

Architectural Description Template

When writing an architectural description, it is important to focus on the construction, form, features, and finishes that exist today, rather than a building's historic appearance. If current elements of the building are modern alterations to its historic appearance, then this should be noted. Similarly, information about the building's history should only be included if it is directly relevant to the substance of the architectural description. For example, the known location of the quarry from which the foundation stones were cut is relevant. The historic relationship of the subject building to another constructed outside the community by the same builder is not directly relevant to the architectural description, but is more appropriately included in the historic narrative.

Architectural descriptions qualify as a type of technical writing, and their clarity depends heavily on organization. An architectural description that is jumbled can be very confusing and counter-productive. Remember that the goal (if not always the result) is for the reader to envision the property's overall design and appearance from the description alone, without benefit of the photos. The following format may help achieve this goal. Note that after description of the façade, the elevations should be referred to by their direction.

[Name] House, circa date, contributing

Summary and setting paragraph

- Is it in a rural or built-up area? If built-up, is it a neighborhood or commercial district? What is a rough date range into which the surrounding development might fit?
- Does the primary structure sit close to the street or at a distance? Does it face the street? If not, does it face any historic or landscape features (in other words, has its orientation changed as a result of the changing landscape)?
- Is there a driveway or other entrance onto the property?
- Is the property wooded or open? Is there any historic landscaping or are there landscape features of note?
- Are there any outbuildings? If so, are they predominantly historic or non-historic? Roughly where are they located relative to the primary structure (ex. four outbuildings clustered together to the rear of the house).

Overview paragraph

- Height
- Form, massing, bays wide
- Architectural style
- Construction (ex. frame, load-bearing masonry, frame with masonry veneer)
- Dominant exterior materials (ex. wood clapboard, 6-to-1 American bond brick)
- Foundation materials
- Roof form and cladding
- Location of porches
- Location of chimneys
- Overall characteristics of the trim and window/door surrounds
- If windows are historic, are they generally of a specific type (ex. double-hung 4/4 wood windows) or if they are replaced, state roughly when the replacement occurred
- General location and characteristics of any additions

Façade

- Location of entrance and position of windows
- Porch details
- Specific information about trim, if applicable
- Notable details
- Any specific alterations and their dates

[Direction] (side) elevation

- Location of and specific information on windows if they differ from description in overview paragraph
- Notable details that differentiate this elevation from the others
- Any specific alterations and their dates

[Direction] (rear) elevation

- Location of and specific information on windows if they differ from description in overview paragraph
- Notable details that differentiate this elevation from the others
- Any specific alterations and their dates

[Direction] (side) elevation

- Location of and specific information on windows if they differ from description in overview paragraph
- Notable details that differentiate this elevation from the others
- Any specific alterations and their dates

Outbuilding, circa date, contributing or non-contributing

- Height, building form and construction, exterior materials, foundation type and materials, roof form and cladding.
- Information on doors and windows (location, type, materials)
- Trim and notable features
- Alterations, if any, and dates

Repeat the Outbuilding format for each secondary or ancillary building or structure on the property.