How to Write an Architectural Description

Your professor will ask you to write an architectural description for a selected building. Using your knowledge of terminology learned throughout your experience as a historic preservation student, primarily from 105, you will use a basic writing structure outlined in Camille Wells’ essay, “Writing An Architectural Description” to detail a building comprehensively. Each professor’s expectations and class in which you will be asked to write an Architectural Description will be slightly different; however, this handout should help to break down the basic steps.

Note that the following is a description of the information contained in the paper and the general order it should be presented in; it does not necessarily denote paragraphs.

Basic Identification

- Start with a building’s “Basic Identification.” This step serves as an introduction, though no formal introductory paragraph or thesis statement will be in an architectural description.

  **State:**
  - The building name
  - Location
  - Compass direction(s): typically of the primary [elevation]

Summary Description

- This next section allows your reader to visualize the structure you are describing. Note that this is in the same paragraph as the basic identification. Be broad and brief here.

  **State:**
  - The building's function (Use present tense)
  - Date of construction (You can be approximate or specific; how much do you know about the building?)
  - The building’s form/shape (Use HISP vocabulary)
  - Number of stories/style
  - Condition
Site

- Always use compass directions when writing about orientation; never left and right or front and back. This prevents the orientation from changing with your (or your reader’s) point of view.

**Describe:**
- The setting/surroundings of your building
- Features: Including topography, watercourses, fences, roads, etc.
- Other Buildings: Name them and mention their placement. If you mean to describe them in detail, do that after you have finished with the principal structure.

Exterior

- Detail a building from the ground up; start with the first/ground floor and move up the facade of the primary elevation.

**Describe:**
- Foundation: Material, height, openings, any additional details
- Structural System: How do the walls stand up? Are they framed in wood or in masonry? Mention the characteristics of the system here.
- Wall Finish: Wall sheathing; weatherboards or stucco, brick, and details, such as quoins, belt courses, or pilasters.
- Appendages: Describe the materials and location of porches, stoops, balconies, and bulkheads.
- Chimneys: Mention the number, location, and construction material of the chimneys.
- Doors and Doorways: Locations and embellishments, trim of the surround, design of the door, presence of a transom or sidelights
- Windows: What is the pattern of fenestration?
  - Are the windows glazed with double-hung sash or fixed panels?
  - Are they set in wood or metal?
  - How many lights (individual panes of glass) are there?
  - What do the shutters or blinds look like?
- Roof: Mention its shape, hip or gable, etc., and structural system. The material of the roof also goes here.
  - Roof Details: Describe the treatment of the cornice and any dormers, cupolas, or towers.
- Other Features: Include any other interesting details you see: lightning rods, guttering, built-on benches, or covered access to an outbuilding are all relevant to your record.