
How to Write a Building Description

If you had to describe something to someone who had no access to photographs but needed to create a drawing of what **you** are seeing, how would you describe it? Would you give the overall, basic shape first and then describe the details? Perhaps you would even organize your description into separate parts and talk about each part separately. You might even describe something from left to right or top to bottom. This is essentially how we write building or other historic resource descriptions. Photographs can provide a lot of information, but they are no substitute for the details a human can pick up and identify in person. Materials, craftsmanship, design or decorative detailing, spatial arrangements, form, and massing all contribute to the unique character of an historic resource. These details, which are often referred to as “character-defining,” help to convey the historic significance of the property.

An accurate, well-organized physical description of an historic resource is a necessary component of [National Register nominations](#) and other types of reports and forms required by the [State Historic Preservation Office](#), such as the [Iowa Site Inventory form](#). Documenting the physical aspects of an historic resource via a written description helps others to understand its significance and provides a guide to what materials and features are important to protect and maintain so its historic integrity remains intact for future generations. The National Park Service has an excellent Preservation Brief on [how to identify the architectural character of a building](#) as well as an interactive [tool that walks you step-by-step](#) through the process of identifying a building’s key features.

Gathering Information

Prior to writing a description for an historic resource, you need to gather information about its physical features. Be sure that you have permission from the property owner if you need access to a property you do not own or is not public. If you do not have permission, only record what you can see from the public right-of-way (e.g. road). If evaluating a resource for individual listing in the National Register, an interior description will be needed as well if it is a building or a structure.

It is often helpful to first complete some background research to find out when the resource was built, who were the original owners, the name of the architect, and what it was used for. Then proceed to document its physical characteristics. First, look at the resource from a distance to gather general information, such as form, materials, roof shape, openings, and projections. Next, turn your attention to the details, such as types of windows and doors and decorative details. The following questions will help you to capture all of the information you might need to describe a building. Most of these questions can be adapted to other types of resources, such as structures, sites, and objects. Skip any questions that do not apply to the resource you are describing.

1. What are the historic and current names of the resource?
2. What is the exact location of the resource?
3. Is this resource in an historic district or previously-surveyed area?

4. What is its current use? What was its historic use?
5. When was it constructed or, in the case of a landscape or archaeological site, when did historical activities occur?
6. Who was the architect, builder, or creator?
7. What type of setting is this resource in?
8. What is the topography of the area, including natural and artificial features? How do these features physically relate to the resource?
9. What direction is the resource orientated to? If it is a building, look for the primary façade to determine orientation. The primary façade is usually where the main entrance is located if it is a building or structure.
10. How many stories?
11. What is the shape of the overall footprint?
12. What shape is the roof?
13. What is the method of construction and what materials were used to construct the resource? For a building or structure, for example, be sure to record materials for the foundation, exterior walls, and roof. Only record what you can see from the outside.
14. How many bays (window and door openings) are found at the first floor level on the façade and side elevations?
15. What types of windows and doors are present and how are they arranged?
16. Where are the entrances located?
17. What other decorative features or design details are present?
18. Are there any chimneys? If so, where are they located?
19. Are there any wings, ells, or porches?
20. Are there any alterations or additions? If so, what is the approximate date of those changes?
21. If it is a building or a designed landscape, what style does it seem to be?
22. Are there any outbuildings or other associated structures, objects, or sites?
23. Any alterations? If so, what is the approximate date?
24. Interior (if needed) – Record the following:
 - Layout of rooms on all floors, including basement (if applicable).
 - Description of woodwork, wall/ceiling material, floors, doors, built-in cabinetry, fireplace surrounds, and any other important architectural features. Be sure to record all design details, even if they are plain. Describing woodwork as “ornate,” for example is not acceptable.

When documenting an historic resource, it is helpful to create or use an inventory form to allow for a quick, organized capture of information when you are onsite, especially if you are surveying more than one or two buildings at a time. Inventory forms can be customized to the type of resource you are surveying. The following sample inventory form may provide some ideas.

Basic Information

- 1. Historic name _____
- 2. Current name _____
- 3. District/Area _____
- 4. Address _____
- 5. City _____
- 6. County _____
- 7. Current use(s) _____
- 8. Historic use(s) _____
- 9. Architect/Bldr _____
- 10. Built date _____

Exterior Features (cont.)

