Short Guide to Technical Writing, Fall 25

Document Contents

For more specific information and specific course policies, see the Course Policy Manual.

Course Details

English 3764: Technical Writing
CRNs #85298, #85300, #85304, & #85305
Fall 2025 (Aug 25–Dec 17)

Course Texts

All readings are free, from
- open online textbooks.
- pages & files in Canvas.
- external PDFs & websites.

Teacher

Traci Gardner
tengrrl@vt.edu
she, her, hers

Straight, cisgender, white. Disabled. Night owl. List maker. Planner addict. Sticker hoarder. Lifetime Girl Scout. Hokie alum. Steelers fan. Poodle lover.

Accessibility

Everyone needs special accommodation at some point. I am happy to work with the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) staff or directly with you to make sure that you have the support you need.

Need extra time on assignments?

No problem. If you need more time, use the course's grace period. Check the details on the Late Policy & Grace Period for details.

Need a less-distracting environment?

Do your work any place that works for you. All work is done online and independently, so you have complete control over where you work.

Ready to tell me what you need to do well in the course?

Official testing is expensive and time-consuming, so I don't require it. Just let me know what you need by Canvas Inbox or email as soon as possible. SSD's new system gives me access to official accommodation details, but if there's something beyond the forms you want me to know, please message me. Keep in mind I can only apply accommodations moving forward, not retroactively.

Contacting Traci & Getting Help

Questions about the Course & Assignments

Discussion Board

Post your questions in the General Q&A Discussion Board in Canvas so anyone who knows the answer can help you. You can also check the General Q&A Discussion Board for questions that have already been answered.

If no one else answers your question, I usually respond **within 24 to 48 hours on class days. I take holidays and weekends off** and reply on the next class day.

Help from the Writing Center

Visit the Writing Center on the second floor of Newman Library. You can talk to a tutor if you have a draft, an outline, or just ideas. Bring your assignment description with you. Make appointments online by setting up an account with WCOnline or call the Writing Center director at 540-231-9270.

Questions about Grades, Your Work, and Accommodations

Canvas Inbox or VT.EDU Email

Send your message to tengrrl@vt.edu using your VT.EDU email or the Inbox tool in Canvas. I will respond as quickly as possible, **usually within 24 to 48 hours on class days. I take holidays and weekends off** and reply on the next class day.

Private Online Meetings

Schedule online meetings in Google Meet. Visit my Booking page to sign up (at least 24 hours in advance). Think of these meetings as like office hours.

Video is not required for the meeting.

Traci's Schedule During the Term

Usually Online Monday to Thursday

- 3 PM to 7:30 PM
- 11 PM to 12 AM

I'm a night owl, so I may reply to your message after midnight.

Offline Weekends & Holidays

Offline after 5 PM on Fridays and all day Saturday and Sunday. I'll send replies on Monday (or the next class day in the case of holidays and university days off.

Course Structure

What's in a Module?

This course has a Module for each class week. Each Module is like a backpack: It includes everything you need for the week. You'll find these materials:

- A Module introduction page
- Links to readings
- Links to all assignments

To access each module, click on Modules in the left menu in Canvas, and then **begin with the Module introduction page**.

Course Modules

This is a tentative schedule. More information is available in Canvas.

Dates	Week	Topics
Aug 25–29	Week 1	Introduction to Technical Writing
Sep 2–5	Week 2	Foundations & Project Initiation
Sep 8–12	Week 3	Proposals & Research
Sep 15–19	Week 4	Plain Language, Audience, & Accessibility
Sep 22–26	Week 5	Finalizing & Submitting Your Proposal
Sep 29–Oct 5	Week 6	User Documents, Instructions, & Support Resources
Oct 6–10	Week 7	Document Design, Audience, & Accessibility
Oct 13–16	Week 8	Finalizing & Submitting Your User Document
Oct 20–24	Week 9	Informational Reports
Oct 27–31	Week 10	Progress Reports
Nov 3–7	Week 11	Workplace Correspondence & Visual Aids
Nov 10–16	Week 12	Finalizing & Submitting Your Informational Report
Nov 17–21	Week 13	Fact Sheets & Other Visual Documents
Nov 22–30	🐾 Thanksgiving Break: No classes or email from Traci	
Dec 1–5	Week 14	Data Visualization & Submitting Your Fact Sheet
Dec 8–10	Week 15	Final Thoughts
Dec 12–17	Exam Week: Optional Final due by 11:59PM on Dec 17	

