

**Consumer Decision Making Contest  
2001-2002 Study Guide  
Formal Wear Rental and Purchase**

Oh my gosh! It's time for the biggest dance of the year at school. What will I wear?!?!?

Almost everyone has had a similar thought when a special event is about to happen. The selection of formal wear is associated with exciting times in our lives. We might be headed to a formal dance, a special party, a family wedding, or a number of other occasions that require formal attire.

In addition to be exciting, it can also be overwhelming or scary...especially for the first time participant.

Formal wear or other special clothing can be either rented or purchased. Some rules are the same for both options, but others are different. So, how do you decide what to wear?

### **Costs of Renting vs Buying**

In some situations, this decision is the easiest one to make. If you are part of a wedding party where everyone wearing tuxedos or dresses needs to look alike, then it is probably best to rent. Or, if you simply do not have enough money to purchase what you want, then renting may be your best option. Keep in mind, however, that buying an outfit does not mean that you have to buy something new. Thrift stores, garage sales, resale stores, outlet stores and other similar sources are available as well.

One way to determine whether to rent or buy is to consider the cost per wearing formula. It says that you divide the cost of the outfit by the number of times you will wear it to determine the cost per wearing.

For example, if you need a jacket that costs about \$100, list the number of times you will be able to wear that jacket. If you see that you will wear it three times in the coming year before you outgrow it or become tired of it, then your cost of wearing that jacket is \$100 divided by three....or about \$33.33 per occasion. Compare that amount with the cost of renting a similar jacket. If it costs \$25.00 per event to rent the jacket, then obviously it is less expensive to rent.

However, if you know that you can wear the jacket ten times before outgrowing it, getting tired of it, or having it go out of style, then you would divide \$100 by 10. And, when compared with the \$25.00 rental fee, that \$10.00 per wearing makes it less costly to purchase the jacket.

If you plan to wear the jacket multiple times, you will probably want to include other costs such as dry cleaning in your total cost.

## **Other Considerations for Renting vs Buying**

In addition to cost, there are other things to consider when making your decision to rent or buy formal wear.

### **Style**

If making a purchase, you want to be sure that it can be worn for more than one occasion. You may even want to purchase something that is adaptable for different seasons of the year. For example, the fabric should not be too light for cool weather or too heavy for warm weather. If the outfit is sleeveless, it should have a jacket that can be worn with it during cooler months of the year. You may also want to consider colors that are neutral so your garment will be appropriate for any season or event. And, you will probably want something that is not too trendy so that it doesn't go out of style before you have the chance to wear it again.

On the other hand, rented formal wear can be perfectly customized for the special event. You are not limited by the season of the year, the color or the latest style.

### **Quality**

When buying a garment, quality is definitely a concern. If you are investing your money in an item, then you want something that will maintain its value for several wearings and be appropriate for several different occasions. It is important that your item will look good and last for as long as you plan to use it. Learning to judge quality in clothing and accessories will help you get the most for your money.

On the other hand, a rented garment only needs to hold up for the time you plan to wear it. Of course, you want something that is not damaged or flawed, but you don't need to worry as much about overall quality and durability when renting an outfit.

### **Budgeting Your Expenses**

Whether renting or purchasing clothing, one of the most important variables is how much money is budgeted for the item. Remember, a formal outfit includes more than just the tuxedo or the dress. You must also have shoes, jewelry and other accessories. You may even want to include extras such as flowers, meals, transportation and so forth in your costs.

By planning ahead for special events, you won't be caught off guard -- or left with empty pockets -- when the time comes. If you start by having a budget in advance of the occasion, you can set a goal for how much money you need and put aside some money at regular intervals to meet that goal. Planning ahead will also give you more opportunity to shop around for the right outfit, do some comparison shopping, take advantage of sales, and check out other available options.

## **Making Payments**

The method you choose to pay for a rented or purchased outfit also makes a difference in the total cost. If you plan ahead and start saving your money, then you should be able to pay cash for your purchases or rented items. This payment method is the least expensive because it does not require any additional fees or finance charges. If you pay cash, be sure you get a receipt marked paid and keep it in a safe place. You will need that receipt in case you need to return or exchange the item, or in case there is a problem when you return the rented item.

You can also use a check or money order to pay for an item, and both of these payment methods are basically the same as paying cash. One advantage is that checks and money orders can be mailed, but never mail cash!

If you shop early and put your selections on layaway or reserve, there are probably no additional fees added to your bill. However, if you take the item out of the store before you have finished paying, you generally have additional finance charges.

