

How to Seem Smarter

Learning more helps, but the way you look and talk can make as big a difference.
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Smart people have it good. Sure, they might get pushed around in high school, but once they reach adulthood, they get the biggest paychecks and the Nobel prizes.

This is a problem for the 50 percent of us who are below average in [intelligence](#), but not an insurmountable one. The first step is making other people believe you're smart. Fortunately, researchers of above-average intelligence have discovered the best methods already:

- **Be attractive.**

A multiplicity of studies have shown that people tend to think that good-looking people are smarter than average. This is usually ascribed to what's called the "Halo Effect," the idea that if we hold a positive opinion about one attribute of someone or something, we tend to ascribe all sorts of other positive attributes to them.

- **Dress the part.**

Similarly, dressing well has been shown to convince others that you're more intelligent. In a 2008 [study](#), undergraduate researchers at the University of Wisconsin showed test subjects pictures of a woman dressed either in a tank top and short skirt or a polo shirt and jeans. They found that the same woman, dressed in "preppy" fashions, was judged to be significantly more intelligent than when she was dressed more provocatively. Again, the halo effect may help explain this result. Interestingly, when the woman in the more provocatively-dressed image was said to be enrolled in a predominantly female major—in this case, Early [Childhood](#) Development—she was assumed to be even less intelligent than if subjects were told she was studying a male-dominated subject—in this case, [Sports Management](#). This probably relates to the next point:

- **Be a Man.**

Millennia of accumulated [bias](#) continues to affect how many people estimate the intelligence of men. In 2004, for example, researchers at University College, London asked subjects to estimate the intelligence of their fathers and their mothers. On average, they said that their [fathers were smarter](#), by three IQ points. (They ranked their mothers superior in [emotional intelligence](#).) While men may seem smarter, on average, the reality is that they are not: A 2000 [study](#) found that men actually tested lower, on average, on IQ tests than women. But biases are hard to overcome: Men still tend to overestimate their own intelligence by around 5 IQ points, while women underestimate theirs, on average, by a similar margin.

- **Forget Your IQ.**

The [Downing effect](#) describes the phenomenon first observed by C.L. Downing that people with below-average intelligence tend to think they are above average, and people with above-average intelligence tend to underestimate their smarts. If you're already above average, then, you can better look the part of you follow the next tip.

- **Be confident.**

We are more swayed by people who present their case with confidence than those who actually know what they're talking about. Not only that, but people who *think* that they're smart perform better on academic tests than humbler peers, regardless of whether they're actually gifted or not, according to a [study](#) by Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, a psychologist at Goldsmiths University in London.

- **Get smarter.**

Scientists long assumed that IQ was a fixed [trait](#), but recent research has shown that with practice it's possible to bump up an aspect of mental muscle power called "fluid intelligence." [Susanne Jaeggi](#) at the University of Michigan led a [team](#) that asked test subjects to engage in a video brainteaser exercise for several weeks and found that, after the training, they scored higher on a general test of fluid intelligence. If that technique works, many other kinds of mental exercise might raise our intelligence as well, like, who knows, reading books...?

That's about all I've got for you—trying to be smart is hard and tiring! For more ideas, I suggest that you try asking the nearest genius. You'll recognize them because they'll be good-looking and wearing a polo shirt.