

A Short Guide to English 3764: Technical Writing

Traci Gardner
Fall 2021

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For more information on this course, see the Course Manual and our Canvas site. (TO BE ADDED)

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Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the Tutelo/Monacan people, who are the traditional custodians of the land on which we work and live, and recognize their continuing connection to the land, water, and air that Virginia Tech consumes. I pay respect to the Tutelo/Monacan Nations, and to their elders past, present, and emerging. To learn more, visit [the Monacan Nation website](#). You can also visit the [American Indian & Indigenous Community Center](#) in 122 Squires Student Center.

I also acknowledge the enslaved Black people who lived and worked on the former plantation lands upon which Virginia Tech stands. These families include the Fractions, McNortons, and Saunders, as well as others. Read more about these families in the *Virginia Tech Magazine* article "[Family Tree](#)."

Your Access to this Course

Everyone needs special accommodation at some point because we all learn differently. 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.



For anyone who needs extra time on assignments

No problem. You can arrange whatever you need. If you need more time on a project, take the time you need. This course has a grace period that allows everyone extra time if needed. Check the [details on Due Dates & the Late Policy](#) for more details.

For anyone who needs a less-distracting environment

You can arrange to do your work for this course any place that works for you. Since all work is done online and independently, you have complete control over where you work.

Providing documentation of special needs

I generally do not require official documentation unless the university requires it for some reason. I do prefer that you let me know of any accommodation you need so that I can make sure I give you the support you need.

For anyone with official documentation:








Contact [Services for Students with Disabilities](#) (SSD) in 310 Lavery Hall ([map link](#), above the Turner Place Dining Center) as soon as possible to ensure that you have the resources you need to participate in the class. The procedures and forms you need are also available on the SSD website.

For anyone without official documentation:


I know that the official testing can be expensive and time-consuming. Send me [a private message in Canvas](#) that tells me what you need, and I will try to help.

Technical Writing Overview

English 3764 ● CRNs #84716, #84718, #84719, and #84727 ● Fall 2021

Who   <p>Traci Gardner tengrrl@vt.edu she, her, hers</p> <p>Straight, cisgender, white. Disabled. Lifetime Girl Scout. Hokie alum. Steelers fan. Poodle lover.</p>	What  <p>This course examines how to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • write about technology and technical subjects in ways readers understand. • analyze your situation so you present information clearly and effectively. • choose the best design strategies for composing in digital environments. 	Where  <p>Online course site on Canvas: canvas.vt.edu/courses/136796 (Course begins August 23)</p> <p>Low bandwidth:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Streaming videos • PDFs • Web pages • Google Drive <p>Times and dates correspond to the Blacksburg Campus (Eastern US Time Zone).</p>
When  <p>Anytime!</p> <p>Asynchronous</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work at your own speed • Set your own schedule <p>No required real-time sessions.</p>	Why  <p>To succeed in the workplace, you need skills in writing and communications, according to 85% of those asked in a 2016 Pew Research survey.¹ In this course, we will focus on these skills so that you learn strategies that will help you prosper in your career.</p>	How  <p>Follow Canvas Modules to complete course activities.</p> <p>You will compose</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Letters, memos, & email • A presentation • Research instructions • A technical description • A recommendation report

What You Need

Course Textbook <p><i>Technical Communication</i> by Markel & Selber. 13th ed. Macmillan, 2021. (Print or ebook).</p> 	Computer <p>A reliable computer–Linux, FreeBSD, Windows, or Mac.</p>	A/V Gear <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A camera or a phone with a camera. Screenshot support on your computer. • Earphones/Earbuds and a microphone
Internet <p>Working, dependable Internet access and a backup plan. If the connection where you live goes out, know where you can go for free WiFi.</p>	Software <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Word processor and presentation software that can save a DOCX, PDF or PPTX file, OR Google Drive. • Image editing software that can save a JPG or PNG file. 	Email <p>I will use your VT.EDU email and the Inbox tool in Canvas. I will respond as quickly as possible, usually within 24 to 48 hours.</p>

¹ Pew Research Center, October 2016, “The State of American Jobs: How the shifting economic landscape is reshaping work and society and affecting the way people think about the skills and training they need to get ahead.”