Work Categories and Weights

Assignment Basics

This course includes weighted categories of work, described below.

All work is open book. Use the textbook, Canvas, and any notes you have.

Your work is your individual responsibility. There are some group discussions, but you are graded individually, based on your participation in these activities.

Kinds of Work in the Course

Major Projects

80%

These written documents range from 1–15 pages. *The weight per project varies.*

The projects include memos, instructions, proposals, long and short reports, and fact sheets. All major projects have visual design elements.

Each project has a rubric that explains how it will be graded. There are six Major Projects in the course.

Weekly Activities

15%

These are various short activities, similar to in-class or independent work in a campus-based class.

The activities include all of the following:
- Homework (5%)
- Textbook Quizzes (5%)
- Draft Self-Checks (5%)

The number of Weekly Activities varies each week. Some weeks have several; some have none.

Check-In Surveys

5%

These are brief, anonymous polls that ask you how you are doing in the course. They're similar to Exit Tickets. Surveys are primarily multiple- choice or true-false. There are no right or wrong answers.

I use your responses to customize the course and write a class newsletter.

There is a Check-In Survey for each week of classes.

Course Grading Process

Like a Performance Review on a Job

In the workplace, no one gives you a 92% on a report or a B+ on a proposal. You're expected to do the job fully and meet the expected standards. If something's off, your manager asks you to revise it by the final deadline.

That's what we do in this class too. If your work meets the standard, you're done. If not, you can revise it by the final deadline.

What "Complete" Means

Criteria	Complete	Incomplete
Matches the assignment	✓	✗
Follows VT's Honor Code & Principles of Community	✓	✗
Meets every rubric item	✓	✗
Includes everything required	✓	✗

Incomplete Isn't a Failure—It's a Draft

If your work is marked Incomplete, don't panic—it's just a sign that something needs more work.

As long as you submit your work by the end of the grace period, you can revise and resubmit as many times as you need, up until you earn a Complete or reach the final deadline at 11:59 PM, whichever comes first.
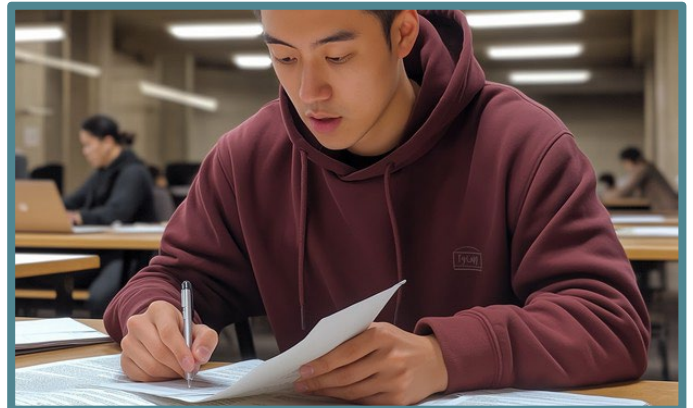
Why This Grading System?

It helps you focus on learning, not just grades. This approach:
- Encourages revision and growth through feedback.
- Reduces pressure by treating Incompletes as part of the process.
- Rewards persistence, not perfection.
- Gives you a chance to revise as long as you submit your work before the end of the grace period.

Tracking Your Work in Canvas

You'll see these marks in Canvas Grades:

✓ or 1 = Complete

✗ or 0 = Incomplete

Canvas chooses symbols or numbers based on the kind of assignment. I can't change it.