- 27. Chimney(s) _____
- 28. Wing(s) or ell(s) _____
- 29. Addition(s) _____
- 30. Alteration(s) _____

Setting and Landscape

- 11. Setting Type _____
- 12. Features _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- 13. Vegetation _____
- _____
- _____
- 14. Outbuildings _____
- _____
- _____

Interior Features (if applicable)

- 31. Floorplan _____
- _____
- _____
- 32. Flooring _____
- 33. Walls/ceilings _____
- 34. Woodwork _____
- _____
- 35. Doors _____
- _____
- 36. Cabinetry _____
- _____

Exterior Features

- 15. Style _____
- 16. Orientation _____
- 17. # Stories _____
- 18. # Bays _____
- 18. Roof type _____
- 19. Construction Method _____
- 20. Foundation _____
- 21. Wall cladding _____
- 22. Roof sheathing _____
- 23. Primary entrance _____
- 24. Other entrances _____
- 25. Door type(s) _____
- 26. Window type(s) _____

Notes/Other Details:

Sample inventory form.

Let's use this house as an example. It is a pretty typical late 19th century house in a small Iowa town that was founded in 1881. It has seen several changes since it was originally constructed.



1. What are the historic and current names of the resource?

The historic name is usually based on the name of the original owner of a building, though sometimes if there was a later owner who was more historically significant it will be based on that person's name. To find the current owner, check the county assessor's website. If it belongs to a married or partnered couple, use the names of both. Example: the John and Jane Doe House.

2. What is the exact location of the resource?

Use the physical/street address for location of property, if available.

If not available, such as with a bridge, use a description of the location based upon roads and important landmarks, such as a river. Example: Fourth Street over the Anytown River between 6th and 7th Avenue.

3. Is this resource in an historic district or previously-surveyed area?

To answer this question, some basic research will be required. For this property, the answer is no.

4. What is its current use? What was its historic use?

Residential.

5. When was this resource constructed?

Based on research, this house was constructed in 1896.

6. Who was the architect, builder, or creator?

This will need to be based on research, but for many simpler houses such as this, we may not be able to find this information. In the case of this house, the builder or architect is unknown.

7. What type of setting is this resource in?

Small town in a rural, farming area. There are only two houses on this block. Blocks are irregularly sized throughout town and this is one of the smaller blocks. There is a mixture of other types of

houses in the area, including mid-20th century all the way back to c. 1900. For example, you can see a 1950s ranch off to the right in the photo.

8. What is the topography of the area, including natural and artificial features? How do these features physically relate to the resource?

House sits on a shallowly east-to-west-sloping piece of land. It sits on the eastern half of the lot. There are two medium-sized trees in front on either side of a sidewalk that leads up to the entrance. There is a much larger tree off to the right. All three trees are maples. A concrete driveway slopes down to the street from the garage and a concrete sidewalk leads to the front door. There is a small, rectangular garden in the front, which is roughly centered on the façade.

9. What direction is the resource orientated to? If it is a building, look for the primary façade to determine orientation. The primary façade is usually where the main entrance is located.

In this case, the façade faces south.

10. If a building, how many stories?

Two stories.

11. What is the shape of the overall footprint?

Roughly rectangular.

12. What shape is the roof?

This is a cross gable roof, which is where two or more gable¹ rooflines intersect or cross one another. Here, the center portion of the house projects forward and is “gable front.” The main body of the house behind this has the gables on the sides with one eave side facing front.

There are also two smaller cross gables on the façade – one to either side of the centered, gable-front projection. Though these may resemble dormers, they do not have “cheek walls,” which are the side walls one usually sees on either side of a dormer.

13. What is the method of construction and what materials were used to construct the resource? For a building or structure, for example, be sure to record materials for the foundation, exterior walls, and roof, only recording what you can see from the outside.

Wood frame construction. This house also has a concrete block foundation, steel siding, and composite shingles on the roof.

14. How many bays (window and door openings) are found at the first floor level on the façade and side elevations?

This is a five-bay by three-bay building.

15. What types of windows and doors are present and how are they arranged?

Windows are double-hung steel. There are contemporary, metal screen doors shielding contemporary exterior doors. The primary entrance has a moulded, two “panel” profile with an oval window. The secondary entrances have plain-front, contemporary exterior doors.

