

Tips for Writing a Winning Essay, 2025

Before you start researching a specific house, be sure you've reviewed the town's history so that you'll be able to put your house's story in context. You may also change your mind about your house selection once you're introduced to the history of Riverton houses generally. The National Register (NRHP) application is a great first step in deciding which house you'll write about. It also contains some basic information about construction dates, original owners, and architectural styles that will direct you to more in-depth research:

<https://rivertonhistory.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Historic-Riverton-District-app-1999.pdf>

As you're reading about the town, from its founding until the middle of the 20th century, note what else was happening when your house was built. The town was planned in 1851 and was extended after that in a number of phases. How does your house fit into this development history? You might also take a look at the book *Historic Riverton: Notable Architecture, People and Events 1775 – 1930* available at the Riverton Library.

After you've selected your house, learn about its architectural style. This may be included in the NHRP application, but you might also be able to identify it yourself. Online style guides are not always accurate. This overview by an architecture firm focused on restoring old houses is a good introduction: <https://www.rtastudio.com/2019/12/american-house-styles/>. Virginia and Lee McAlester's *Field Guide to American Houses* is generally considered to be the definitive guide to the subject. In your essay, you'll need to describe the house and a guide will give you the right vocabulary to do this.

Once you've described your house and the context in which it was built, get to know who lived there. If you choose one of the older houses in town, the NHRP application may list the name of the first owners. If your house is newer or more modest, you may have to search deeds. Long-time HSR volunteer Pat Solin prepared a guide to researching your old Riverton house that appears on our website (<https://rivertonhistory.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Research-Tips-24-May-2022.pdf>). This includes directions for searching deeds and other tips for filling out the story of the Riverton house you're researching.

Once you know who the original owner was, you can search U.S. Census records to find out more about the family such as: what its members did for a living, their ages, who their neighbors were, and if they had any servants. FamilySearch.org is a free online resource including census records from 1850 until 1950.

Be sure to gather this information before you start writing. If you start researching a newer or more modest house and don't feel like you have enough information to write a decent essay, consider writing about an older house with owners named in the NHRP application. Some of these may have white plaques by their doors with their construction dates.

Winning essays provide details. When you're describing your house and the story of its residents, be as specific as possible. You may include photos in your essay to help explain its architectural style or elements of its story.

Good luck!