularly all black or white — devastate the esthetic. For example:

- **Black Shirts.** The white shirt creates the high contrast critical to the deep, long “V” of Classic Black Tie. Removing the “V” makes no sense. If a black shirt is switched for the usual white, it eliminates the “V” entirely. The all-important wedge of white is eviscerated. So, too, is the band of cuff. Once done, the result is just head and hands bobbing in a sea of black. To be blunt, it makes a man look like a giant hand puppet.

- **All White Tuxedos.** The stuff of proms. Impractical, as well as poor contrast. A tropical suit is still a suit, not a tuxedo.
Chapter 13 — A Plan for Classic Black Tie —
Rent vs. Buy

Classic Black Tie need not be expensive. Once you understand why it works, you’ll never look at a tuxedo the same way again. You’ll look good every time and you’ll enjoy formal events, too. But first you need a plan.

Renting Classic Black Tie

Renting is not as cheap as you think. At the same time, buying may not be as expensive as you may think. The cost of rental for a complete outfit may be $150. After several rentals, you’ve spent enough to buy a tuxedo.

Rental stores often have limited options. The vast majority of rental business is for proms and weddings. The stock and styles, therefore, will be what 15-25 year-olds think is correct for a first formal event. As a result, many local rental places push 2- or 3-button tuxedos with notch lapels and flap pockets, contemporary wing collar shirts, and clip-on bow ties. Rentals also tend to be bigger, boxier, and have bigger arm holes, too, since they must fit a wide range of men.

Prom costumes, a stable of teen life, will be stocked, too. None of it will be close to what you need. Tuxedo “costumes” for prom — often in gaudy or bright colors — are a long-established social tradition and a rite of passage. It does give men something to laugh about twenty years later (when you really need it), so it does serve a purpose. But you don’t need it if you’re older than 18.

If you plan to rent, check — well in advance — if the store carries what you need. Don’t assume they do. Again, most rental tuxedos will have notch lapels. A few shawl lapels may be available. Peak lapels will be rare. If the store has what you want at a reasonable price and you’re short of cash, just go with the rental and have fun.

If you get stuck on short notice, just do the best you can. Even if you are handed a notch-lapel tuxedo, get a good fit, show cuff, and use a turn-down collar and a pocket square. Get a jacket with the fewest buttons possible, tuck in the flaps, and you’ll still be doing pretty well.

At the event, watch what other men are wearing, notice what looks good, and start making a list for next time. You’ll be surprised how much you can learn in an evening.
The First Purchase

The first purchase of black tie usually is event-driven — an upcoming ball, cruise, or wedding. Most black tie events are known well in advance. With a little planning, you often can get a Classic Black Tie outfit at a surprisingly reasonable price. Since you won’t wear a tuxedo nearly as often as an everyday suit, you’ll also be set for a long time, too.

Do just a few simple things and you’ll look great:

- First, get proper measurements. In particular, know your suit size and your shirt size. Proper fit is critical. Do this first.

- Even if a store in your town doesn’t carry tuxedos, plenty of online sources are available.

- Put the first money where it matters most and what people see the most. In order, that’s proper tuxedo, shirt, bow tie and cummerbund, pocket square, and studs.

- The best first choice is a one-button, single-breasted peak lapel. Look for no vents or moderate side vents. If it has flaps on the pocket, just tuck them in. It’s a classic, won’t go out of style, and can be worn with a wide variety of accessories. A one-button shawl tuxedo is another reasonable choice.

- For shirts, either a marcella or pleated front is a good first purchase. Classic wing-collar shirts, while elegant, are expensive and can be added later if you want. Avoid the contemporary wing collar shirt. Also be sure to launder the shirt before you wear it, since good cotton shirts are sized to shrink. If the shirt fits perfectly out of the box, be prepared to get a larger size.

- To cover your waist, a black cummerbund is often an easy first choice. While more formal, a low-cut formal vest is often harder to find and always can be added later. In the end, you’ll want both.

- For a bow tie, get a self-tie in black. Match the fabric of the box to the facing on the lapels (e.g., grosgrain or satin). It will look better and you’ll have plenty of time to find the 5 minutes you’ll need to practice.

- For accessories, a little goes a long way:
  - A white pocket square. It doesn’t cost much and won’t go out of style. You can use it forever, both for black tie and business. In a pinch, even a good cotton handkerchief will do.
  - Double-sided cufflinks are wonderful. Shirt studs, too, while a small detail, always add elegance.
Braces will help your pants drape better, so use them. No one will see
the braces under your jacket, so don’t worry at least for now how
fancy they are.

- For shoes, think long-term. While wonderful and classic, good patent leather
oxfords or opera pumps are not cheap. While good formal shoes are worth having,
don’t feel pushed into buying cheap ones, particularly if your budget is tight. (A
cheap pair may, in fact, be plastic.). No one will turn you away at the door if you
use plain-toe or cap-toe black oxford balmorals instead. Black oxfords are the
most formal business shoes and something you should own anyway. Just give
them a high-gloss polish (try “Parade Gloss” just for the evening) and you’ll be
fine. Walk with confidence and you’ll be surprised how few people will notice.
You can upgrade later.

A Proper Fit

If it’s classic tuxedo and it fits well even a low-priced tuxedo is fine. You’ll look much
better than a man who spent five times more for something trendy, ill-fitting, or anything
that looks like a black suit.