The windows and doors are mostly regularly spaced with some off-setting occurring between the first and second floors.

¹ A “gable” is the triangular portion of the wall that is formed by two roof planes sloping down from a central ridge or high point.

16. Where are the entrances located?

The primary entrance (front door) is off-center through the inset porch to the west. A secondary entrance is located on the east side of the façade. There is also another entrance at the back of the house through the addition (not pictured here).

17. What other decorative features or design details are present?

This house is pretty plain other than some contemporary decorative, metal scrollwork posts on the front porch.²

18. Are there any chimneys? If so, where are they located?

No chimneys.

19. Are there any wings, ells, or porches?

There is an inset, one-story porch on the western third of the façade, tucked into the corner where the centered, gable-front portion projects forward. It has a shed roof, metal railings with open scrollwork, and a wood deck floor sitting on a concrete block base. Two concrete steps lead up to it from the sidewalk.

20. Are there any additions? If so, what is the approximate date?

Not pictured here, but on the rear (north elevation) there is a one-story, two-bay by one-bay addition with a gable-front roof. It is covered in the same steel siding as the main body of the house. It appears to have been built during the mid-20th century.

21. What style does it seem to be?

This is probably one of those late 19th Century or Late Victorian “vernacular” houses without any particular style.³

22. Are there any outbuildings or other associated structures, objects, or sites?

There is a single story, square, gable-front, two-car garage with a pedestrian door to the east of the garage doors. It sits on a concrete block foundation and is capped by a composition shingles.

23. Any alterations? If so, what is the approximate date?

Steel siding, concrete block foundation, and windows are replacements and appear to date to the last quarter of the 20th century, c. 1985.

² Given its era of construction, there may or may not have been more architectural embellishments at one time, but we should not worry about what “used to be” present. Only focus on what is currently present.

³ Vernacular simply means that a resource reflects local building traditions and was designed based on function, needs, and local availability of materials and craftsmen. Embellishments, if present, and forms may be influenced by architectural trends of the time period in which it was constructed, but they are usually simpler in design and used sparingly compared to “high style” examples.

Putting It All Together

As previously mentioned, a building description should be able to provide enough detail that would allow someone who has never seen the building to create a basic drawing of it. It should also be well-organized with a logical structure and discuss overall shape and massing (including number of stories, if applicable), building materials and how they are assembled, and locations and designs of architectural/historical features. It is best to begin with a general, physical description of the resource plus its setting. Then break down the resource into discrete areas and describe each area with more detail. In the case of a building or certain types of structures, for example, this is most easily accomplished by describing the façade first, from the bottom up, and then describing each remaining elevation in turn in the same manner.

The level of detail needed for a building description varies based on the nature of the report. Descriptions for surveys of a large number of resources or contributing and noncontributing resources in historic districts, for example, will require less detail than those for individually-eligible National Register nominations. Often the description of a resource in an historic district may contain no more than a paragraph or even a few sentences of information.

Architectural terms can sometimes be tricky to master, but there are wonderful resources available that can guide you, such as [A Field Guide to American Houses: The Definitive Guide to Understanding America's Domestic Architecture](#) by Virginia Savage McAlester and [Illustrated Dictionary of Historic Architecture](#) by Cyril M. Harris. Other sources are available online, such as the Trust for Architectural Easement's ["Glossary of Architectural Terms."](#)

Here is an example of a description of the house for which we just answered the questions. In order to illustrate how to break down the narrative, a label for each section appears to the left:

INTRODUCTION AND SETTING

The John and Jane Doe House at 123 Main Street sits on a hill on the eastern side of a grass-covered lot in Anytown, Iowa, at the northwestern corner of Main Street and Smith Road. The surrounding residential neighborhood features late 19th to mid-20th century single family homes with varying setbacks and somewhat irregular spacing. Most lots contain mature trees in both the front and back of houses, much like this one.

OVERALL DESCRIPTION

This five-bay by three-bay, cross-gable, two-story house constructed in a vernacular style in 1896, sits on a concrete block foundation, is wrapped in steel siding, and is capped by a composition-shingle-covered roof. The centered gable-front portion projects forward from the side-gabled main body of the house and two smaller cross gables pierce the eave to either side. Windows and doors are spaced mostly regularly throughout, though the second story is offset from the first and a window appears in each gable peak. All windows are double-hung steel, which are not original to the house, but the openings in which they sit have the same shape and size one would expect in a house of this age. The foundation, siding, and windows all appear to date to c. 1985.

