
AT-HOME ATELIER

HOW TO CURATE YOUR OWN SENSE OF CLOTHING STYLE

Raylee McKenzie • Dr. O'Donnell's Advanced Composition • April 24, 2023

Whether backed by intentionality or not, our appearances can be the clearest windows to our minds. Are you more carefree or meticulous with your presentation? Do you gravitate towards complex, overly accessorized outfits, or do you prioritize comfort? Are your clothes an expression of you, or are they limited by the impressions of someone else? Regardless of your current outlook on fashion, getting comfortable with your body and the way you style it can significantly boost your confidence. But where to start?

I began this journey myself during the darkest days of the pandemic in 2020. With ample time to reflect, I started to question how clothing can become a statement, how to gain an intuitive sense of style, and how to feel the most “me” in my clothes. Nearly 3 years later, I've built a wardrobe that's both fashionable and functional for me—that's what fashion is all about! By detailing my process (which is always ongoing) and sharing my dependable resources, I hope to guide you to comparable results. Style isn't something you can gain overnight—stay committed and you can build your ideal collection.

STEP 1: EVALUATING YOUR WARDROBE

Time for a major closet cleanout, right? Well, not exactly.

Before speeding to the nearest retailer to revamp your entire wardrobe, pause. Undoubtedly, you've already amassed several clothing items that have become staples in your ensemble. Most of these will fall under the category of **closet staples** or **wardrobe essentials**, which are foundational pieces widely applicable to various outfits. When determining your closet staples, ask yourself:

POPULAR CLOSET STAPLES

White T-Shirts
Jeans
Black Long-Sleeved Shirts
Plain Structured Jackets
White Sneakers
Little Black Dresses
White Button-Ups
Knit Sweaters

- How often do I wear this item?
- How many different outfits can I create with this item?
- Does this item match the rest of my wardrobe well?
- Do I see myself wearing this item consistently in the future?

Closet staples can vary widely from person to person. The list above can help you get started, but keep in mind that we'll explore distinctive styles and their essential items later.



Tip #1: Donating Clothing

If you decide to part ways with any of your beloved clothing, I recommend donating it to a local thrift shop or selling it to a consignment store. These sustainable options can give your clothes a new, loving home.

Once you've picked out the essentials, assess the pieces in front of you: what are the common factors? Is there a shared color scheme? Do they lean towards a similar silhouette (loose or form-fitting, high or low-waisted)? What do these clothes reveal about your current style?

Depending on how much you want to alter your wardrobe, you can also use these questions to decide which items to keep in your rotation.



Some staples from my closet.

STEP 2: DEVELOPING A FASHION-FORWARD EYE

Your initial evaluation was practice—you learned to determine what you like and what you don't. To test that out, try scouring these sources.

I. INSTAGRAM

Instagram can be a fantastic social media platform for developing style because it concentrates on visuals and its algorithm prioritizes accounts of your choice. While the search features can be a bit clunky, the explore page can pick up on your preferences and guide you toward other creators who align with your interests.

If you don't know of any influencers to follow, try searching for basic terms like "trendy outfits" or "fashion inspo." When you find an outfit you like, use the **save** feature to bookmark the post. You can even create folders within your saved posts to categorize outfits for later. Feel free to follow any creators whose posts you gravitate towards often—you can study their sense of style and survey their following list to find similar outfits from other influencers, too.

Some accounts may tag purchasable items to buy through Instagram's **shop** feature. While I haven't tried it myself, this can be a helpful method of finding signature pieces and the brands that design them.

II. PINTEREST

Pinterest is my favorite platform and a natural top choice for fashion inspiration. Like Instagram, Pinterest is a mainly visual platform; however, I find it more useful because of its fine-tuned algorithm and stronger search capabilities. Where Instagram places importance on individual creators, Pinterest allows you to design your own visual scrapbook of ideas.



Tip #2: Pinterest Save Button

If Google Chrome is your default browser, the Chrome Web Store has an extension called "Pinterest Save Button" that allows you to save images online to your boards and discover similar images in Pinterest. This broadens your selection outside the confines of the app.

