When you are writing an architectural description you are painting a word picture. This picture must be clear enough for someone who has never seen the building to accurately envision it without first seeing a picture. The first step to writing a good clear description is to train your eye to see clearly and notice details. The second is to organize your thoughts so that the reader gets a general impression first and then can mentally begin to add the details. An architectural description is written in the present—observations are what you see, not your experience with the building or its condition. Architectural descriptions should identify materials, construction details, alterations and workmanship. Finally, it is essential to edit your description so it is clear, non-repetitive, and complete.

Cluster your observations in paragraphs that have topic sentences and a logical structure. This is impossible to over-state. You are writing for a reader. A series of run-on thoughts that constantly shift from overall to very particular is unnecessarily difficult to read. You have been composing sentences and organizing thoughts almost your entire life, so do it well. If you find organizing what you want to say difficult take advantage of the assistance of the Writing Center. All the people of the writing center are excellent. Ellen Peiser is especially useful because she has had experience with historic preservation writing.

There is a whole vocabulary of architectural terms and virtually every element has its own name. The use of correct terminology can make your description clear and complete, but if you see a feature that you can’t find the architectural term then every day words will serve you well. Avoid [don’t use] architectural style as a descriptive feature. There are no “Georgian windows” but the details of windows in a building (say muntin width) may be evidence of Georgian style.

Let’s go through possible paragraphs for your paper. An architectural starts with the summary statement, there is no summary at the end.

1st paragraph: Approach the building from the street. Begin an architectural description with the address of the property and its use. Give a compass direction the building is facing and how it sits on the lot (e.g. "northwest corner of Lot 8"). Use cardinal compass points (north, east, south, and west) to describe the general direction the side ("facade") of the building you are describing. Don’t be overly precise. There is a place for the giving the orientation in degrees, minutes, and seconds but the first paragraph of the architectural description is not that place. Once you have described the setting of the building describe the general features of the building; the shape or ground plan, the number of stories, and the orientation of the roof and locations of chimneys, and the dominant building material (usually of the walls). At the end of this first paragraph (and only here) state the architectural style you believe best fits the building and the primary features that support you conclusion.

2nd paragraph: Describe the materials of each component (foundation, walls, roof) and any decorative details of the junction of these components. Always talk about larger features first then move to the details. A tower on a building would be described here as would symmetrical wings on a building that complete a compositional ensemble. If the walls or foundation are built of bricks what is the bond pattern, are there stone quoins at the corner? Does the wall step out at the cornice, or are there brackets, modillions, or dentils in the cornice?

3rd paragraph: Describe the windows and doors by characterizing the features, including any framing elements around the openings. If all the windows are the same except in the foundation, then first describe the most common form and then describe the exceptions. Are there stone lintels, or brick relieving arches above the openings, shutters, or other details of the windows and doors? Do the arches have keystones? When describing the door(s) are there windows (transoms and side-lights) that surround the door itself?

4th paragraph: Describe the additions or projections from the building. But if you can’t see it, don’t describe it. Is there a stoop with steps, or is there a portico? First describe the feature and its location and then describe the materials, or texture and decoration of the addition. Describe any other features of the architecture that you see, but haven’t mentioned.

Your description should contain answers to the following questions:

What is its setting or the surroundings of the building? Residential, Commercial. How does the building set on the property, at the edge of the side walk, aligned with the other buildings on the street, or perhaps set on the middle of the property.

Does the building use architectural elements to associate its form with a particular antecedent? Is the association classical, Renaissance, or another historic association?
How many stories does it have? In the USA a foundation is not a story, dormer windows indicate a half-story. What is the ground plan of the building? Is it square, rectangular, L-plan, or T-plan? What are the structural materials (wood frame, concrete block, etc.)? For the purposes of this assignment consider what you see on the exterior as the structural system. If the walls are stone, the building is stone, if brick then consider the massing brick; if horizontal lapped siding consider the structure wood. What is the siding treatment of the building? If stone, is it ashlar, free stone, or cobble; if brick, what is the bond; if horizontal siding is it molded at the exposed edge, drop siding, shingled? What is the material of the foundation? What type and orientation of the roof, and what materials are used on the roof? Does the building have dormers, are there windows in the dormers? What type of windows does the building have? Recall that windows are described by the number of pieces of glass in each sash. Where are they located on the building? What trim (if any) was used around the windows? What kind of doors does the building have and where are they? What other kinds of features does the building have, such as porches or chimneys? Are there any other features of the facade that you haven't mentioned?

**What the architectural description is not**

Do not relate the history of property or its supposed association with transcendent dead folks. You may identify a building by a former occupant because that is the common name of the building—The Mary Washington House, or Kenmore—but don’t (I mean do not) relate the association of the property with the Mother of Washington, the last meeting of the mother and son in this building, or the purchase, restoration, and adaptation as a shrine of the building. In addition almost every building we are using has one or more plaque giving a date of construction. Beyond the obvious reason to not quote the inscription, avoiding plagiarizing information without attribution don’t mention the contents of the plaque at all—BECAUSE MOST ARE WRONG.

The description is your work, but never start your architectural description by referring to yourself. An unhappy choice would be something similar to “For my second assignment I was told to describe the Mary Washington House at 1300 Charles Street.” Put your ego in your pocket for this assignment.

The corollary to this impersonal, third person approach is to avoid tell about your experience with the building:

- I couldn’t see the roof = the building has a low pitch roof.
- I couldn’t see the foundation = the building has a low foundation.
- I couldn’t tell whether the building has weatherboard or clapboard = the building has horizontal lap siding.

As part of your editing process use your find command [ctrl + F] and look for every “I” to insure that your ego hasn’t slipped in unrecognized.

Don’t write about what the building or its features do not have. If the transom window above a door does not have tracery, describe the transom window by its form “a rectangular four light transom”.

The other pitfall of careless writing is to unconsciously evaluate the building or its features. There is an ever expanding list of words that would appear to describe the building or its features, but subtly give your feeling (or anxiety) about the feature. These terms of appreciation may have their place, but not in architectural description.

**Terms of ambiguity and lack of precision**

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Avoid words that are evaluations using your own values.

I assume          | plain       | modern  |
beautiful         | simple      | perfectly|
elaborate         | graceful    | quaint   |
I guess            | complicated | unique   |

1Thanks to Kasey Mayer for making this writing better by commenting on an earlier version.