FAÇADE DESCRIPTION (ELEVATION 1)

The gable-front portion on the south-facing façade projects forward from the main body of the house. To the west of this, tucked into the corner where the gable-front portion meets the eave-front, main body of the house, is a single-story porch that shelters the primary entrance. It

features a shed roof, contemporary metal posts with open scrollwork, and a wooden deck floor. Two concrete steps lead up to it from the sidewalk. A contemporary, metal storm door covers the exterior door, which features a moulded, two “panel” profile with an oval window. On the eastern third of the façade on the other side of the large, front gable is a one-story enclosed space with a shed roof tucked into the corner in a similar manner as the open porch. This houses a secondary entrance with a plain, contemporary exterior door covered by a metal storm door.

**ELEVATION 2
DESCRIPTION**

The east elevation fronts Smith Road and features three windows on the first floor with another centered in the peak of the side gable.

**ELEVATION 3
DESCRIPTION**

The north elevation looks out onto the deep backyard with a line of immature pines fronting Adams Street at the northern boundary of the property. The gable peak has one window. A one-story, two-bay by one-bay, gable front addition is set off-center along the north elevation. An off-center secondary entrance with a contemporary steel screen door and plain exterior door provides access into the house. A set of two concrete steps leading up to a concrete pad provides access to this door.

**ELEVATION 4
DESCRIPTION**

The west elevation features three regularly spaced windows at the first floor level and one window in the side gable peak at the second floor.

OTHER DETAILS

A wide, two-stall, one story, gable-front garage with a side pedestrian door to the east sits west of the house. It appears to date to c. 1985. A concrete driveway slopes downhill toward the street from the garage.

Here is another example of a different house that might be appropriate for an historic district or other similar type of survey, which does not need to be as detailed as that of an individual building being evaluated or nominated for the National Register.

**INTRODUCTION AND
SETTING**

The Jones House (123 Main Street) sits on a flat, rectangular lot covered with turf and bordered along the western boundary by a line of large, coniferous trees in a residential neighborhood. It is a two-story, three-

OVERALL DESCRIPTION

bay-by-three-bay, c. 1840 Greek Revival style brick house sitting on a rubble stone foundation and capped by a low-pitched, hipped roof clad in composition shingles and pierced at each of the four corners by brick chimneys. A small, 1-½-story, one-bay-by-three-bay wing with a gable roof extends from the rear, west elevation. Fenestration is regular on all elevations. The primary entrance is found on the east façade, facing Main Street. It features a centered, four-panel wood door, which is flanked by three-quarter sidelights and is sheltered by a small one-story, elevated porch. The porch is capped by a pedimented gable roof that is supported by four Corinthian-style columns. To either side of the porch on the first story are six-over-six, wooden double hung windows (c. 1920

**FAÇADE DESCRIPTION
(ELEVATION 1)**

replacements). The second story features similar windows with one each directly above the first floor windows and primary entrance. The north and south elevations feature a similar fenestration arrangement as the

OTHER DETAILS

east façade, but with simplified porches sheltering secondary entrances and featuring shed roofs supported by chamfered posts and plain brackets.

For a National Register nomination of an individually eligible building, the description needs additional details, especially if the building, structure, site, or object is particularly complex. Here is an example from the nomination of a building currently in the National Register:

INTRODUCTION AND SETTING

Located in East Central Iowa in Tama County, the First United Brethren Church sits at the northeast corner of the junction of High Street and Church Street in Toledo. The building is sited on an irregular, grass-covered rectangular lot at the corner of High Street and Church Street near the edge of Toledo’s main commercial district that runs along High Street for approximately three city blocks. To the north and east of the church, the streetscape turns residential with single-family houses, dating from the late 19th century up to the 1940s, set at regular intervals with common setbacks. Concrete sidewalks edge the property along High Street to the south and Church Street to the west where there is also a small lot of angled street parking with about a dozen available spaces. One large ash tree occupies a space just east of the main church building.

