OTTAWA STONEWORK

Repointing & Mortar

Repointing and tuckpointing brick and stone: crumbling joints, mortar types N and S in the Building Code, lime mortar on older walls, and joint colour and profile

5 Expert Answers from Masonry IQ

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Q1

Why is my mortar crumbling out of the joints in Kanata?

Crumbling mortar joints have more than one possible cause, and a mason looking at your wall is the only one who can say what is driving it in your case.

NRC building digest CBD-123 notes that "shelling of the mortar surface and general crumbling or powdering of mortar are evidence of advanced deterioration due to freezing," so frost cycling is one mechanism worth ruling in or out, but it is not the only one.

A few things that shape what the repair involves:

- How deep the deterioration goes. Shallow surface crumbling and joints that are hollow several centimetres back are different jobs.
- The mortar type already in the wall. Ask what is in the wall now and what the mason proposes; the Ontario Building Code (9.20.3.1.(1)) requires mortar to conform to CSA A179.
- How much of the wall is affected. A small section and a full facade are priced differently.
- Height and access. Upper courses need scaffolding or a lift, which adds to the scope.

For a written quote, ask for the area of wall being repointed, how joints will be cut out and to what depth, the mortar type and colour match, how silica dust will be controlled during cutting, what brick replacement is included if any units are damaged, and what cleanup and disposal cover.
Start with a mason at the wall, because the repair scope, which mortar to use and whether any units need replacing all depend on what they find when they probe the joints in person.

Q2

Mortar joints sitting back from the brick face on my Kanata house?

Joints that sit back from the brick face are a sign that the mortar has receded or eroded, leaving a gap between the mortar surface and the plane of the brick. A mason looking at the wall can tell you how far back the joints have gone and whether repointing is the right response.

Published Ontario contractor pricing, 2025–26 puts repointing at about $10 to $30 per sq ft of wall, with the middle of the published ranges around $15 to $25. Your quote will differ depending on how much of the wall is affected, how high the work reaches, and whether scaffolding is needed.

A few things shape what the job involves. The depth of the recess matters: joints that have pulled back only a few millimetres are a different scope than joints that are crumbling or hollow behind the face. The mortar type matters too. The Centretown Heritage Conservation District plan notes that cement mortar prevents moisture from escaping through the joint and can cause brick damage, but that plan applies in its own district. If the house is not designated or in a heritage conservation district, the Ontario Building Code (9.20.3.1.(1)) requires mortar to conform to CSA A179; for exterior above-grade non-loadbearing walls, Table 9.20.3.2.-A allows Type N or S mortar. The Code has no rule requiring lime mortar or mortar matched to the existing joint; that comes from heritage district plans and masonry practice where they apply.

Ask the mason how the old mortar will be removed and how dust will be controlled on site, since cutting or grinding mortar joints generates silica dust, a regulated workplace hazard.

A fair written quote for this job should cover the area of wall being repointed, the height and whether scaffolding or a lift is needed, the mortar type and colour match to the existing joints, the joint profile, how the old mortar is cut out, cleanup and disposal, and a written warranty.

Before you sign, ask the mason what mortar type and joint profile they plan to use, and whether the colour has been matched to your existing brick.

Q3

Is Type N or Type S mortar used for brick veneer in Ontario?

Ontario's Building Code (O. Reg. 163/24, Table 9.20.3.2.-A) specifies mortar type by location and function. For brick veneer above ground, the Code calls for Type N or Type S mortar.

The table reads this way for exterior above-grade applications:

- Parapets, chimneys and masonry veneer: Type N or Type S
- Non-loadbearing walls and columns: Type N or Type S
- Loadbearing walls and columns: Type S
- Foundation walls and chimneys (at or below ground): Type S

So for veneer specifically, both types meet the Code requirement. The choice between them is a decision for the mason based on the job conditions.
A few other veneer rules from the Code are worth knowing. Solid masonry units shall be not less than 70 mm thick (9.20.6.4). Over a wood-frame wall, there shall be not less than a 25 mm air space behind the veneer (9.20.6.4).

