Beyond the Little Black Dress

by Michele Little

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About Michele Little
Michele Little, style expert and image consultant, is Your Signature Stylist with One Chic Mama, Inc., www.onechicmama.com. She is passionate about helping women discover their authentic beauty and step into their personal style with ease and grace. Michele works to empower her clients to help them find the right colors and styles of clothing for their body types, as well as to create a style that brings out their very best. She works with women on a one-on-one basis as well as in group programs. Michele’s philosophy is ‘what you wear tells the world who you are’.

Knowing she wanted to have a career in fashion at the age of 6, Michele began dressing her Barbie’s in couture fashions she sewed herself. After attaining a Bachelor’s degree from UNC-G in Apparel Arts, Michele went on to design custom hats and wedding gowns. She added a line of washable silk and linen ready-to-wear items in 1997 that was sold in boutiques across the country, as well as in her own atelier.

Drawing on more than 20 years experience in the fashion industry, Michele became a certified Image Consultant in 2008. Since then she has quickly become a sought after speaker and expert in her field. Michele is a freelance writer and a regular contributor to Triangle Style Magazine, the Cary Citizen and Star Lee Magazine. Michele is the author of Mama’s Little Helpers: bite sized beauty and style tips for busy moms and the soon-to-be-released Secrets of Signature Style. Michele is also the founder and president of ARDSI, Inc, the Association of Retailers, Designers and Style Professionals International, Inc.

Michele lives in Raleigh, NC with her two children, Ivy and Dylan and their dog Firefly. Learn more about Michele and her services at www.onechicmama.com.
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The Little Black Dress. LBD. Every woman knows what it is and what it stands for. She probably even has one in her closet, ready to pull out at a moment’s notice as she’s been told to do in countless books, articles and by friends. It’s become an institution in our closets – a mainstay which we can turn to when all else fails, made popular by Coco Chanel in the 1920’s. Yet - gulp - the LBD really isn’t the best choice for everyone, but more than that, it can be a bit boring. I’d like to show you life beyond the little black dress and open you up to all the amazing possibilities a dress can bring!

I want to help guide you to finding your own best alternative to the little black dress. Why, you might ask? Because black is not the most flattering color for all women, but it’s also very expected. I want to encourage you to wear something that’s going to make you feel like a million bucks and stand out from the crowd, not just something that’s so simple that most of the women at any given cocktail party will have one on.

So let’s get to work to find what’s going to make you look beautiful, whether it’s a turquoise shift dress or a champagne ball gown. Are you ready?

Black Isn’t Your Best Color – or Is It?

The right colors make you light up, while the wrong color can make you look years older

Black is defined as the absence of color. When we wear color, that color is reflected onto our skin. When we wear a virtual black hole of pigment, that, too, is reflected onto our skin and leaves can leave us with an unflattering pallor. That is, unless black is one of our best colors. I happen to be one of those lucky people who look good in black. With my dark hair, fair skin and hazel eyes, black actually looks good on me. Yet if I were a sun-kissed blond with a golden tan and blue eyes, black would simply drain me of all
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color and cast a pallid hue on me. A vibrant blue or a rich cream would do much more to enhance my assets and make me look radiant.

But black is easy. Women have come to think of it as their fallback, almost like their security blanket when they’re not sure what else to wear. When they don’t know what other color to wear, they wear black. But imagine, during the holiday season as your LBD gets pulled out and put to work for cocktail parties, dinner parties and holiday soirees, making your grand entrance only to be greeted by a sea of – gasp! – little black dresses. It almost begins to look like a uniform, and sure doesn’t go very far in expressing personal style. Sure, a black lacy Valentino dress is going to stand apart from a black shift from Target, yet if you opt to wear a gauzy, floaty creation made of multiple colors, or even in the contrasting combination of black and white, you’d set yourself apart from the pack and really make a style statement.

Many women want to fit in and play it safe when it comes to fashion. But what I’ve found is that when women know what looks good on them, they’re much more risk taking. They opt for bold, bright colors in styles that flatter their figure, and they look like a million bucks! Yet finding what looks good (and knowing why) can be the tricky part. Don’t worry. I’m willing to share a few of these tricks with you:

☑ Evening dresses in your skin or eye color will look fabulous on you and make you shine! If you have sea-green eyes, a beautiful sea-green or aqua dress will make you look amazing. A lacy dress in your skin color (whether it’s ivory, mocha or black) will enhance your skin tone and look dazzling!