A good tailor can do wonders. When being fitted, wear the shirt and shoes you’ll wear
with the tuxedo, so you get accurate measurements.

Here, a few things done right make all the difference. Insist on having them done right,
no matter what anyone else claims is “in style” at the moment.

Among other things to check:

- The trousers should fit on your waist, not below it. If your trousers don’t have
buttons for braces, have them sewn on.

- Set the sleeve length on the jacket to show at least ½ inch of cuff. This is critical.
You don’t want sleeves half-way down your hand. Measure each sleeve
separately, too. It’s not unusual, too, for one arm to be slightly longer than the
other.

- Proper trouser length is critical. Don’t leave extra fabric bunched up above the
shoe. It can spoil an otherwise good look. Remember, too, no cuffs.

- Consider a boutonnière. If you have a working buttonhole on your left lapel, and
it’s wide enough (usually at least an inch), a tailor can sew a small loop under the
lapel to hold the stem. It’s certainly not required, though, and always can be added
later.
These few things can guarantee a good look. It isn’t expensive, either. You will look proper at any event and your tuxedo will not go out of style. From here on, you’ll own Classic Black Tie for any event. Since you won’t use it as often as a regular suit, it will last a lot longer, too. Once it’s in your closet, you’ll find reasons to use it.

Later Upgrades

As your needs (or finances) change, upgrades are easy. No need to rush. You already are set, so you can wait for sales or exceptional bargains. Even one new item every few years can make a big difference.

Here are some options:

- For variety, add a second type of tuxedo shirt (pleated or marcella), another stud set, or a new pocket square.

- Adding an off-white or cream summer jacket also is a good upgrade. You already have tuxedo trousers, so all you need is the jacket. Among other things, it makes an easy second look for a cruise with several formal nights.

- Antique cufflinks, stud sets, and collar studs (particular those from the high period of formal wear 60-100 years ago) often can be found on eBay.

- Keep an eye out for some of the harder-to-find items, such as opera pumps, a classic wing-collar shirt, or a formal vest.

- If you are patient, the big purchase — a new upgraded tuxedo — may be easier and much cheaper than you think, too. One place full of bargains is eBay. If you know what you need and bide your time, it’s possible to get truly exceptional, top brand tuxedos at a fraction of retail.
Chapter 14 — Black Tie Resources

Best First Resources for Classic Black Tie

To learn more about Classic Black Tie, here are the best places to start:

- **Website.** The best website on Classic Black Tie — by far — is *The Black Tie Guide: A Gentleman’s Guide to Evening Dress*. Everything you need to know is here. It’s flat-out the best online source for anything about black tie. It’s good for experts and beginners alike. The site also has wonderful sections on the history of black tie, by decade, as well as many pictures and practical tips. This site — for good reason — is the most-visited site on Classic Black Tie in the world. If you go online, starting anywhere else is just silly.

- **Blog.** The author of the Black Tie Guide, Peter Marshall, also recently started *The Black Tie Blog*, another thoroughly excellent (and entertaining) blog on Classic Black Tie.

- **Books.** The best books on Classic Black Tie are by Allan Flusser:
  
  
  

**Slideshow on Classic Black Tie**

For a slideshow based on *The Aesthetics of the Tuxedo*, see *Black Tie 101: The Classic Tuxedo: What to Wear and Why it Works*. 
Black Tie Bibliography

For more on Classic Black Tie, try some of the best books on classic men’s dress. Each has selected pages on Classic Black Tie. In addition to Flusser’s books, the best are:


Movies

For entertainment (and study), watch any of the following movies. In each, correct Classic Black Tie is well displayed. They all feature Cary Grant:


- *The Philadelphia Story* (1940). Cary Grant, Jimmie Stewart & Katherine Hepburn. Classic Black Tie, along with white tie, and morning dress, too. All three in one movie.

Best Sources — White Tie

While rarely used today, white tie is the most formal and elegant of all civilian evening dress for men. Much of black tie, ultimately, is derived from this earlier and more formal dress. White tie is, quite simply, the most elegant of all formal wear. A brief look at white tie puts the rules for black tie in perspective.

Websites. The best online sources for white tie are:
• Peter Marshall, The Black Tie Guide (a special section on White Tie).
• Joe DiPietro, Living Gentlemanly. A concise, four-part entry on white tie.
• The Cambridge University Heraldic & Genealogical Society. Tips on white tie from the good folks at Cambridge.
• Wikipedia. Entry on white tie.

Books. Alan Flusser’s books, listed above, all give concise descriptions of white tie as well.

Best Websites — Classic Men’s Dress

Several wonderful websites exist on classic men’s dress. All types of topics are covered, including formal dress. If you have questions, the search function can unearth much good advice.

• Ask Andy About Clothes. Probably the best overall site. Slightly older crowd, including many lawyers. Collective knowledge is astonishingly deep, varied, and quite helpful. Black suits and notch-lapel tuxedos drive them crazy.
• Style Forum. Younger crowd. Much overlap, though, with the Ask Andy group.
• Fedora Lounge. Specializes in the classic American dress of the 1930s and 1940s. But many topics of general interest, as well. They love hats.
• London Lounge. Lovers of classic, elegant clothes, and all things associated.

dhg
9 January 2012