



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**

Speaking and Writing Center [1]: More in depth descriptions may ask you to describe the interior of a building as well.

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

Speaking and Writing Center [2]: The year of your building can be dated in a variety of ways. Deed research can give you the most accurate date; if you cannot gather this information from deed research, you can use an approximate date using "circa" or its abbreviation, "ca."



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.

Speaking and Writing Center [3]:
Example: "The brick has a Flemish bond."
Example: "The roof is supported by a king post truss."