If you know a color looks fabulous on you (based on compliments and how you feel when you wear it), go for it! If a red dress makes Beyond the
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✓ you feel daring and sexy, then why play it safe? Find the sexiest red dress you can and wear it with confidence to match.

✓ If you must don your LBD, then jazz it up with a **pop of color**. Wear emerald earrings and shoes to match, or cobalt platforms with a great clutch. Gold with black is an elegant combination. Black on black can be pretty boring, so have a little fun with it.

✓ Add a little **texture**. If you must wear black, try something with a lace accent, a little embroidery or a metallic accent.

Don’t get me wrong - wearing black is not all bad. I just want you to wear it with intention. It’s so easy to wear it by default, and not have to think about color. But when you do, look out! And when you want to dress to impress, go for broke and wear the colors and styles that will make you stand out in the crowd. You’re beautiful – now go flaunt it!

**Wear Color With Confidence**

*How to choose colors that make you look great*

One of the first things people will notice about you is the colors you are wearing. Color has the power to affect your mood, make you look great, make you look tired or make you stand out. Wearing a color that makes you look great is a surefire way to attract people to you. But knowing what color to wear isn’t always easy. Many women are hit or miss when they choose colors and often choose incorrectly, resulting in wearing a color that can make them look old, tired or ill. If you have a closet filled with black, take a good hard look at how it affects you. So ditch the black and find out what colors make you shine!

Through working with my clients I have found that black is in just about everyone’s closet. There are a few exceptions, such as a fabulous woman named Ingrid whom I recently met, who dresses only in cream (a gorgeous color and her hair enhancer to boot). But the majority of us have a closet filled with black. Why? Well, because it’s what we’re told to wear. Pick up any magazine, read any
style book and what do so many experts say you simply MUST have in your wardrobe? Black, of course. But I beg to differ, and with good reason. Let me explain.

As I mentioned above, black is the absence of all color. Even if it is someone’s best color it’s still not going to be their VERY best color. It is my goal to empower women and to help them wear color with confidence. If you’re gonna wear black, wear it with intention and not because you don’t know what else to wear. It makes a difference.

Ok, so how to know what your best colors are? My first solution is easy – work with a professional to have a Personal Color Analysis done. When I do a color analysis I begin by matching up my client’s hair, skin and eye colors to professional swatches and determine her 3-part color harmony. You’ll receive a personalized color palette that contains your 40 best colors, making shopping and wearing color easy peasy!

But there are other ways to discover some of your best colors that you can do yourself. First, look at yourself in the mirror with a close eye. Your haircolor, eyecolor and skintone are all colors that, when repeated in your clothing, will help create a personalized look and make you look gorgeous!

**Color is A Powerful Tool**

Here are some of the messages colors can send:

- Black connotes sophistication, authority, formality, mystery.
- Navy is authoritative, conservative, businesslike and popular.
- Red shows excitement, strength, power, action and energy.
- Yellow is clean, fresh, innovative and original.
- Blue exudes peace, loyalty, popularity, gentleness
- Gray shows calm, serenity, dignity, conservative
- Green is fresh, wealth, renewal, healing, change
How to wear your haircolor:

Your haircolor, or *hair enhancer*, is a wonderful shade to wear for special occasions. This means that if you have brown hair, for example, a brown dress or jacket in the same shade would look beautiful on you! As your hair begins to lighten up as you get older, pay attention to it and how it affects the colors you wear. You may need to take your darks down a notch and even eliminate black from your wardrobe altogether (yes, really!). Try wearing a charcoal, medium gray or even camel in place of black and see how stunning the effects are. These shades are almost always more flattering than black, which can wash you out, make you look older than you are, make your wrinkles stand out and make you look tired.

How to wear your eye color (eye enhancer):

You’ve probably noticed how women with blue eyes wear blue to make their eyes pop. It’s an amazing effect that can be captivating, yet this trick is not limited only to those with baby blues. The color that is closest to your eye color is referred to as your eye enhancer. Whether your peepers are hazel, brown, gray or blue, you can get a similar effect by wearing your eye color.