OVERALL DESCRIPTION

The church is a roughly symmetrical, cross-shaped five-bay by ten-bay, two-story building built in the Streamlined Classical style in 1946. Load-bearing, hollow clay tile construction is clad in brick of multiple colors and rests upon a concrete block foundation. It is topped by a rolled asphalt-covered flat roof with metal-capped parapet and is pierced near the northeast corner along the east elevation by a metal-capped chimney stack. Fenestration is mostly regular on the south, west, and east elevations, and irregular on the north with mostly wooden double-hung windows, plain wooden surrounds, plain limestone sills with drip grooves, and wood storm windows.

FAÇADE DESCRIPTION (ELEVATION 1)

The main façade faces High Street to the south and features a centered, primary entrance with a six-light rectangular transom containing stained glass above a set of contemporary steel double doors with clear inset glass. The entrance is encased by a limestone surround with fluted pilasters along each side and is topped with a recessed limestone panel inscribed with the words “United Brethren Church.” Concrete steps flanked by brick half-walls capped by concrete railings arise from the sidewalk along High Street up to the landing in front of the primary entrance. A c. 1985, concrete ramp with a painted metal railing runs parallel along the façade east of the entrance to the landing in order to provide alternative access. Windows are aligned in vertical bands with smooth, rectangular limestone spandrels along either side of the entrance and feature leaded “opalescent” glass in an Art Deco style pattern.

ELEVATION 2 DESCRIPTION

The land slopes downhill in a northerly direction along the west elevation, revealing a semi-basement level. This elevation features three distinct wall planes with a central projection and two inset wall planes to either side,

north and south. The northerly section's roofline sits a half-story lower than the rest of the building and houses an interior stairwell. A secondary entrance can be found here at ground level and features a contemporary steel exterior door with a single clear glass light and concrete steps. Fenestration is irregular in this section. The lower level window contains clear textured glass and the upper level windows contain solid sheets of "opalescent" glass. The central section of this elevation projects outward and at the first floor level contains five, two-story-high, leaded stained glass windows. These windows light the interior nave of the church and each contains a different pictorial medallion featuring a Biblical scene. Five double-hung windows with clear textured glass sit just below to light the basement. The southerly section of this elevation contains leaded stained glass windows arranged in groups of three horizontally and aligned vertically in bands separated by soldier courses of brick.

**ELEVATION 3
DESCRIPTION**

The north elevation features another secondary entrance at the semi-basement level that can be reached by a set of concrete steps extending down from the ground level. The four panel wood door features a plain wood surround. The lower level window contains clear textured glass and the upper level windows contain solid sheets of stained glass.

**ELEVATION 4
DESCRIPTION**

The east elevation features two vertical wall planes. The southern section contains leaded stained glass windows arranged in groups of three horizontally and aligned vertically in bands separated by soldier courses of brick. The northern section, which houses the nave, projects outward and at the first floor level contains five, two-story-high, leaded stained glass windows similar to those on the west elevation projection.

ADDITION DESCRIPTION

To the north of these windows on the church's east elevation is a one-story, one bay by one bay wing that serves as a passageway leading from the interior of the church to the 1959 education wing addition to the east. It is a four bay by two bay, one-story concrete block building clad in multi-colored brick of similar hues as the church. It sits on a concrete slab and is topped by a rolled asphalt-covered flat roof with metal-capped parapets. Fenestration is regular throughout with aluminum double, three-light louvered windows. These windows are set in vertically-oriented bands with paneled limestone spandrels featuring rabbet edging that extend above to the roofline and below to the egress windows of the basement level on all elevations except the north.

Additional Guidance

Often it is helpful to read other National Register nominations in order to gain a better understanding about the organization and important details that should be included in your description. The National Park Service has many [examples of nominations from several different types of historic resources](#) for you to follow. Additionally, the University of Vermont's graduate program in historic preservation provides a [great primer on how to tackle building descriptions](#).

Resources for determining architectural style and those styles that may have influenced a vernacular resource can be found both on the internet and in book form, often available at local libraries. A few suggestions are below:

- [*A Field Guide to American Houses: The Definitive Guide to Understanding America's Domestic Architecture*](#) by Virginia Savage McAlester
- [*American House Styles: A Concise Guide*](#) by John Milnes Baker
- [*"What Style is Your House?"*](#) by the Iowa Architectural Foundation
- [*"Architectural Styles Categories"*](#) by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission

Questions?

Contact nationalregister@iowa.gov or 515-281-5111.