A Short Guide to English 3764: Technical Writing

Traci Gardner
Spring 2021

Many of the resources in this guide were originally developed on Canva.com. The image versions of these resources are also available:

- [A Module in Canvas Is Like a Bucket]()
- [Weekly Schedule in Technical Writing]()
- [When Your Grades Are Based on Labor]()
- [Succeeding in an Online Course]()
- [How to Email Your Professor]()
- [Do You Know Where To Find The Answers?]()
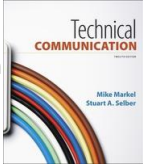
Acknowledgements

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]()."

Technical Writing Overview

English 3764 · CRN #14894, #14896, #14898, & #14908 · Spring 2021

Who

Traci Gardner

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she, her, hers

Straight, cisgender, white. Disabled. Lifetime Girl Scout. Hokie alum. Steelers fan. Poodle lover.

What

This course examines how to

- 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

Online course site on Canvas: canvas.vt.edu/courses/126055 (Opens January 19)

Low bandwidth:
- Streaming videos
- PDFs
- Web pages
- Google Drive

Times and dates correspond to the Blacksburg Campus (Eastern US Time Zone).

When

Anytime!

Asynchronous
- Work at your own speed
- Set your own schedule

No required real-time sessions.

Why

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.

How

Follow Canvas **Modules** to complete course activities.

You will compose
- Letters, memos, & email
- A pitch presentation
- Research instructions
- A technical description
- A recommendation report

What You Need

Course Textbook
Technical Communication by Markel & Selber. 12th ed. Macmillan, 2018. (Print or e-book).

Computer
A reliable computer–Linux, FreeBSD, Windows, or Mac.

A/V Gear
- A camera or a phone with a camera. Screenshot support on your computer.
- Earphones/Earbuds and a microphone

Internet
Working, dependable Internet access and a backup plan. If the connection where you live goes out, know where you can go for free WiFi.

Software
- A word processor that can save a *.DOC, a *.DOCX, or a *.PDF file, OR Google Drive.
- Image editing software that can save a *.JPG or *.PNG file.

Email
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.

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[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 and other course materials may change to adapt to your needs and those of others taking the course.

You can always find the current assignments and information for the course in [Canvas](). It is your responsibility to check your Canvas Announcements for updates and changes to the course schedule. Check the Module Instructions each week for specific details on the work due.

Schedule was last updated on January 17, 2021.

Week of	Textbook Material Covered
January 19	Project Module 1: Course Intro • Syllabus & Course Info • Requirements • Policies, including VT Policies and Resources
January 25	Project Module 2: Getting Started in Tech Writing • Markel & Selber, Ch. 1: Understanding the Tech Comm Environment • Markel & Selber, Ch. 2: Understanding Ethical & Legal Considerations • Markel & Selber, Ch. 3: Writing Technical Documents 🔔 Last Day to Add: Monday, January 25, 2021
February 1	Project Module 3: Convincing Your Audience • Markel & Selber, Ch. 5: Analyzing Your Audience and Purpose • Markel & Selber, Ch. 8: Communicating Persuasively 🌳 Spring Break Day: Friday, February 5, 2021
February 8	Project Module 4: Pitching Your Ideas • Markel & Selber, Ch. 21: Making Oral Presentations
February 15	Project Module 5: Designing Your Pitch • Markel & Selber, Ch. 9: Emphasizing Important Information • Markel & Selber, Ch. 11: Designing Print and Online Documents ⏰ Pitch Presentations Due: Friday, February 19, 2021, by 11:59 PM
February 22	Project Module 6: Conducting Research • Markel & Selber, Ch. 6: Researching Your Subject • Markel & Selber, Ch. 7: Organizing Your Information • Markel & Selber, Part A: Skimming Your Sources and Taking Notes • Markel & Selber, Part B: Documenting Your Sources 🌳 Spring Break Day: Thursday, February 25, 2021
March 8	Project Module 8: Designing Your Instructions • Review textbook as needed ⏰ Instructions Projects Due: Friday, March 12, 2021, by 11:59 PM