If you're not already familiar with the logistics, you can save any post on Pinterest to a **board**—a compilation of pictures in a certain category. It's up to you how you want to organize your pictures, or **pins**. Personally, I embrace my hatred of tidiness even in the digital world: I have over 1,700 "fashion" pins all saved to one board. You can follow my example, designate several boards for different styles or articles of clothing, or compartmentalize a single board with **sections**.

III. SIMPLIFYING POPULAR STYLES

(And the Dangers of Overcategorization)

You've heard me mention styles vaguely several times throughout this guide. **Styles** are subcategories of fashion based on the vibes that outfits give off (you're probably familiar with styles such as preppy, retro, and streetwear). But this definition is frustratingly broad. What styles are out there, and how can you align them with your own personal preferences?

- **ATHLEISURE**: Think gym wear but make it fashionable. Biker shorts, leggings, quarter zips, and sweatshirts in neutrals are common choices.
- **BOHEMIAN**: Clothing characterized by loose silhouettes and earthy palettes. Tunics, tassels, maxi skirts and dresses, flared pants, and embroidery can all be boho.



fashion

1,726 Pins 4d

- **GRUNGE:** A subculture formed mostly in the 90s by alternative rock fans. Incorporates distressed denim, flannels, combat boots, and band tees in an androgynous fashion.
- **POLISHED:** Typical business attire. A-line skirts, pencil skirts, suits, ties, pumps, and anything tailored can fall under the polished label.
- **PREPPY:** Polished fashion's younger sister. Channeling classic school uniforms, preppy fashion includes pleated skirts, loafers, blazers, sweaters, and button-ups along with other tailored styles.
- **RETRO:** A broad category encapsulating styles of the 60s, 70s, and 80s, mostly. Retro fashion can include bell bottoms, funky patterns, or mod dresses. Remember that fashion is cyclical—many looks from the past are bound to come back into vogue at some point.
- **STREETWEAR:** A relaxed style with hoodies, sweatpants, baggy jeans and tees, basketball shoes, logomania, and other designs popularized by urban hip-hop scenes in the 90s.

While adhering to a certain style can be helpful while figuring out your own tastes, try not to force yourself to cling to labels too much. Remember, fashion is equal parts art and function; it's meant to be an expression of you! Don't push yourself to fall into a certain category for conformity or any other reason. The most important lesson to learn from this guide is to feel confident *and* comfortable in what you wear.

STEP 3: AMBITION INTO ACTION

Okay, you've made me dismantle my closet and scour the entire internet for new outfits. When do I get to wear them?

Now! In the first two steps, you learned how to choose elements of style and found inspiration to create outfits out of them. With these lessons in mind, you can transform your closet—with both new clothes and classics.

I. SHOPPING TIPS

It can be tempting to buy hauls from fast fashion retailers like Shein, Forever 21, and Zara, but remember to balance quantity and quality.

WHAT IS FAST FASHION?

Fast fashion is a relatively new term that describes clothing made with unethical techniques. Retailers who engage in fast fashion typically sell clothing made with exploitative labor and environmentally harmful materials, such as polyester and acrylic fiber. These synthetic materials are often lower in quality than natural materials and are nonbiodegradable, so overproduction and fast trend turnovers can greatly harm the planet. (Rauturier, 2022).

To spot fast fashion, research your retailers before you buy. Good On You has an [online directory](#) rating thousands of brands on sustainability. If the prices on new, trendy clothes seem too good to be true, they probably are. Also, check the clothes' labels for synthetic materials and try to get into the habits of donating old clothes and avoiding trends you're unsure on.

If you're looking to shop, I'd recommend checking out thrift stores first. Not only are they far more sustainable than most new clothing stores, but they also tend to be considerably cheaper. \$20 might get you one shirt at Target but five at Goodwill.

Thrifting without having specific pieces in mind gets overwhelming fast. Thankfully, your previous curation of outfits can ease you into the process. Here are a few steps to a fruitful thrift haul:

1. DESIGNATE A COLOR PALETTE.

Look through the clothes you own and the outfits you've saved online. Chances are, you gravitate towards similar colors. It can help to keep swatches of these colors in your notes app on your phone. Ignore any items that don't fall into your palette.