Course Schedule

This schedule may change to adapt to your needs and those of others taking the course. Check Canvas Announcements for updates and changes to the dates. Check the Module Instructions each week for specific details on work that's due. *Last updated July 2021.*

Week	Dates	Activities and Work
1	Aug 23-27	Module 1: Course Intro Aug 27: Last Day to Add
2	Aug 30-Sep 3	Module 2: Getting Started in Tech Writing
3	Sep 6-10	Module 3: Convincing Your Audience Sep 6: Labor Day, No Classes/Limited email
4	Sep 13-17	Module 4: Pitching Your Ideas
5	Sep 20-24	Module 5: Designing Your Pitch
6	Sep 27-Oct 1	Module 6: Conducting Research Oct 1: Fall Break, No Classes/Limited email
7	Oct 4-8	Module 7: Writing Instructions Oct 5: Last Day to Drop
8	Oct 11-15	Module 8: Designing Your Instructions
9	Oct 18-22	Module 9: Describing Objects & Processes
10	Oct 25-29	Module 10: Using Graphics Oct 25: Last day to resign w/o penalty
11	Nov 1-5	Module 11: Designing Your Descriptions
12	Nov 8-12	Module 12: Structuring Your Recommendation
13	Nov 15-19	Module 13: Designing Your Recommendation Nov 17: Last day to reschedule exams
	Nov 20-28	Thanksgiving Break No classes/Limited email
14	Nov 29-Dec 3	Module 14: Finalizing Your Recommendation
15	Dec 6-8	Module 15: Evaluating Your Progress Dec 8: Last day of classes; Last day to withdraw
Exam Week	Dec 10-15	Dec 10: Exam opens at 12:00 AM Dec 15: Final Exam due by 11:59 PM

Due Dates & the Late Policy

I accept late work. You do not need to ask in advance or explain why your work is late. Just take more time when you need it, as many times as you need it. Turn your work in when you can before the grace period ends.

I accept late work
(no questions asked)

Grace Period

If you cannot meet a due date, use the grace period. **The grace period covers most situations, whether a religious holiday, academic conflict, illness, or a personal issue.**

The grace period occurs between the due date and the last moment that you can submit work in the course. Canvas indicates the end of the grace period as the “available until” date, shown in the screenshot on the right.

The screenshot shows a Canvas assignment interface for 'Turtle Anatomy Exam'. At the top, it says 'Due: Fri Jul 23, 2021 11:59pm' with an orange arrow pointing to it labeled 'Due Date'. Below this is a dropdown menu for 'Attempt 1' and a green circle with 'IN PROGRESS' and 'Next Up: Submit Assignment'. Further down, it says 'Unlimited Attempts' and 'Available: Jul 20, 2021 12:00am until Jul 28, 2021 11:59pm' with an orange arrow pointing to the 'until' date labeled 'End of Grace Period'. A 'Details' link is also visible.

If you turn in your work during the Grace Period, Canvas will mark the activity as *Late*. Don't worry about this late label. There is no grade penalty for work submitted during the grace period.

Nearly everything in this course has a grace period. The length of the grace period depends upon the kind of activity (explained below).

Suggested Due Dates with Open Grace Period

Much of the work on projects in this course is flexible. Work with suggested due dates has an open grace period that ends at 11:59 PM on Friday, December 3.


Take my advice however, and don't wait until the last minute! Try to keep up with the suggested due dates so you can spread your work across the term. Taking a few extra days occasionally should not derail your progress.

Examples of work with open grace periods, ending on December 3:

- Brainstorming notes for your projects.
- Your recommendation report.

Firm Due Dates with Five-Day Grace Period

Some work in the course needs to be completed in a timely manner. Work with firm due dates has a five-day grace period (including weekends and holiday). For example, if your work is due on Friday, July 23, the grace period ends five days later, on Wednesday, July 28 (shown in the table below).