Week of	Textbook Material Covered
March 15	Project Module 9: Describing Objects & Processes • Markel & Selber, Ch. 20: Writing Definitions, Descriptions, and Instructions, pp. 535-555 Spring Break Day: Wednesday, March 17, 2021
March 22	Project Module 10: Using Graphics • Markel & Selber, Ch. 12: Creating Graphics
March 29	Project Module 11: Designing Your Descriptions Review textbook as needed Description Projects Due: Friday, April 2, 2021, by 11:59 PM Last Day to Resign without Penalty: Tuesday, March 30, 2021
April 5	Project Module 12: Structuring Your Recommendation • Markel & Selber, Ch. 18: Writing Recommendation Reports Spring Break Day: Tuesday, April 6, 2021
April 12	Project Module 13: Designing Your Recommendation Review as needed: • Markel & Selber, Ch. 11: Designing Print and Online Documents
April 19	Project Module 14: Finalizing Your Recommendation • Review textbook as necessary Recommendation Reports Due: Friday, April 23, 2021, by 11:59 PM Last Day to Reschedule Final Exams: Wednesday, April 21, 2021
April 26	Project Module 15: Evaluating Your Progress No weekly work accepted after 11:59 PM on Friday, April 30, 2021 Spring Break Day: Monday, April 26, 2021
May 3	Project Module 16: Taking the Final Exam • No course activities due during the last three days of classes, by policy in the Virginia Tech Faculty Handbook, 9.6.1. Classes end & Last Day to Withdraw: Wednesday, May 5, 2021
May 10	Final Exam Due: Wednesday, May 12, by 11:59 PM. No grace period.

Sequence of Technical Writing Projects

In this course, you will compose four formal projects and several informal documents. These projects build toward a long recommendation report. The sequence of projects outlined below will be your primary focus for the entire term.

Choose Your Topic

After reviewing the Recommendation assignment, you will consider topics that relate directly to your major and future career.

Once you choose one as the focus for your report, you will write an **informal proposal** to tell me what you've decided.

Pitch Your Idea

With your topic chosen, you will prepare and then present your idea to the class in a pitch presentation.

Your presentation will provide an overview of your topic and generally describe your recommendation.
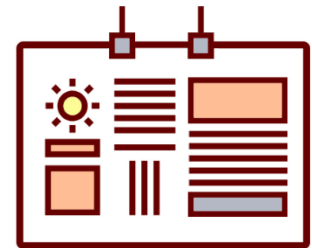
Conduct Research

You will gather two kinds of research to support your project:

- primary (information you collect), and
- secondary (information other people have collected).

Part of that process will be composing instructions to ensure your primary research process is uniform.

Describe an Object or Process

Your recommendation will include details on the objects or relevant processes involved.

You will write a technical description, which you can later incorporate in your recommendation.

Make Your Recommendation

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

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 dates when things are due. 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

Readings for the Week
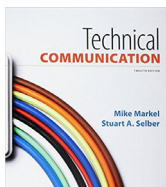
Everything you are supposed to read for the week is listed under the *To Read* heading on the Module Instructions page.

The readings will include

- Chapters from the textbook (Markel & Selber)
- Pages in Canvas
- LinkedIn Learning videos

Activities for the Week

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

- *To Write* heading: the informal documents and the formal projects
- *To Discuss* heading: peer feedback and self-reflection Discussions
- *To Track* heading: writer's log instructions and self-assessment Quizzes

Typical Weekly Schedule

The Course Schedule tells you the topics for every week, and the Module Instructions Page tells you the specific details of the work to do in the course.

The typical weekly schedule outlined below suggests how to break up your work during the week and the days work is due in the course.

Monday

- Readings and activities posted in the Module for the week. Check the Module Instructions page in Canvas for details on what to do.

- Begin work on the readings and activities for the week.

- Track what you do in your work log.

- Grace period for previous week's work ends on Monday at 11:59 PM.

Tuesday

- Get started on the activities to write and to discuss due for the week.

- Complete readings on Tuesday so you can apply the ideas to your work.

- Fill out your work log.

Wednesday

- To stay on track, have a full rough draft of any projects due on Wednesday.

- Add details on your work to your work log.

- Continue work on the readings and activities for the week.

Thursday

- Respond to posts in Discussions.

- Make sure your work log is up-to-date.

- Continue work on the readings and activities for the week.

Friday

- Respond to Discussions by others in the class.

- Fill out your work log, and add your weekly summary and reflection.

- Activities and the Self-Assessment for the week are due on Fridays by 11:59 PM. Grace period for these items ends on Monday at 11:59 PM.

Weekend

- Continue work on the readings and activities as necessary, if using the grace period.

- Get started on the work for the next week, if desired.

How Assessment Works

As you may recall from the Course Manual, I use antiracist assessment strategies, adapted from Asao Inoue's work on [contract grading](), [labor-based grading](), and [anti-racist assessment strategies]().

