A Short Guide to English 3764: Technical Writing

Traci Gardner
Summer I 2021

Contents

Last updated May 17, 2021

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

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- Succeeding in an Online Course

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- 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 #62047 · Summer I 2021 · May 24-July 2

Who

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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/132039 (Opens May 24)

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 presentation
- Research instructions
- A technical description
- A recommendation report

What You Need

Course Textbook

Technical Communication by Markel & Selber. 13th ed. Macmillan, 2021. (Print or ebook).

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."

Suggested Due Dates

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 due. *Last updated on May 22, 2021.*

Week	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
1	**24** Module 1: Course Intro	**25**	**26** 🔔 Last Day to Add	**27**	**28** Bio Due Writing Goals Due
2	**31** 📅 Memorial Day, No Class	**1** Module 2: Conducting Primary & Secondary Research	**2**	**3**	**4** Research Drafts Due
3	**7** Module 3: Introducing Your Topic & Outlining Your Report 🔔 Last Day to Drop	**8**	**9**	**10**	**11** Midterm Due Description Due
4	**14** Module 4: Drafting Your Report's Body	**15**	**16** 🔔 Last Day to Resign without Penalty	**17** Recommendation Body Drafts Due	**18** ✴️ Juneteenth celebrated, No Class
5	**21** Module 5: Drafting Your Report's Front & Back Matter	**22**	**23**	**24**	**25** Recommendation Front & Back Matter Drafts Due
6	**28** Module 6: Finalizing Your Report	**29**	**30** Recommendation Report Due	**1** Grace Period Ends	**2** Final Exam Due: by 11:59 PM. No grace period

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 entire term.

Choose Your Topic

Following the details on the [Recommendation Report Overview](#), 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 choose a topic for your report, you will write an informal proposal to tell me what you've decided. You can include information from your proposal in the introduction and front matter of your Recommendation Report.

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 findings, explains the possible options, 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.

Last updated May 17, 2021

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

Typical Weekly Schedule

The typical weekly schedule outlined below suggests how to break up your work during the week and submit your work on the suggested due dates.

Everyone works differently, and we all have other obligations. Adjust this schedule to fit your situation. Do what you need to make it work for you.

Monday

- Check the the Module Instructions page in Canvas for the specific activities for the week.
- Complete Peer Feedback Discussions for your classmates.
- Track what you do in your work log.

Tuesday

- Skim the writing activities for the week to identify what you need to do and what you need to find out.
- Read the textbook and other readings, looking for details that will help you complete the activities.
- Fill out your work log.

Wednesday

- Complete related writing activities (such as those what will help you write your draft).
- Use feedback from your classmates to revise your draft from the previous week.
- Add details on your work to your work log.

Thursday

- Compose a rough draft of your project.
- Continue work on any other readings and activities for the week.
- Make sure your work log is up-to-date.

Friday

- Compose a cover letter for your draft.
- Post your cover letter and draft in Discussions by 11:59 PM. Canvas automatically assigns peer feedback partners at 12:00 AM Saturday.
- Fill out your work log, and add your weekly summary and reflection.

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),

Some Definitions

Grades

The system that ranks student work from 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 students' 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 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. There are two kinds of assessment: formative and summative.

Formative Assessment

- Focuses on comments that help form and improve the project.
- Provides advice on how to proceed.
- Points out where the reader is lost or has questions.
- Avoids any judgment of quality.

A chef is using *formative assessment* when she tastes a dish while cooking to decide if she needs to add anything. She is considering how she can improve the dish.

Summative Assessment

- Focuses on summary comments.
- Makes judgments that relate to the quality of the finished product.
- Happens when it's too late to improve.

Diners are using *summative assessment* when they taste the finished dishes and share their comments. The diners are judging the final quality of the dish.

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 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 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.

So Where Do Course Grade Come From?

Because the university requires it, I have to enter a course grade 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 complete a **work log** that records everything you do and reflects on how well you have done.

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

Your Course Goals

During the first week of the course, you will complete a statement of your goals for the course. I will provide you with guidance on the kinds of work that we will do, and you will decide what you want to concentrate on, how much time and intensity you hope to put into the course, and what in particular you hope to learn,

Your Midterm Progress Report

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

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, you will use details and examples from your work logs and compare your work to the goals that you set at the beginning of 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 as appropriate however.
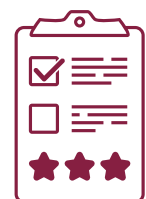
Succeeding in This Online Course

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.
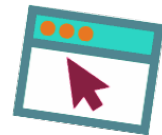
3. **Set a Schedule**
   Schedule regular class sessions for yourself. Dedicate six to eight two-hour sessions on different days, rather than a one-day marathon session of 15 to 20 hours.

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 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. As we get close 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 July 1.

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 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.