2. TAKE NOTE OF SPECIFIC ITEMS YOU'VE SAVED MORE THAN ONCE.

Have you saved 4 outfits with flared pants or denim skirts? If so, you might want to look out for those pieces the next time you head out. Thrift stores are perfect spots to find basic items while maintaining decent quality.

3. KNOW WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING FOR.

You never know what you'll see at the thrift store. If you take the time to look through every rack, you'll be exhausted before you hit the register. Think, "this is what I need, and this is something I can skip today." Preparedness will save you hours in the long run.



My main color palette.

I almost exclusively thrift or shop online. If you have similar shopping habits, it's enormously useful to record measurements in your phone for quick reference. Frequent online shoppers should ensure sites are credible and have reasonable return policies before buying. Some of my favorite online shoe stores, for example, are Koi Footwear and Public Desire.

II. FINISHING TOUCHES

What turns a good outfit into a great one? The final presentation. Stylish people know how to layer and accessorize to get the most out of their wardrobes.



Tip #3: Smart Buying

Find a statement piece for a pretty penny? Bookmark the item and consider the purchase for a month or so. If you can afford to buy it twice and you still love it after the wait, go for it!

LAYERING

Layering has both practical and visual perks. In colder weather, layering is a necessity. But with a versatile collection, you can layer clothing in any season.

LAYERING ESSENTIALS

Fitted black or white t-shirts

Turtlenecks

Tights and Leggings

Fitted long-sleeved shirts

White tank tops

For cold weather, you can start with turtlenecks or long-sleeved shirts and combine them with nearly any other top. The key is the fit—close-fitting bottom layers will give you more freedom with the outermost layers. Tights and leggings can add flexibility to your summer clothes by allowing you to wear skirts and shorts in the wintertime. Fleece-lined leggings are a must-have if miniskirts are your go-to.

Similar techniques also work for hot weather. Trade your long sleeves for short ones or ditch them altogether.

You can layer tank tops over t-shirts or other tank tops to add intrigue without the unwanted extra heat.

ACCESSORIZING

Accessories are a fashionista's most powerful weapon. Knowing how to add flair without statement pieces as your base can transform even the most basic closet.

My favorite accessory is jewelry—necklaces, bracelets, rings, and earrings can add tiny details without dramatically altering the outfit. If you're looking to change the silhouette and appear a bit more polished, you can opt for belts. Gloves, hats, socks, and hair accessories can also rejuvenate a look.

There's no shortcut for mastering the final flairs. Experiment with distinct aspects of your look and see what works best for you!



Tip #4: Handmade Jewelry

If you're looking for individuality or just a new hobby, try making your own jewelry!

Craft stores sell chains, pliers, charms, string, and even premade jewelry kits to get you started making unique accessories. Some of my handmade jewelry is pictured to the left.

FINALE: CLOSING THE SHOW



Tip #5: Saving Outfits

Build an ensemble you can't get enough of? Use a full-length mirror to take a picture! You can make a folder in your phone of your favorite outfits to reference if you're stuck in a rut.

At the end of the day, remember that style is a choice and an ongoing venture. You don't need to dress any certain way if you don't want to. But in the case that you do choose to evolve your look, remember that you deserve room to grow with it. Allow yourself to be flexible and have fun on your journey. Self-expression and confidence are the real end goals here. I hope this guide helps you to flourish in your own fashion.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Raylee McKenzie is a freshman majoring in English at East Tennessee State University with minors in Creative Writing and Journalism. With the hope of pursuing a career in writing, her work critically focuses on her central interests, whether it be fashion, music, or gaming. Raylee can be contacted by email at mckenzier1@etsu.edu.

WORKS CITED

Good On You. (2023). *Good On You Directory*. Retrieved February 12, 2023, from <https://directory.goodonyou.eco/>

Rauturier, S. (2022, April 1). *What Is Fast Fashion and Why Is It So Bad?* Retrieved February 10, 2023, from Good On You: <https://goodonyou.eco/what-is-fast-fashion/>