These aren't grades. They're status updates that tell you when your work is finished.

Where Your Course Grade Comes From

Canvas calculates your course grade by tallying all the work that is Complete in each category of work and assigning a score based on the weight of the category. The math is straightforward:

$$\frac{\text{\# of Complete Tasks}}{\text{Total \# of Tasks Available}} \quad X \quad \text{Weight for the Category}$$

Add up the calculations for all the categories, and then compare the number to the VT Grade Scale with +/- (below). Canvas does the math for you, so your current course grade is always visible on the Grades page.

Keep in mind: Canvas calculates based only on work that has been assigned and is due—your grade may change as more work is added and as I add feedback.

Example Grade Calculation

Here's how Example Student would calculate their grade using the information in Canvas:

Category of Work	# of Complete Tasks	Category Weight	Category Calculation
Major Projects	5/6	80%	66.66
Weekly Activities	25/28	15%	13.39
Check-In Surveys	12/15	5%	4.00
Total (Course Grade)			**84.05 (B)**

Virginia Tech Grade Scale with +/-

	B+ 87–89.99	C+ 77–79.99	D+ 67–69.99	
A 93–100	B 83–86.99	C 73–76.99	D 63–66.99	F 59.99 &
A- 90–92.99	B- 80–82.99	C- 70–72.99	D- 60–62.99	below

Late Policy & Grace Period

The Basics

I accept late work for most assignments in this course. Just use the Grace Period.

You don't need to ask in advance or explain why your work is late.

The Grace Period lets you take more time when you need it, as often as you need it, and then turn your work in before the grace period ends.

Target Due Dates

Every assignment in the course has a **Target Due Date**. That's the date the assignment is due. Aim for the Target Due Date so you do not fall behind in the course.

Remember these facts about the Target Due Date:

- It applies to all work in the course.
- It ends at 11:59 PM on **Fridays**.

Grace Periods

There are **two different grace period systems**: one for weekly activities and check-in surveys, and another for major projects. For both systems, once the grace period passes, you can no longer submit the assignment and, therefore, it earns an Incomplete.

Weekly Activities & Check-In Surveys
- Lasts **3 weekdays.**
- Requires that work is submitted to the relevant assignment in Canvas.
- Ends at 11:59 PM on Wednesdays.

Major Projects & Self-Checks
- Lasts **6 weekdays.**
- Requires that work is submitted to the relevant assignment in Canvas.
- Ends at 11:59 PM on Mondays.

There is **no grace period for the Final Exam** (which is optional); however, you have the entirety of Exam Week to do your work. Your final exam is due by 11:59 PM on Wednesday, December 17, 2025.

Major Project Revision Deadlines

You can revise Major Projects as long as you meet these requirements:

- Your Major Project is **submitted by the end of the Grace Period**.

- Your submission meets the expectations for a **good-faith effort** (meaning it responds to the assignment and meets basic requirements like topic, focus, length, and format).

- You earn an **Incomplete** on that Major Project.

You may revise as often as you'd like **until the revision deadline**, which is **two weeks after its Target Due Date**.
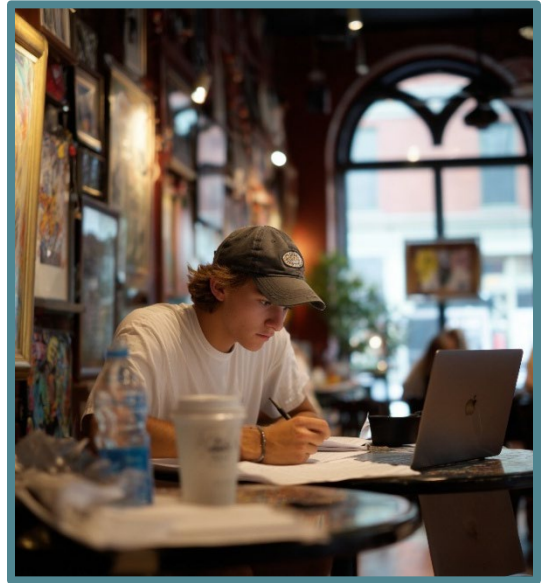
Late Labels and 0 or ✗ Marks in Canvas

If you don't submit your work by the **Target Due Date**, Canvas will do two things:

- Label your work as **Late.**
- Mark it as **0** or ✗ (Incomplete).

