Bottom of Form

The White House Colonnade, Pathway to the Oval Office of the US President. Photo by Brooks Kraft LLC / Corbis News / Getty Images (cropped)

by Jackie Craven

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In architecture, a column is an upright pillar or post. Columns may support a roof or a beam, or they can be purely decorative. A row of columns is called a *colonnade*. Classical columns have distinctive capitals, shafts, and bases.

Some people, including the 18th century Jesuit scholar Marc-Antoine Laugier, suggest that the column is one of the essential elements of architecture. Laugier theorizes that primitive man required only three architectural elements to build a shelter — the column, entablature, and the pediment. These are the basic elements of what has become known as the [Primitive Hut](https://www.thoughtco.com/primitive-hut-essentials-of-architecture-178084), from which all architecture is derived.

**Where does the word come from?**

Like many of our English-language words, *column* originates from Greek and Latin words. The Greek *kolophōn*, meaning a summit or hill, was where temples were built in places like [Colophon,](https://www.thoughtco.com/miletus-greek-history-119714) an ancient Ionian Greek city. The Latin word *columna* further describes the elongated shape we associate with the word column. Even today when we speak of "newspaper columns" or"spreadsheet columns," or even "spinal columns," the geometry is the same — longer than wide, slender, and vertical. in publishing — the distinctive mark of the publisher, much like a sports team may have an associated symbolic mark — comes from the same Greek origin. The architecture of ancient Greece was distinctive and remains so today.

Imagine living in an ancient time, perhaps in [BC](https://www.thoughtco.com/a-d-anno-domini-1788306) when civilization began, and you are asked to describe the grand, stone projections you see high on a hill. The words that describe what architects call "the built environment" usually come well after the structures are built, and words are often inadequate descriptors of grand visual designs.

**The Classical Column**

[](https://www.thoughtco.com/another-look-at-types-of-columns-177524)The ideas of columns in Western civilizations come from the Classical architecture of Greece and Rome. Classical columns were first described by an architect named Vitruvius (c. 70-15 BC). Further descriptions were written in the late 1500s by the [Italian Renaissance](https://www.thoughtco.com/the-renaissance-182382) architect Giacomo da Vignola. He described the [Classical Order of Architecture](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-an-order-of-architecture-177516), a history of the columns and entablatures used in Greece and Rome. Vignola described five basic designs:

* **Greek Columns and Entablature:**
  + [Doric](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-a-doric-column-177508)
  + [Ionic](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-an-ionic-column-177515)
  + [Corinthian](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-a-corinthian-column-177504)
* **Roman Columns and Entablature:**
  + [Tuscan](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-a-tuscan-column-177523)
  + [Composite](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-a-composite-column-177503)

Classical columns traditionally have three main parts:

1. **The base.** Most columns (except the early Doric) rest on a round or square base, sometimes called a **plinth.**
2. **The shaft.** The main part of the column, the shaft, may be smooth, fluted (grooved), or carved with designs.
3. **The capital.** The top of the column may be simple or elaborately decorated.

The capital of the column supports the upper portion of a building, called the [entablature.](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-an-entablature-3953692) The design of the column and entablature together determine the Classical Order of Architecture.

**Out of (Classical) Order**

The "Orders" of architecture refer to the designs of column combinations in Classical Greece and Rome. However, decorative and functional posts and shafts that hold up structures are found throughout the world.

Over the centuries, a variety of column types and column designs have evolved, including in Egypt and Persia. To see different styles of columns, browse our [**Photo Guide to Column Design and Column Types**](https://www.thoughtco.com/another-look-at-types-of-columns-177524).

**Function of a Column**

Columns are historically functional. Today a column can be both decorative and functional. Structurally, columns are considered *compression members* subject to *axial compressive forces* — they allow space to be created by carrying the load of the building. How much load that can be carried before "buckling" depends on the column's length, diameter, and construction material. The column's shaft is often not the same diameter from the bottom to the top. ***Entasis*** is the tapering and swelling of the column's shaft, which is used both functionally and to achieve a more symmetric look — fooling the naked eye.

**Columns and Your House**

Columns are commonly found in 19th century [Greek Revival](https://www.thoughtco.com/house-style-guide-american-home-4065233) and [Gothic Revival](https://www.thoughtco.com/house-style-guide-american-home-4065233) house styles. Unlike large Classical columns, residential columns usually carry the load of a porch or portico only. As such, they are subject to weather and rot and often become a maintenance issue. Too often, home columns are replaced with cheaper alternatives — sometimes, unfortunately, with wrought iron. If you buy [a house with metal supports where columns should be,](https://fthmb.tqn.com/_t4Yrl2Z-j1O9hPUb_fziLPbDiY=/columns-iron-P5210027-56aade5b5f9b58b7d0090916.JPG) you know that these are not original. Metal supports are functional, but aesthetically they are historically inaccurate.

[Bungalows](https://www.thoughtco.com/guide-to-american-bungalow-styles-178048) have their own type of tapered columns.

**Related Names for Column-Like Structures**

* **anta** — A flat, square, column-like structure, usually on either side of a door or the corners of a building's facade. These pilaster-like paired structures, called *antae* (plural), are really a structural thickening of the wall.
* **pillar** — Like a column, but a pillar can also stand alone, like a monument.
* **support** — A very general word that describes a function
* [**pilaster**](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-a-pilaster-engaged-column-4045117) — A squared column (i.e., a pier) protruding from a wall.
* **engaged column** — A round column protruding from a wall like a pilaster.
* **post** or **stake** or **pole**
* **pier** — A squared column.
* [**buttress**](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-a-flying-buttress-4049089) – a strengthening support against the wall (a flying buttress is one which takes the load away from the building from a high point on the wall. Used by Gothic architects to facilitate thinner, taller walls and bigger windows.)