Notice how gorgeous Princess Diana looks, left, in an aqua dress that repeats her eye color. Now take a look at her in the picture to the right and take note of how the black just drains her. The difference in color creates a significant impact and she looks much more radiant in the turquoise dress.

Another wonderful color for everyone to wear is their own unique skintone, referred to as your skin enhancer. Wearing your skin enhancer can help
your skin to look more luminous and make you look lovely!

**How to wear your skin enhancer:**
During the 2009 Oscars many of the stars, including Anne Hathaway, rocked gowns in skintone shades adorned with pleats, Swarovski crystals and other embellishments to add interest and excitement. These gowns made their skin look luminous and helped them to sparkle and shine!

Wearing your *skin intensifier* color is a wonderful way to make your skin look truly gorgeous. Typically in the blue-green, teal and turquoise range, skin intensifiers are wonderful colors to wear when you’re showing a lot of skin.

Skin intensifiers are probably the number one color I recommend that my clients bring into their wardrobe to add a dash of color while making their skin look radiant, from the palest ivory to the deepest ebony. Turquoise is also the color for 2010 and you’ll find it everywhere, making this season a wonderful time to add a dress in this vibrant hue to your wardrobe.

**That’s What I Like About You**
*Know your best features and play them up*

As women, we are our own worst critics. We’re the first to point out our big hips, our extra five pounds or our bad hair day. Well ladies, we’re going to change all that! I want to encourage you to let go of any negative images or ideas that you have about yourself. I know, easier said than done. Here’s a little exercise to get you started in the right direction. Next time you catch a glimpse of yourself in the mirror and think, “Wow, my hips and thighs are HUGE!”’, turn that around and create a statement of gratitude. Think about how fortunate you truly are to have hips and thighs to get you around in life,
to create your feminine curves and to support you as you move throughout your day.

Now create a mantra that sounds something like this:
“I am grateful for my hips and thighs that have allowed me to [have my beautiful children, excel at dancing, run a marathon…] and I embrace them as part of my unique self.” Write it down and place it where you’ll see it each day. When we reframe our negative body images then we can focus on what’s positive about us and really let ourselves shine in the spotlight. You are beautiful - now let’s go discover what your assets are!

Don’t pay attention to sizes. Sizing means different things to different companies, and no two fit alike. You want a dress that fits you like a glove, whether it’s a 2 or a 22. If you need to have it altered (who doesn’t?), find yourself a great tailor and have it cut to suit you. A dress that’s too big is just as unflattering as a dress that’s 2 sizes too small. The right fit goes a long way to boost your confidence and leave you looking great.

What I’ve found in working with my clients is that when we focus our attention on what’s great about us and downplay those parts that we’re not so crazy about, we boost our confidence tremendously and can really show up as our best selves. This requires a little self-discovery and perhaps the help of a trusted friend.

To discover your best assets, look at yourself closely in the mirror. What do you just LOVE about yourself? It could be your gorgeous hair, your beautiful smile that lights up a room or your long, sexy legs that look great in heels. Think about what you get most complimented on and use that as a starting point. If you’re at a loss, ask a friend whose opinion you trust to tell
you what’s great about you. You’ll probably be very pleasantly surprised and will get a good confidence boost to boot!

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So now that you have at least one thing to focus your attention on, let’s get to work. We’re going to take this asset and use it as the focal point of your outfit. Everything you wear should support you in playing this one element up to the hilt and helping you look fabulous. Here are a few suggestions:

- ✓ If your long, flowing locks are your best asset try wearing a dress in your haircolor to make them look more luxurious. Wear an unfussy dress to keep the attention on you!

- ✓ If your eyes are your best asset, play them up by wearing your eyecolor, either in your dress or your jewelry. You’ll look fabulous!

- ✓ If your legs are your best asset, treat yourself to some beautiful heels, smooth on some lotion with a little sparkle and don a short skirt to help them step into the spotlight.

- ✓ If your smile is your best feature, wear a gorgeous shade of lipstick and do something that makes you really happy so that you can’t help but smile!

- ✓ If your curves are your best asset, wear a figure flattering dress that hugs you in all the right places, and is in one of your best colors. After all, you don’t want to blend into the woodwork.

- ✓ If you’re proud of your well-defined waist, opt for a style that brings emphasis to the waist – a belt, bow or even a bold colored handbag will draw attention to this area.