These are automatic labels Canvas applies. **There's no penalty** for being late as long as you submit by the end of the **grace period**.

Once you submit the work, I'll check it to see if it meets the assignment criteria. If it does, I'll update the mark to ✓ **or 1** (Complete). The **0 or** ✗ will go away. If it doesn't, I'll let you know if you can revise and resubmit. Allow time for me to review and add feedback. It's not always automatic.

Unfortunately, the **Late** label is permanent. Canvas won't let me remove it. I do hide it from my view, so I never see it. Try not to stress about it. After all, it doesn't affect your grade.

Key Tips
- You can revise and resubmit during the grace period.
- You're only locked out after the final deadline passes.
- Canvas doesn't reflect the whole story. Check the assignment or message me if you're unsure.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Policies

Does AI Matter in Technical Writing?

An April 2023 Pew Research Survey found 6 in every 10 Americans (**62%**) said that AI would have a "major impact on workers generally"
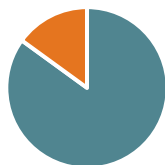
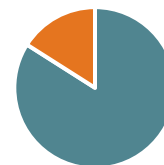**75%** of global knowledge workers already use AI, according to a 2024 Microsoft/LinkedIn study

Employees who use AI say it helps them . .

90% Save time

85% Focus on their most important work

84% Be more creative

Employers say . . .

66% would not hire someone without AI skills

71% would hire less-qualified people with AI skills over more-qualified people without them

Sources

Rainie, Lee, Monica Anderson, Colleen McClain, Emily A. Vogels and Risa Gelles-Watnick. (2023, April 20). AI in Hiring and Evaluating Workers: What Americans Think. Pew Research Center.

Microsoft, & LinkedIn. (2024, May 8). AI at Work Is Here. Now Comes the Hard Part (2024 Work Trend Index Annual Report).

Policy Details

To prepare for the writing you'll do in the workplace, we'll consider how to use AI to improve your critical thinking and writing.

What AI tools can I use?

You can use [Copilot](#) for assignments that require generative AI tasks. Copilot is the only AI tool officially approved by Virginia Tech because it protects your personal work when you login with your VT PID. It will not use any content you upload, so your writing will not be part of the language learning database.

I will design our activities to be compatible with Copilot to streamline the activities I ask you to complete. You are welcome to use other AI tools that you have access to. If an alternative tool cannot accomplish an assigned task however, you'll need to switch back to Copilot.

What can I use AI for in this course?

For each activity, I will provide detailed instructions on how AI can be used. Generally speaking, you can use AI in these ways:

- **Brainstorming Ideas:** You can ask Copilot to generate a list of topics that interest you by creating a prompt that includes the assignment parameters. You can also use AI to help you evaluate the brainstormed list for the most promising ideas.

- **Editing Checks:** Have AI check your draft for accuracy. Copilot can check for basic grammatical mistakes, punctuation errors, and spelling issues. Ask AI to tell you where the errors are and even what they are, but make updates yourself. Do not have AI correct your work.

- **Research Assistance:** Ask AI to help you research a topic. Copilot can help you find relevant sources and gather information. However, it's crucial to verify the accuracy and credibility of the sources and information that Copilot suggests. AI does not consistently provide real references. Always make sure the references exist and then cross-check with reliable references.

- **Draft Review:** AI can be used ethically for draft reviewing. You can think of AI as a computer peer review partner. I'll provide instructions for these tasks. I'll ask you to try some of the following AI tasks as you work on drafts:

- **Develop ideas:** AI can help expand on initial ideas, providing additional perspectives or

angles that you might not have considered. Use it to deepen your understanding of a topic and develop a more comprehensive approach.

