

# A Brief History of the Suit

Contributed by Ron Porter  
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In the 1660s, King Charles II decreed that at court, men were to wear a long coat or a jacket, a waistcoat, a cravat – which later mutated into the modern necktie – a wig, and trousers. The entire ensemble would eventually become the standard business suit that millions of men wear everyday working day of their life.

By the early 1800s, styles had changed enough that the trend led men to wear understated, beautifully cut, perfectly tailored coats, along with elaborately knotted neckwear. What we call the modern suit was originally a nineteenth-century English innovation. The tailored man's suit became the great social leveler of the 19th century. With the breakdown of the aristocratic leadership that had dominated society since time immemorial, it became less necessary for men to emphasize distinctions of social rank. As the suit became increasingly popular, even the humblest men would have at least one suit to wear - their "Sunday best."

America took the lead in the 20th century with the ready-to-wear industry, devising technological advances that created a reliable source of clothing for all men. Tailors worked on standardized master patterns, a technique borrowed from the United States Army, and the proliferating department stores disseminated suits of a fairly uniform nature.

The Zoot Suit first gained popularity in the late 1930s in Harlem among the jazz community. The word "zoot", according to the Oxford English Dictionary, probably comes from the word 'suit'. Anti-Latino race riots in Los Angeles during World War II are known as the Zoot Suit Riots. Despite restrictions and discrimination, Zoot Suit culture prevailed.

Over the past half-century, the wearing of suits has become far less common than it once was and is now restricted almost entirely to formal and business activities. During the 1990s, many businesses in North America adopted casual Fridays. The abandonment of a uniform dress code has led to considerable confusion over what is considered appropriate business wear. More recently, some businesses have reinforced the wearing of suits, although they may never again be as common as they once were.

So, if you're one of those guys who bucks the trend and continues to wear a suit everyday of your life – take a bow. You are keeping history alive.

A Brief History of the Suit is written by Erin Hattaway for SKMENSWEAR | MENS SUITS. Erin Hattaway is an undergraduate student at Brigham Young University. Her most recent editing experience includes work for BYU's undergraduate philosophy magazine, The Aporia. She currently works with Rich Christiansen (linked to <http://www.2tieatie.com>) and Ron Porter, collaborating on their upcoming book Bootstrap Business.