Fri, 7/23 Firm Due Date	Sat, 7/24	Sun, 7/25	Mon, 7/26	Tue, 7/27	Wed, 7/28 Grace Period Ends at 11:59 PM
Five-Day Grace Period 					

Examples of work with five-day grace periods:


- Activities assigned during the first week of the term.
- Weekly Work Logs, throughout the term.
- Your Midterm Progress Report.

Firm Due Dates with No Grace Period: Peer Feedback

Peer feedback in the course must be completed on time—because of limits in Canvas and because your classmates' work depends upon it.

To make up for the lack of a grace period, most peer feedback activities happen in two rounds. Each round gives you five days to complete your feedback. You can participate in the first round, the second round, or both rounds. It's up to you. Examples of the two rounds are shown below:

Date	Related Peer Feedback	Feedback Round
Fri, 7/23	Rough draft due for Round 1 feedback by 11:59 PM.	Round 1
Sat, 7/24	Canvas automatically assigns feedback partners at 12:01 AM.	
Sun, 7/25		
Mon, 7/26		
Tue, 7/27		
Wed, 7/28	Round 1 feedback due to partners by 11:59 PM.	
	Rough drafts due for Round 2 feedback by 11:59 PM.	Round 2
Thu, 7/29	Canvas automatically assigns feedback partners at 12:01 AM.	
Fri, 7/30		
Sat, 7/31		
Mon, 8/1		
Tue, 8/2	Round 2 feedback due to partners by 11:59 PM.	



Firm Due Date with No Grace Period: Final Exam

The final exam has no grace period. We can't extend the course beyond the end of the term. There are no make-ups or extensions unless approved by the Dean of Students. Regardless, you should still have plenty of time to take your final.

When to take your exam

Any time that you want to during exam week. You have all six days, from 12:00 AM on Friday 12/10 to 11:59 PM on Wednesday, 12/15. **Your final exam must be submitted by the due date so that I can submit grades on time.**

Rescheduling because of three exams in 24 hours

You won't need to reschedule your exam for this course. Simply choose another day during the exam period. You can take the exam whenever you want during exam week.

Interruptions in Course Progress

In the case of extenuating circumstances, please let me know immediately. I understand that things happen. As long as you are honest and timely in letting me know what's going on, we can try to work something out.

Incomplete Policy

My department's policy states, "Incompletes are for students who did their work during the semester but could not complete course requirements because of a problem or emergency at the end of the term."

As a result, I cannot offer Incompletes for anyone who failed to keep up during the term. If you find you have an impossible amount of work to complete by the end of the term, withdrawing from the course is likely the best solution.

Sequence of Technical Writing Projects

In this course, you will compose formal and informal documents that build toward your Recommendation Report. The sequence of projects outlined below will be your primary focus for the term.

Choose Your Topic



Following the [Recommendation Report Criteria](#), you will choose a topic for your Recommendation Report that

- relates directly to your major and future career, and
- focuses on a specific situation that you can easily observe.

For example, you identify some slippery, dangerous stairs on campus. As a building construction major, you know how to improve the situation. Your report explains your recommendation for solving the issue. You can review the [Recommendation Topic Examples](#) page for help.

Once you make a choice, you will complete a short form to propose your topic.

Conduct Secondary Research



You will gather secondary research (information other people have collected) to support your project by finding books, journal articles, and/or professional websites.

The go-to research resources in your career field will provide basic details about strategies and techniques and give you support for your recommendation report.

After conducting secondary research, you will create a working bibliography, which will later form the bulk of the References section in your Recommendation Report.

Conduct Primary Research

You will also include primary research (information you collect). You might conduct a survey, observe the situation, or interview people who know about the situation.

Ideally, primary research is designed so that someone else can duplicate the research, confirming the findings. As a result, you will write a how-to document, with a technical description and step-by-step instructions on how to conduct the primary research.



This document will later become an Appendix in your Recommendation Report.

Make Your Recommendation



Your recommendation report identifies the situation you examined, outlines your research methods and results, draws conclusions about each option, and finally makes a recommendation to your audience.

The final report may be 15-18 pages long, including all the front and back matter. We will work through the different portions of the report one-by-one, building the entire report by assembling all your informal and formal work by the end of the term.