Veneer less than 90 mm thick shall have unraked joints. Corrosion-resistant ties shall be not less than 0.76 mm thick and 22 mm wide, at maximum spacings of 400 mm vertical by 800 mm horizontal, 500 mm vertical by 600 mm horizontal, or 600 mm vertical by 400 mm horizontal (9.20.9.5). Weep holes are required at the bottom of the air space, spaced not more than 800 mm apart (9.20.13.8.(1)), and throughwall flashing shall direct any moisture in the air space to the exterior (9.20.13.3).

If the property is designated or in a heritage conservation district, the district plan may say more about mortar composition. The Centretown and Minto Park plan, for example, states that lime-based mortar should be used when repointing historic brick and masonry, and that using a mason experienced in lime-based mortar is encouraged. That guidance comes from the heritage plan, not the Building Code itself.

For a written quote on veneer work, ask the contractor to specify the mortar type and mix, the tie spacing, how weep holes and flashing will be handled, and where matching brick is sourced if any units need replacing.

Q4

Is silica dust from grinding mortar a concern on Ottawa jobs?

Yes, silica dust from grinding and cutting mortar is a regulated workplace hazard in Ontario, not just a nuisance. Under O. Reg. 490/09, silica is a designated substance, and tuckpointing and surface grinding, along with dry mortar removal with an electric or pneumatic cutting device, are classified as Type 2 operations under the Ontario silica guideline.

Controlling exposure is the employer's duty to its workers. Before work starts, ask the crew how they plan to manage dust: wet cutting, dust extraction attached to the grinder, and appropriate respirators are the kinds of controls worth asking about. Ask how they will protect the rest of the site, including windows, HVAC intakes and neighbouring surfaces.

There is also a question of who bears responsibility for identifying designated substances before a project begins. The Occupational Health and Safety Act (s.30(1)) says an owner shall determine whether any designated substances are present before beginning a project. How that section applies when an owner-occupier hires a contractor for home renovation work is unverified in our sources, so raise it with the contractor before work starts.

Before work begins, ask for a written contract that names the dust controls along with the full scope and price.

Q5

Should old Ottawa brick get lime mortar or Portland cement mortar?

For older brick in Ottawa, the choice between lime and Portland cement mortar depends on the wall. The Ontario Building Code (O. Reg. 163/24, 9.20.3.1.(1)) requires mortar to conform to CSA A179 and that lime used in mortar be hydrated; it sets no requirement about matching old mortar or using lime over Portland.

The guidance that does address historic brick comes from heritage district plans. The Centretown and Minto Park plan states that "lime-based mortar should be used when repointing historic brick and masonry as cement mortar prevents moisture from escaping through the mortar and causes brick damage," and that "care should be taken to match the colour and joint profile of the mortar." The Wilbrod/Laurier and Daly Avenue plans both state that "new mortar must match the original in colour, pointing method and composition (soft, lime rich mortar rather than a cement based mortar)." These are plan guidelines, not province-wide code rules, and they apply to those specific districts.

What a mason needs to assess before choosing a mortar:

- the age and condition of the existing brick
- what the original mortar was (colour, texture, composition)
- whether the wall is in a heritage conservation district or is individually designated
- the mortar type for the wall's exposure and load (the Building Code's Table 9.20.3.2.-A lists type N or S for exterior above-ground non-loadbearing walls and type S for loadbearing walls)

When getting quotes, ask each mason to specify the mortar type and mix they plan to use, how they will match the existing colour and joint profile, and how they will control silica dust when cutting out old joints. Ask for the mortar specification in writing as part of the quote, along with the joint profile, and the area to be repointed.
If the property is in a heritage district or is individually designated, the district plan or designation by-law may shape what mortar is acceptable; that is worth confirming before work begins.

Disclaimer: This guide is provided for informational purposes only by Ottawa Stonework. It does not constitute professional advice. Always consult qualified contractors and your local building authority (the City of Ottawa) before starting any fence project. Fences in Ottawa must meet the City's Fence By-law, and a free locate is required before digging any post hole. Information is current as of November 15, 2026 and may change. Visit **ottawastonework.com** for the latest answers.