Most people will choose to use a credit card if they don't have enough money to pay cash at the time of purchase. If you use this method of payment, then be prepared to pay interest on your purchase unless you pay the bill in full when it arrives. These additional finance charges need to be part of your cost comparison formula in order to have an accurate accounting of your total expenses.

Regardless of the payment option selected, be sure you understand all of the conditions. In some cases, you will lose the money you have paid on a layaway if you fail to complete your purchase by a certain date or if you decide to change your mind about the item selected. Some merchants may require payment in cash, down payments, or deposits to place things in layaway or hold them in reserve. Just be sure that you ask questions and understand the agreements you are making before finalizing the transaction.

## **Purchasing Formal Wear**

As with any other item you purchase, high price does not necessarily equal high quality. Following are some criteria to use when judging the overall quality of an item.

### **Fabric**

Testing the fabric in several small ways will help you determine the quality of the garment. For example, if you crush a corner of the fabric in your hand for about 30 seconds, how does it look when you release it? If the wrinkles remain, then it will wrinkle as you wear it.

Stretch a small length of fabric against a ruler and release it. It should return to its original length. If not, then it is likely to bag on you as you wear it.

Check the color of the fabric to be sure the dye is even. There should be no dark or light streaks in the color. And, if the item is a two-piece, be sure that they are perfectly matched colors.

Hold the fabric up to the light and examine it for flaws in the weave or snags in the knit.

Rub two pieces of the fabric together briskly. Watch for small balls or “pills” that may form. If you see them, it indicates that the fabric will “pill” when washed or worn.

## **Construction**

Look at the seams inside the garment. If the material ravel easily, the seams should be finished in some way to keep them from raveling. Seams on curves should be firmly stitched and there should be no loose or hanging threads.

The material along the seams should not pucker or buckle. Thread used in the sewing should be a suitable color that is not easily seen.

Plaids, stripes, checks and other patterns should be matched at the seams, whenever possible.

Buttons should be securely attached and buttonholes should not be ragged. Buttons receiving regular use should fit easily into their buttonholes.

Zippers should be sewn securely in the garment, and the material along the zipper should not be puckered or buckled. The zipper should operate smoothly and remain closed at the top when slight pressure is applied.

Check lapels and collars. Seams connecting the under collar with the top should not be visible. The lapel should lay flat and not curl.

Hems should be a uniformed width around the bottom of the garment. They should lay flat hanging smoothly and evenly.

Expensive dress and men’s jackets will probably have a lining or partial lining. They should be sewn smoothly and should not pucker. Lining fabric is lightweight, but it should be firm and resist raveling. If a stretch garment is lined, be sure the lining also stretches.

## **Merchants**

Another consideration when buying a garment is where to make the purchase. Can you shop at discount stores, special sales, resale stores, garage sales, thrift stores or outlet stores? If so, you may be able to save money on your purchase. If making an expensive purchase, however, it is important to buy from a reputable company in case you have problems with the item. Be sure to check their return policies and other procedures that will affect your transaction.

## **Sewing**

When buying a formal attire, costs can be lowered if you have sufficient sewing skills to make all or part of your outfit. You may want to purchase the material, pattern and other items needed to make the garment yourself. Or, you might be able to engage the help of someone with more experience than you to help with your project. You may also want to consider hiring someone to make an item that is specially tailored for you.

## **Renting Formal Wear**

Renting formal wear is different than buying, so you have different criteria to consider when choosing this option.

### **Accessories**

If you plan to buy accessories to go with your rented outfit, be sure that you will be able to wear them with other items you already own. Otherwise, you may spend a lot of money on something that is worn only once.

### **Getting your choice**

Check with the companies in your area to see if you can reserve the particular formal wear you want. Be sure to find out that it will be available at the time you need it, in the color you want and in the style you choose. Ask if you will be wearing the exact same garment you try on in the store or if they have several of the same kind. You want to be sure you know what you are getting when you place your order.

You will probably want to pick up the item as early as possible in case there are problems with your order or changes that need to be made. Before taking your item home, look it over for damages, missing buttons, missing pieces and other potential flaws. Remember, rental clothes have been previously worn and laundered, so they may have more wear and tear than your clothes at home.

### **Contracts**

Read the contract carefully and ask any questions you may have before signing it. Be sure you know your rights and responsibilities when renting formal wear. Determine if you need to have the item cleaned before returning it or if cleaning charges are included in the rental fee. Find out when the items need to be returned. Keep in mind, there may be additional fees for late returns. And, be sure you understand who pays for damages and your maximum out of pocket expenses for them. You are signing a legal contract when you rent formal wear, and it's important that you read all the fine print and accept all the liabilities before you make the transaction.

Special events are meant to be fun times. And, selecting the right outfit to wear will help you have the confidence you need to put your best foot forward.

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