A Module in Canvas is like a Bucket



This course uses Modules in Canvas to organize the work that you will do for each week.

You may notice that some of the sidebar navigation, like Assignments and Quizzes, does not show in the course Canvas site. That's because everything you need is in Modules.

What Is a Module?



In this course, a module is like a bucket. It contains everything you will need for a week.

Inside, you will find details on the readings and other activities that you are to complete for the relevant week.

What's Inside the Bucket?

The Instructions Page



The Module Instructions page outlines the instructions for the week. This page tells you what to do with everything that is in the bucket, and it gives you the suggested due dates for the work.

Be sure to notice these details on the Module Instructions page:

- General details on the current projects in the first paragraphs
- Sections on what you need to read, to write, to discuss, and to track
- Links to the resources and activities for the week

Activities for the Week



The activities you need to complete for the week are listed under these headings on the Module Instructions page:

- *To Read*: the textbook chapters, Canvas pages, and LinkedIn Learning videos
- *To Write*: informal and formal document assignments
- *To Discuss*: peer feedback and self-reflection Discussions
- *To Track*: writer's log instructions and self-assessment assignments

Typical Weekly Schedule

The schedule outlined below suggests how to break up your work during the week and submit your work on the suggested due dates. Take this as a suggestion, not a required schedule. Everyone works differently, and we all have other obligations. Adjust the schedule to make it work for you.

Monday

- Check the the Module Instructions page in Canvas for the specific activities for the week.
- Make a plan to complete the activities for the week.
- If you participated in the first Feedback Discussion, start your peer review assignments.
- Track what you do in your work log.



Tuesday

- Read the textbook and other readings, looking for details that will help you complete the activities for the week.
- Fill out your work log.



Wednesday

- Continue work on the week's activities.
- Post peer review for the first Feedback Discussions if you participated.
- Post your cover letter and draft in Second-Chance Discussions by 11:59 PM, if desired. Canvas automatically assigns feedback partners at 12:00 AM Thursday.
- Add details on your work to your work log.



Thursday

- Use feedback from first Feedback Discussion to revise your work.
- Continue work on any other readings and activities for the week.
- Make sure your work log is up-to-date.



Friday

- Post your cover letter and draft in first Discussions by 11:59 PM. Canvas automatically assigns feedback partners at 12:00 AM Saturday.
- Submit work you have completed by the Suggested Due Date. If you need more time, turn it in later.
- Fill out your work log.



Weekend

- Take a break. No one should work all the time!
- Work if you want to. If you do, be sure to track your work in your log.
 - Get started on the work for the next week, if desired.
 - Catch up on work as needed.



How Assessment Works

You will receive feedback from me and your classmates, and you will assess your own progress and learning. Rather than focusing on grades and grading, we will concentrate on feedback and assessment (primarily formative assessment).

So Why Formative Assessment Instead of Grades?

This course focuses on learning, specifically on learning about how people communicate in the workplace. Research tells us that grades are a terrible way to measure learning.

Why? Learning cannot be readily quantified. Two people may feel that they have learned a great deal, yet if we try to turn that learning into a number, we usually fall short.

What We Know About Grades

- Grades are used to rank students. They were created so gatekeepers could sort students into piles that let them decide who gets which privileges (like entrance to college and scholarships).
- Grades are not fair. The usual grading process compares student work to an ideal text. Unfortunately, that means your success on a writing project depends upon perfect grammar and style. But whose grammar and style count? And who decides? That's the problem.
- Grades are arbitrary systems. There is no particular reason that 89.999 is a B+ and 90.000 is an A- other than an arbitrary decision someone made. Likewise, there are arbitrary decisions about whether to curve or round grades.
- Grades do not motivate students to learn. They just make students anxious and encourage them to do the least work possible to reach their goals. With grades, students do only as much as the teacher says to do. There's no motivation to go beyond the least possible amount of work a grade requires.
- Grades don't matter outside the school system. No one cares what grades you got once you leave school and enter the workplace. Managers don't give out letter grades. They expect you to show up, put in your best effort, and accomplish the goals your company sets.