Some Definitions

Grades

The system that proposes to rank student work that proport to rank the best, the most perfect drafts to the worst, most imperfect texts. The system usually relies on letters (A, A-, B+, etc.) and numbers, from 0-100, that correspond to those letters.

Grading

The process of comparing student work to specific criteria in order to evaluate the student's performance and assign the relevant letter- or number-based rank.

Feedback

All reactions you receive when you share your texts with readers. Your readers may smile, laugh, or cry. They may ask you questions about things they don't understand or share an opposing idea or an issue you haven't mentioned. Feedback can be written, recorded in video or audio, shared orally, and even communicated through gestures.

Assessment

The various methods that help teachers use to help students learn and improve. Assessment can include grades, but it also includes reflection by students and teachers, analysis of learning successes and challenges, and completing projects to demonstrate learning.

Why This Assessment System?

The usual grading process compares student work to an ideal text. Unfortunately, that means your success in a course depends upon perfect grammar and style. But whose grammar and style count? And who decides? That's the problem. The notion of an ideal text is systemically racist because it ignores the many ways that people communicate.

Hi!

Howdy y'all

Heya

As-Salaam-Alaikum

No one speaks or writes according to a single correct grammar and style. In fact, there is no one correct way of communicating. There are many ways of communicating, and as long as your audience understands the message, those ways are correct.

The assessment system in this class focuses on ways to think about what makes writing effective instead of what makes it perfect or correct, as shown in this comparison of the usual grading system to the feedback-based system I use:

	Usual Grading System	My Feedback System
What the Teacher Does	• The teacher reads the text. • She marks errors she notices. • She adds comments on things the writer does well and things the writer needs to work on. • She uses a rubric to show how the text compares to the criteria for the assignment. • She adds a letter or number grade that indicates how the draft compares to ideal expectations.	• The teacher reads the text. • She shares reactions to what she reads. • She asks questions, looking for clarification and wondering about alternative options. • She suggests ideas that may improve the draft. • She proposes ways to expand the ideas or improve future drafts.[2] • She marks the project's status as either complete or incomplete.
What the Writer Does	• If writers are not revising, they may look at nothing other than the grade. • If they will revise, they glance over the paper, looking for what the teacher has marked. • Writers usually look at comments as a to-do list. They assume the teacher marked everything wrong.[3] All the writer has to do is address all the comments to perfect their work.	• Writers read the feedback and questions on their drafts because they can always improve their work. • They reflect on how the feedback can help them make their drafts more effective. • They make their own revision plans, with major and minor changes that they will make to improve their texts.

Notice two big differences between these systems:

1. The grading system focuses on what the writer does wrong while the feedback system concentrates on ways the writer can learn and improve.

2. The teacher in grading system assigns the project a grade while the teacher in the feedback system marks whether the project is complete.

These two differences shift the focus away from grades, empowering students to focus on learning and doing their best possible work. But that's just one of the benefits!

The Benefits of This System

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[2] These steps follow Emily Wray's RISE Model (2011).
[3] A large misconception in the first place. Teachers rarely mark every error in a text. Even if we had all the time in the world, marking everything is overwhelming for the student. Instead, most of us focus on one or two prominent higher order issues that can increase the text's effectiveness.

Because the university requires it, I still have to enter a course grade for you at the end of the term. Rather than using an unfair grading system, I base course grades on your labor–on the time and intensity that you put into your writing and other projects.

This grading system is probably not what you are used to, so I want to tell you a bit about what happens when your grades are based on labor. Here is how you should approach your work:

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 you are graded on labor, mistakes won't undermine your 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 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 writing group or I 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 are you are working to improve, you can't fail.

Put in the Effort (No Pain, No Gain).

Going through the motions won't produce professional 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.

How This System Connects to Your Course Grade

If you are like students I have taught in the past, you are probably curious about this assessment system. Maybe you are even excited to try it out. At the same time, you may be a bit unsure though. If there are no grades, how can you tell how you are doing in the course?

If it were possible, I would have no grades at all. Since you need a course grade however, I set up a points-based contract system that allows you to see exactly how you are progressing toward your course goal. **Here's the simplest explanation of the points system:**

<div align="center">

Do the Work   Earn the Points

</div>

It really is that simple. You complete activities in this course, and you earn points for the work you complete. These points accumulate during the semester to determine your overall course grade.

Simple does not mean easy however! You must complete each activity fully, paying attention to the assignment and assessment criteria to earn the relevant points.