- **Outline and Organize:** Copilot can create outlines and organize your thoughts. Input your main points and ask AI to suggest a logical structure or flow for your document.

- **Summarize:** You can use AI to summarize content. This can save time and help you focus on the most critical information.

- **Check Document Design:** Use Copilot to review design elements like layout, use of white space, font choices, and overall design effectiveness. AI can then suggest improvements to enhance readability and aesthetic appeal. Be aware however that AI may not accurately analyze visual elements. Verify its suggestions.

What if I want to use Copilot in a way you haven't mentioned?

If youwant to use AI in another way, send me a message in Canvas explaining your plan and how it relates to use of AI in the workplace. I'll review your request and let you know if it's acceptable.

Are there things I can't use AI for?

For most of the work in this course, you cannot ask AI to write or revise your drafts or final submissions for you. Using it to review your draft and make suggestions (as described above) is fine. Having AI do the writing or revision for you directly violates the Cheating and Plagiarism sections of the Virginia Tech Honor Code. There may be some exceptions. I'll be clear about these exceptions in the assignments.

What if Copilot gives me incorrect information or makes other mistakes?

Regardless of how or where you use AI in this course, you are fully responsible for the work you submit. Just as in the workplace, you need to stand behind your work. If AI introduces errors and you pass them along, you are accountable for those mistakes. The goal here is not to discourage you from using AI but to help you develop the critical skill of verifying AI-generated content—an essential practice in any professional setting.

What do I need to keep track of when I use AI?

Keep track of what AI tools you used and how you used them. In some cases, the assignment will ask you to save specific artifacts, like the prompt that you used and the response that the AI tool gave you. Always read the assignment carefully to determine the information you need to track as you use AI.

How do I need to acknowledge my use of AI?

When you use AI as you work on your assignments, include details on which AI tools you used and how they contributed to your work in a submission comment when you submit your work.

Key Terms at a Glance

✔ / ✗ **in Canvas**: Canvas marks assignments as ✔ (or 1) for Complete and ✗ (or 0) for Incomplete. These are *status updates*, not grades.

Check-In Surveys: Anonymous weekly polls used to reflect on how the course is going. There are no right or wrong answers. Worth 5% of your grade.

Complete: Your work meets *all* assignment expectations and rubric criteria. It's considered finished—no revisions needed.

Good-Faith Effort: A submission that responds to the assignment and meets basic requirements (topic, focus, length, format). Required for eligibility to revise a Major Project.

Grace Period: Extra time to submit your work with no penalty.

Incomplete: Your work needs revision or is missing something. It's not a failure—it's just a draft. You can revise and resubmit it until the final deadline.

Late Label (in Canvas): If you turn in work after the Target Due Date, Canvas marks it "Late." This label is permanent, but it doesn't affect your grade.

Major Projects Grace Period: Applies to Major Projects and Self-Checks. Ends six weekdays after the Target Due Date (on Mondays at 11:59 PM).

Major Projects: Six longer assignments that involve research, writing, and design. Examples include memos, proposals, reports, and fact sheets. Worth 80% of your grade.

Modules: Course units organized in Canvas. Each includes a starting page, objectives, readings, and assignments. Begin every module at the introduction page.

Revision Deadline: The final date (two weeks after the Target Due Date) to revise and resubmit a major project that was marked Incomplete.

Target Due Date: The day an assignment is *due* in order to stay on schedule. You won't be penalized for turning work in after this date, as long as it's within the grace period. Most Target Due Dates fall on Fridays at 11:59 PM.

Weekly Activities Grace Period: Applies to Weekly Activities and Check-In Surveys (ends Wednesdays at 11:59 PM).

Weekly Activities: Short writing tasks, textbook quizzes, or Canvas Discussions. Worth 15% of your grade.