

Start With an Amazing Jacket

A diverse group of Milwaukeeans gathered to do their duty, jury duty that is, at the Downtown Courthouse. One woman stood out in the sea of fashion choices that March morning. Wearing a military inspired fitted jacket, over a t-shirt, and jeans, she wowed the rest of us with her effortless chic. That is the power of the humble jacket.

It is an indispensable wardrobe staple for very good reason, because it can transform any outfit into fashion. Whether it is constructed of wool, cotton, velvet, leather, or denim, a flattering fit is what is most important. When you try on a jacket or a coat it should feel right. What does that mean? Think of anything you've owned or tried on that seemed to slide over your body, the collar precisely hugged your neck, and the shoulder line perfectly met the edge of your shoulders: you could literally feel the drape on your body.

Make sure you dress for trying on clothing at the Goodwill stores. First things first: put on any jacket or coat (not outerwear) with what you will be wearing under it. Most likely that would be a shirt, blouse, tee, or light sweater. If it hikes up in the back it will hang long in the front, and vice versa, so back on the rack it should go. The next few paragraphs are a practical guide to recognizing what a good fit should feel like.

Check the shoulder line. Fit here is the key to any jacket's overall proportion on your body. The shoulder line of any jacket style should meet the edge of your shoulders. Look for tailoring features: a nipped waist, vertical seams, or panels that give a smooth shape that skims, not constricts the body. The drop shoulder fit is harder to describe, but typically should not exceed 2 inches below your natural shoulder, to avoid looking dumpy. Even with a relaxed cut in a jacket, you still want to define your body.

Does it have reach? Can you raise your arms (as if to sling a tote bag over your shoulder, or reach for something) without that feeling of tightness through the shoulders and back? If not, go to the next size up. If a jacket rolls back on your shoulders, or pitches forward as you move, put it back. It was probably fit for a broader shouldered person, and is too long from shoulder to underarm.

Check your stance. This is a tailor's term for the meeting of the lapel and buttons. Most gals of average height of any size will look great in a one- or two –button jacket for the longer line it creates. A deep V that draws the eye up is most flattering for a larger bust line or the larger gal in general. Conversely petites appear taller when the stance is higher, with three or even four button styles.

Length. This is a tough one with all the choices we are given, but, traditionally just about an inch below your bottom, with a fingertip length. This is where your fingertips rest on your thigh when you stand with your arms relaxed and straight at your sides. Those with larger bottom halves should avoid any jacket whose length hits at the widest part of the hip, as this will visually expand that area and draw the eye there!

The 3-way mirror test. Move around checking the shoulder line and collar. Do the arms look skimming, and graceful? Or, do you look like a stuffed sausage? Take in the overall effect. Does the coat drape with your body movement, or is it stiff and

regimented like a suit of armor? Does the proportion work with the bulk of your wardrobe? Does the silhouette create a flattering unbroken line for your shape? Is the sleeve length long enough? That means clearing the top of your hand or just at the wrist with the arms relaxed. Just remember, a great jacket that only works with one or two things is not very versatile, also, a coat that feels stiff, restricts movement, and does not flatter your figure is not a bargain at any cost.

When everything else in your closet seems to let you down, nothing pulls together, anchors, or creates an outfit faster than a beautifully cut jacket. Keep in mind while shopping that good fabric and tailoring in a jacket will raise your wardrobe's style quotient and you will never be at a loss for pulling together a look of "effortless chic" for yourself.