If you want to learn more about grades and assessment, check out the work of [Jesse Stommel](#), [Alfie Kohn](#), and [Susan D. Blum](#).

The Benefits of This System

To avoid the challenges that come with grades, I will not try to quantify your work. Instead, I will focus on feedback.

This grading system is probably not what you are used to, so first I want to tell you a bit about what happens when we focus on learning and feedback rather than grades. Here's how you benefit:

Focus on Ideas (Not Mistakes)

Focus on what you're trying to say. Forget about the pressure to be perfect. Why? Your ideas and the purpose of your message are the most important part of what you write.

Focusing on perfection can distract writers from developing their ideas. Because we will focus on what you accomplish and how you improve, mistakes won't undermine your course grade.



Write for Yourself (Not for Me)



In this course, you are learning writing strategies that will use in the workplace. Don't worry about writing to impress me, as your teacher. Why? I am not going to be with you when you enter the workplace.

You need to develop your own sense of what makes writing effective in your field. Your course grade is based on how hard you work to find that out.

Take Risks (Don't Play It Safe)

Try writing and composing strategies that stretch your abilities and help you learn new things. There's no need to play it safe. Why? Taking risks doesn't count against you.

In fact, taking risks can demonstrate that you're putting in time and effort. After all, the safe, easy route doesn't push you to learn and improve.



Have a Do-Over (No Penalty)



If you take a risk and it doesn't turn out, just try again. If your peer feedback or my comments ask you to revise, there is no impact on your grade. Just like in a game, you have unlimited do-overs. Why? Making mistakes is part of the learning process.

Whether it takes two tries or more, you are investing time and effort in your writing. As long as you are working to improve, you can't fail.

Put in the Effort (No Pain, No Gain)

Going through the motions won't produce strong workplace writing. You have to put in hard work. You need to write, rewrite, start over, and try again to improve your projects. The more you work, the better you'll do in the course.

Why? All your work counts toward your course grade, as long as you do the work, listen to feedback, incorporate what you hear, and reflect on how to improve your writing and communication.



Where Do Course Grades Come From?

This course has no grades on the daily work you do or the individual projects you complete. Research tells us that grades are a terrible way to measure learning, so we are doing away with them.

There is only one grade in this course: the course grade that I enter for you at the end of the term. Rather than averaging grades for all the work you complete during the term, I base course grades on three things that you tell me about:

- the time and intensity that you put into your writing.
- what you learn by engaging in the course activities and assignments.
- how you improve your writing and communication skills over time.



Your Work Log

For each of these three measures, I will ask you to tell me about your progress. You will record everything you do and reflect on how well you have done in a weekly work log.

The log entries you keep are critical to the course grade you propose. You will look back at your log to find evidence of what you have worked on, how long you worked, and so forth.



Your Midterm Progress Report Presentation

At midterm, you will review the work you have completed up to that point and compare your accomplishments to the course goals. You will consider specifically the three measures that your course grade is based on and the extent to which you have put in your best effort.

Additionally, you will outline a plan to reach your goals during the rest of the term and suggest the grade you believe you should earn based on your work so far in the course.



Your Final Performance Review

For your final exam, you will write a performance review that provides an evaluation of your work in the course and proposes the grade you should receive. As with the midterm progress report presentation, you will use details and examples from your work logs and consider the extent to which you have put in your best effort during the term.

I will review your performance review and the notes that I have on your work. In most cases, I will record the grade you suggest as your course grade. I reserve the right to change your grade if appropriate however. We'll talk more about the reasons I might not take your suggestion later in the course, but generally, it happens when someone has proposed a grade that is lower than they deserve for reasons that have nothing to do with learning in the course.



Succeeding in This Online Course

The assessment system relies on you to set goals for the course. You are probably thinking primarily of writing and communication goals. Because this is an asynchronous online course however, you should consider some additional guidelines to ensure that you do well.

The key to success in this course is to focus on consistent, regular interaction—with the course materials, with your classmates, and with me. Here are five specific ways to make that happen.