You’re on a roll so don’t stop now! See what other amazing things you can discover about yourself and play them up!
Finding an alternative to the LBD

Can it be done?

Ok, now that you want to dress to impress and show yourself off you shouldn’t really feel the need to wear a little black dress. After all, there are so many other gorgeous colors out there and with the dress being a hot item this year there has never been a better time to think beyond the little black dress.

But you still may not be convinced that you need an alternative to the LBD. Let me twist your arm a little and show you how easy (and how fabulous!) it can be!

First, let’s discuss what the LBD does and why it’s so ubiquitous. It’s versatile, able to be dressed up or dressed down in a single bound. It’s timeless, never really in style or out of style. It’s always appropriate. It is elegant. And so on. But you know what? So is a little blue dress, or a little brown dress or a little champagne dress. Let’s explore the options.

Above are two fabulous pictures of Tyra Banks wearing identical dresses but in different colors. The dress on the left is almost in her skintone and looks fabulously elegant. She has accessorized very simply, with a skinny belt, earrings and heels. Yet she could just as easily wear a pair of chandelier earrings, a bold belt and a pair of peep toe booties with this dress for an edgier look. Or she could team it with brown pumps and a jacket for a business meeting. Or add a shot of color for a girls’ night out. Do you see what I’m getting at? This color (ochre) is just as versatile and so much more flattering to her than black would be. It enhances her warm skintone and makes her look elegant.
The purple dress is also a winner. The cut is a classic and can be easily dressed up or dressed down. Either one could be a go-to for almost any occasion.

To move beyond the little black dress you want to have alternatives that are versatile and can be worn in a multitude of ways. This means that you want to opt for dresses that are least memorable. Now the color can be bold, but avoid details that pigeonhole it as the dress you wore to the symphony, on Broadway or to your birthday dinner. Sure, there are times when you want a dress that stands out and stands alone, and this is not what beyond the little black dress is all about. I’m talking about finding a workhorse of a dress that makes you look fabulous while being as chameleon-like as your LBD.

When choosing a dress, you want to make sure you choose one that fits and feels great all the time, not just on those days when you’ve lost a few pounds. Having confidence is half the battle and when you have go-to items in your closet that really fit and make you feel great you set yourself up for success.

**Have a Three Way**

*Give your new little dress different looks by using accessories*

Once you have your go-to dress in your best color, whether it’s a neutral or a bright, I want you to see if you can create at least three different looks with it using items you already have. If it’s going to pull it’s weight it’s got to multi-task and we’re going to put it to the test.

For your first look, put it together for a cocktail party or dressy evening out. You may pair it with some beautiful jewelry, a pair of heels and a fabulous clutch, but wear whatever works for you. Be creative
and move beyond the expected. If you always reach for pearls, step outside your comfort zone and opt for diamonds or some dangly chandelier earrings.

For your second look see if you can create a business look, or a not-so-dressy look. Take your dress to a new level by adding platform pumps, a great cardigan and a belt or a fabulous jacket. Some chic jewelry and a mid-sized handbag will get you on the right track.

For your third look, play with it for girls’ night out. Bring in a shot of color, some bold jewelry and some sexy shoes.

In my example to the right I created three looks using one dress that is perfect for travel, taking the wearer from a day of sightseeing to the beach and then out for dinner, drinks and dancing.

See how different you can make your dress look just by changing your accessories. You just may surprise yourself! Oh, and don’t forget to snap a picture of each look so you don’t forget what fabulousness you created.

Smooth Operator

Keep your look flowing with the right undergarments

Choosing the perfect dress for you can be a chore in itself and once it’s done you may breathe a sigh of relief. But your work is not over yet. To complete the look you need to make sure that you create the right foundation for a flawless look.

Your underwear plays a big part in determining how your clothing, especially your dress, will look on you. The right undergarments leave you
Looking fabulous while the wrong ones will have all eyes on you for all the wrong reasons.

Shapewear is your very best friend when it comes to dresses. Every celebrity who walks the red carpet is ensconced in it and you should be too! It doesn’t matter if you’re thin as a rail or a full-figured gal, without the right support you’ll end up looking lumpy and bumpy and ruin the effect of your dress. Shapewear comes in all shapes, sizes and colors, just like women do, so it’s hard to recommend just one item for everyone. My best recommendation is once you’ve selected your dress, take it to your local lingerie boutique or department store and ask for advice. Try it on in the store with multiple items to find which work for you.

