

## **Writing sample: Your Luxury Home Expresses YOU** (1500 words)

When we discuss renovation, what are we talking about? Many people use the terms “renovate” and “remodel” interchangeably, but they are different. To renovate is to renew: refresh surfaces, update styles and make a room or property look like new without changing anything fundamentally. To remodel is to change the structure: knock out walls, add rooms or even take an entire building down to the studs. Hire the best architects, designers and contractors and either process leaves you with a home that feels like new and feels like you.

Why not just buy a new house? After the housing market fluctuations of the beginning of the millennium, more Americans are choosing to stay in place and renovate or remodel, rather than buy new. This choice makes particular sense for those who are not planning to move again and expect to live out their lives in their current home. An increasing number of homeowners are finding that they can completely remodel without changing the footprint of their property. Why go through the hassles of searching, moving and finding new schools for your children when you can find your dream home right where you are?

Home renovation isn't just about making your home look nicer. It is about achieving a more comfortable lifestyle that expresses who you are. Some breathe better with more square footage while others can make a smaller space feel just as plush with rich materials and expert design. What it is really about is blending your preferences for comfort and convenience with who you are and who you see yourself becoming.

Remodeling and renovation can sound like your property needs fixing when what those processes really do is align a space with the changing needs of its users. It starts with imagining the life you want to lead. Look around your current space and evaluate what parts feel like they belong and which do not. What parts of your current space do you love? What elements do you feel you have outgrown? It might be easier to name what you want to remove than imagine what you want to replace it with and that's perfectly okay.

With your future lifestyle in mind, work with a top notch interior designer to make your personal choices of style, color and features. With a top-of-her-field architect you'll decide on layout and elements such as water features and fireplaces. The best general contractor you can find will help you choose the best materials and will work with you to make sure they are fulfilling your vision. Without having to pick up and move, you will achieve the lifestyle you deserve.

Think about your bathroom. The bathroom is a room we tend to spend a lot of time in. It is the first room you enter in the morning and the last one you visit before bed. During those sleepy times you can impress upon yourself a vision of luxury and comfort, or maybe a view of sleek, get-things-done streamlining. Bathrooms that guests do not see can be intimate areas to tailor to your exact tastes.

Whatever style you prefer, chances are a bathroom can always be warmer. Consider heat lamps, towel warmers or a heated floor. You might highlight the shower with an immersive showerhead, pebble floor and a built-in place to sit. Or if you know you spend more time in the bath, you can choose a straight, freestanding or sunken bathtub that either is or isn't traditionally shaped. Whether you like a lush, wraparound feeling or the airy lightness of a spacious room, this room exists just for you.

Even more private is the bedroom, where people have been spending an increasing amount of time. Many have theirs outfitted with docking stations, desks and large screen TVs while others prefer a focus on resting and mindfulness. Your bedroom can express your love of nature with live plants, wooden wall hangings or wallpaper that shows an outdoor scene. Or it can show an inward focus with a meditation altar that has crystals and stones where you can peacefully recharge.

Lavenders, blues and grays invoke relaxation and sleep. For the other popular bedroom activity, designers recommend deep reds, dusky pinks and caramel shades to invoke Valentine's Day. Do you want to use your bedroom for sleeping, working, entertainment or other? Create the exact environment to fit you.

Kitchens are wonderful places to renovate. They are often the focal point of a home and accommodate cooks, consumers, and -- depending on the layout -- guests. There are also endless gadgets and features designed just for kitchens, making it particularly fun to renovate.

Maybe you are finished with spending money at restaurants where you have little control over ingredients and have decided to get back to home cooking. No chef gets far without counter space. Most luxury homes now have spacious kitchen islands where you can spread out your ingredients or your appetizers, if your kitchen opens up onto a living area. These islands can be made of rich materials and can include a second sink or stove.

Kitchen extras that will soon enough feel like must-haves include built-in wine coolers, refrigeration drawers, roll-out spice racks and juicer bars with drainage. Or how about a built-in cappuccino-and-beverage maker to start your day? With such wonders, you'll relax into your cooking lifestyle and have your family eating healthier without breaking a sweat.

For cooking or enjoying a leisurely cup of coffee, your kitchen will be a delight to spend time in with rich stone countertops and backsplashes. And not even the most high-end coverings or simulated substances can compare with real wood cabinets. Real wood simply has a warmth to it that makes any kitchen feel cozy, however spacious it is.

These days living rooms and dining rooms flow into each other, facilitating gatherings that focus food or conversation, friends or family. Such spaces make it easier for a family to spend time together instead of in separate rooms. Someone getting dinner ready does not have to feel left out of activity going on in the living room.

If you enjoy entertaining, high ceilings add a touch of elegance, while stone-face gas fireplaces add light and coziness. Your conversation area might be sunken with plush seating and lush carpeting to lower the sound. Or you could go with sleek stone tile flooring that you can heat on chilly days.

Do you enjoy the fermented grape? Wine racks and trellises add beauty and make it easy to store and choose your favorites. Imagine telling your guests there is plenty more and then strolling over to your trellis to thoughtfully select the next bottle.

And don't forget the outside of your home. On summer evenings it's nice to sit outside with an outdoor water feature that allows you to imagine that you're near a creek, a shore or a waterfall. Pamper yourself with features you might find in a luxury villa such as an outdoor cascade, waterscape or koi pond.

Once you have your vision and your plans ready to go, you will want the best contractor possible. Make sure he or she has years (better yet, decades) of experience in the industry and a strong track record of excellent work. You want someone who knows high-end materials and who has been working with them for years. It does not make any sense to choose the finest wood, marble and stone if you are going to hire a contractor who has more enthusiasm than experience.

When you find your contractor, this is where you need to get your timing right. The American construction industry is busier than ever, but it needs more skilled workers than it currently has. This can sometimes create a bit of a bottleneck, so the time for you to act is *now*. Book your contractor nice and early so that you have the home that truly reflects your lifestyle as soon as possible.

Spring is, of course, an ideal time for contractors to do outdoor work and that window can stretch into the summer. Depending on how big your job is, you can sometimes even schedule work for autumn so your home is sparkling and ready for the holidays.

But even if you imagine a start date that is months away, talk to your contractor now so you can be sure you're on his or her calendar. With skilled labor at a premium you want to be certain you have your contractor lined up well ahead of time.

Renovating your home allows you to create something truly unique as you combine your personal expression with the design and style of the house. Let the materials and features reflect who you really are. From the indoor herb garden to the hanging pendant lamps in the bedroom, let each touch support the lifestyle you will enjoy for years to come. When people walk into your home, let them see your values all around them so that they say, "This home is really you!"