1. Use Courses Resources

Explore everything on our course Canvas site, and always do the readings. These resources are the online classroom for the course. You'll do better if you use them.



2. Check Canvas Daily

If anything changes (like a suggested due date or an assignment), you'll find it in Canvas Announcements first. Check in at least once daily so that you always know what is going on. Alternately, you can [set your Canvas Notifications](#) for the course so that you receive an email or text message when a new Announcement is posted.



3. Set a Schedule

Schedule regular class sessions for yourself. Dedicate three or four two-hour sessions on different days, rather than a one-day marathon session of 6 to 8 hours.



4. Avoid Last-Minute Work

You'll do better in the class if you get started early. If you wait until the last minute, you may not have time to complete your work or improve your draft before its suggested due date.



5. Questions? Talk to me

I have no way to know when you need help. Tell me how it's going—what works for you and what you're unsure about. Use posts in Canvas Discussions to connect with me. If you have a personal question, use the [Inbox tool in Canvas](#).



How to Email Your Professor

Want to write email messages to persuade me to help you? Follow these guidelines.



Identify Yourself Up Front

Don't make me guess who you are

State how I know you in the beginning of your message. Don't assume I will know which course section you're in or which class you took in the past.

Focus on the Basics about Health Issues

Don't share TMI about your health

No one wants to read how many times you "barfed your guts out" or hear the saga of how your cat, a torn carpet, and an order of Nachos BellGrande resulted in your broken ankle. Okay, that story might be interesting, but just say you have the flu, or you broke your ankle.

Include Any Attachments

Don't make me reply for more information

If you have a note from the doctor or the Dean, include it with your email. Don't ask if I want to see it. That just means I have to reply to say I do. If all you have is a piece of paper, take a photo with your phone and send the photo with your message.

Make Reasonable Requests

Don't ask for miracles

Don't beg or demand things. Don't ask me to do the impossible. Skip the sob stories. I don't have a TARDIS, a Time-Turner, or a magic wand. Ask for things that are practical and fair, and I will do what I can.

Stick with Basic Explanations

Don't bring the drama

Don't tell complicated stories about why your work is late or why you need more time to revise. The more excuses you come up with, the less believable you sound. Just share the basics—and please don't say some other course was a higher priority!

Tell Me How You Can Fix It

Don't make me find the answer

Solve the issue yourself if you can. If something is late, turn it in and tell me you've done so. If you can't fix things, suggest a solution that would work—and tell me what you have already tried.

Course FAQs

To do well in this class, you need to know the answers to these five questions. With these answers, you are ready to succeed.

What Am I Supposed to Do?

Every week, read the Module Instructions page to find a list of everything you need to read, write, or do.

The work in this course includes reading the textbook and other resources, writing various documents, and completing other activities in Canvas.



When Is It Due?



Submit your work in Canvas by **11:59 PM on Fridays if you can**. Check the **Module Instructions page** each week to see the specific dates.

If you need more time, take more time, using [the grace period](#). As we get closer to the end of the term, I will run out of time to give you feedback however. As a result, the sooner you can turn your work in, the better. Remember to submit all course work by 11:59 PM on December 3.

How Did I Do?

Find feedback in **annotations on your submissions in Canvas**. Check Announcements for feedback to the whole class. Allow 48 hours after the end of the grace period for me to provide feedback.

You will suggest your own course grade at the end of the term. If you are worried about your grade, review the work you've done and your notes in your work logs. If you are doing the assigned work and putting in a reasonable amount of effort, you should be on target.



Where Can I Get Help?



- Read the step-by-step instructions for each Assignment in Canvas. Often, you'll find the answer there.
- Check Announcements in Canvas for the most recent help and advice.
- Look for Help Q&A Posts in Canvas Modules for each major project.
- Contact me using the Canvas Inbox if you can't find an answer. I usually reply within 48 hours during the week. I reply by Monday for questions sent during the weekend.

What More Can I Do?

Keep these guidelines in mind:

- Put in your best effort. Hard work pays off in this class.
- You have to try, but you don't have to be perfect.
- Take risks! Stretch your abilities and learn new things.
- Remember that you can always try again if something isn't working.