Several things I can recommend that all women should do to create a smooth foundation are:

- Get a bra fitting. Our bodies change often, especially if we lose or gain weight, and ensuring that we’re wearing a bra that fits will give us a smooth line under our dresses. If you need a strapless bra the same holds true.

- Avoid VPL. Visible panty lines have ruined many a great dress and if I have anything to say about it they would be banned. Seriously, if you go to the trouble to find a dress that makes you feel fabulous, why would you want everyone to see your panty lines? Spanx makes power panties that eliminate panty lines and create a smooth look without creating a muffin top. Enough said.

Back fat/bra bulges are the bain of a dress’ existence. Avoid them by opting for a longline body shaper or a high-backed bra like the
Unbelievabra. They’ll smooth out your back view while trimming your waistline too.

If you plan to wear tights or pantyhose with your dress, opt for a pair that have added tummy control if you need it. They’ll suck you in while keeping you looking sleek and chic.

Personal Best
You’ve worked hard to find the perfect LBD alternative, now let’s make you look gorgeous!

Ok, you have your LBD alternative and you know how to accessorize it, as well as what to wear underneath it all. Now for the finishing touches. Let’s look at your hair, makeup and other personal features that can help you to look great – or can make your look fall flat.

How’s your hair? Do you have the same style you’ve had since college? If you haven’t changed your hairstyle in a few years, perhaps it’s time for an update. But not just an update, think of it as more of an uplevel. You want to increase your style IQ and having a fabulous hairstyle is going to help you look tres chic.

Changing your hairstyle can be a very personal and emotional process. If you’re not used to change and you like things status quo, it might be uncomfortable for you, or your significant other, to come home with a new ‘do. If you’re ready to make a change you want to determine whether your current hairdresser is the right one for you. If you need to go do someone else, ask friends or even strangers who have great hair who they go to. I get asked all the time who cuts my hair because I make sure to go to someone who does a great job.

How about your hair color? If you’re changing your style it may be time to try a new color or add in some soft highlights to frame your face. It can make a big difference.
Now let’s talk makeup. Many clients that I talk with are challenged by the makeup counter and approach it with fear and dread. Makeup can be fun and doesn’t have to be something that causes stress. What I like to encourage my clients to do is to find a brand they like or would like to know more about. Talk with the staff and have a makeover. Sure, they’ll use a hundred products on you and if you bought them you’d spend a small fortune. But the good news is there is no obligation to buy. Think of it this way – if you’ve never been there before and you feel pressured so you buy everything, only to feel guilt and talk negatively about them to your friends, there’s just a lose-lose. Makeup brands are out to create loyal customers and that’s done through communication. Make sure you state your needs clearly and let them know that you like or don’t like something, or need to think about it. Don’t say you’ll come back it you know you won’t.

If you want to explore multiple brands at once, try Sephora or Ulta. You can have an expert show you how to apply makeup and explain differences between brands, colors, etc. I encourage you to experiment with makeup because it really can help you to look your best while being a lot of fun as well.

How are your teeth? Do you need to have them whitened? Try an at-home whitener such as Crest Whitestrips or other brand. Professional whitening is also very effective, but can be more costly. Do what works for you. It makes a difference.

To add the finishing touch to your dress ensure your finger nails and toenails are kept up. Few things are worse than grungy toenails worn with heels and a nice dress. Take some time out for a manicure and pedicure, or even just a polish change if you’re tight on time or cash.
Looking your best doesn’t have to be a lot of work but it does take some time and planning. With a little forethought you’ll be ready for the endless whirl of holiday parties, soirees and evenings out and will be able to get ready at the drop of a hat!

Here’s to your great style!

Michele Little has just launched her Secrets of Style Inner Circle Program and would love to invite you to enjoy the first month for just $1. Sign up now at [www.onechicmama.com/innercircle](http://www.onechicmama.com/innercircle).

To learn more about Michele Little, Your Signature Stylist, and how she can help you to take your image to the next level, contact her at [michele@onechicmama.com](mailto:michele@onechicmama.com) or 919-828-7529.