Complete or Incomplete?

The Complete and Incomplete designations in the course are very straightforward:

Complete work	• Meets the requirements of the assignment. • Answers all the questions in the activity. • Is submitted by the end of the grace period. In the workplace, the text would be ready to send out to readers.
Incomplete work	• May be missing elements or not appropriate for the assignment. • May be too short or too long. • May be in the wrong genre. In the workplace, your manager would ask you to revise the draft since it is not ready to send out to readers.

You claim the points for the work you do by taking a self-assessment quiz in Canvas. I check your work, and if you need to do more work to meet the requirements, I adjust the points and ask you to revise.

The Points-Based Contract for the Course

You choose the grade you want to earn in the course and then complete the work required to meet that goal. The Course Manual includes the grade scale and the points totals you should aim for each week to stay on track.

To Earn a B

- Complete all the basic work each week of the course, earning 830 points (out of 1000).

To Earn a Course Grade Lower than a B

- Complete work in the course that earns fewer than 830 points.

To Earn a Course Grade Higher than a B

- Complete all the work required for a B (earning 830 points), and

- Complete additional, optional work that raises the points total to a higher level:

To earn	You need
a B+	40 total additional points beyond a B (830 points)
an A-	70 total additional points beyond a B (830 points)
an A	100 total additional points beyond a B (830 points)

Succeeding in This Online Course

The assessment system and points-based contract for this course should give you the information that you need to set your goals for the course. Because this is an asynchronous online course however, you 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 writing group, 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 In On Canvas Daily:**
If anything changes (like a 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.
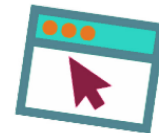
3. **Set a Schedule:**
Schedule weekly class sessions for yourself. Dedicate six to eight two-hour sessions on different days, rather than a one-day marathon session of 15 to 20 hours.

4. **Avoid Last-Minute Work:**
You'll do better in the class if you don't wait until the last minute to do everything. If you wait until the last minute, you may not have time to complete your work or improve your draft before it's due.

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.
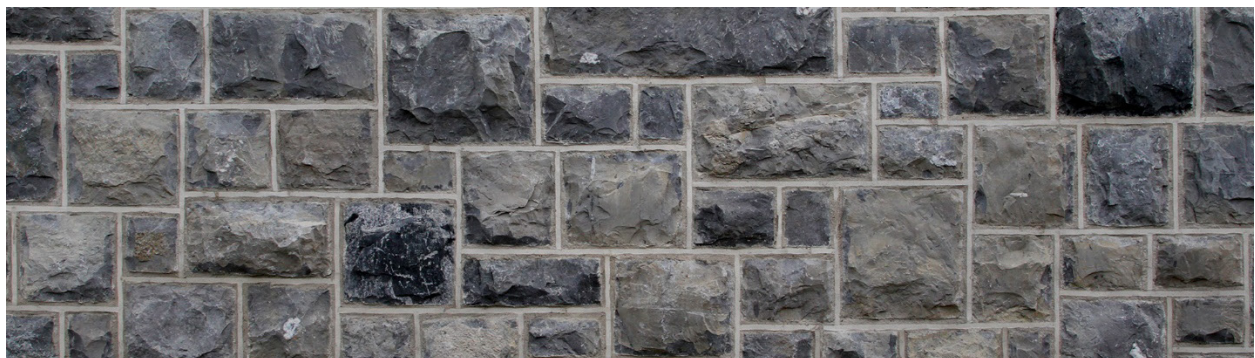
Course FAQs

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 long and short documents, and completing Quizzes, Feedback Discussions, and other Assignments in Canvas.

When Is It Due?

All work should be submitted in Canvas by **11:59 PM on Fridays**.

If you need more time, take advantage of the Grace Period, which ends at 11:59 PM on Mondays.

Check the **Module Instructions page** each week to see the specific dates.

How Did I Do?

Find feedback in **annotations on your submission in Canvas and comments in your Weekly Work Log**. Check Announcements for feedback to the whole class. Allow 48 hours after the end of the grace period for me to provide feedback.

Use **Grades in Canvas** to see your current grade. If you have questions about your grade or your work, send me a **private message using the Canvas Inbox**.

Where Can I Get Help?

- Read the step-by-step instructions for each **Assignment in Canvas**. Often, you'll find the answer there.
- Check the **Announcements in Canvas** for the most recent help and advice.
- Look for the **Help Q&A Posts in Canvas Discussions** for each major writing 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 will pay off.
- 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.