Teamwork & Collaboration Guide  
for English 3764: Technical Writing

# Torgersen Bridge over the Mall on the Virginia Tech campus

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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 VT Library exhibit [The Land Speaks: The Monacan Nation and Politics of Memory](https://exhibits.lib.vt.edu/the-land-speaks/). You can also visit the [American Indian & Indigenous Community Center](https://ccc.vt.edu/index/aiicc.html) 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](https://www.archive.vtmag.vt.edu/fall15/family-tree.html).”

# Icon Description automatically generatedYour 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](http://www.ssd.vt.edu/) 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](#_Due_Dates_&) 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 require that you let me know of any accommodation you need **during the first week of classes** so that I can make sure I arrange the support you need. I can only make accommodations for the future. I don’t have a time machine (oh, how I wish I did!), so I can’t apply them to past situations.

For anyone with official documentation:

Contact [Services for Students with Disabilities](http://ssd.vt.edu/students.html) (SSD) in 310 Lavery Hall ([map link](https://goo.gl/maps/rNDopPaCXok), 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](https://community.canvaslms.com/docs/DOC-10573-4212710324) **during the first week of classes** that tells me what you need, and I will try to help.

# Teamwork & Collaboration in This Course

You will complete projects individually and with a group in this course. Because a large portion of the course focuses on project management and collaborative writing, working successfully with your group is crucial to doing well in the course. This guide explains how groups are set up and collaborate, offers suggestions for supporting one another, details what to do if something goes wrong, and outlines how the projects and activities that groups create are assessed.

## Teamwork & Collaboration Goals

* Expand information literacy (researching primary and secondary sources) to find, evaluate, integrate, and synthesize the necessary information and visuals to complete projects. [CLO 1]
* Analyze the context; determine appropriate audiences for or users of planned communications; assess needs of global audiences and people with disabilities. [CLO 2]
* Practice workplace genres related to specific fields (e.g., proposals, instructions, correspondence, reports, technical specifications and slide decks); illustrate how genre conventions can serve as heuristics and as principles of arrangement. [CLO 3]
* Practice team and collaborative work in all phases of project management: planning, researching, writing, revising, and presenting information; include genres associated with team work (e.g., meeting minutes, summaries, poster presentations; pitches). [CLO 4]
* Design and evaluate strategies for testing the usability and overall effectiveness of documents. [CLO 5]
* Illustrate the ethical and human implications of research findings and workplace products on diverse audiences. [CLO 6]

Support one another in xxx ways

Bill Hart-Davidson

I’m maybe an outlier… but I ask groups not to leave their wounded and to see firing as a last resort. Reasoning: in every professional context, a team that gets a good result but destroys itself in the process has failed. It’s costly, it’s unethical and destructive of a healthy work culture. And I don’t want folks to learn that in my class.

Bill Hart-Davidson

To say more... The implication here is that the work of the group includes how to be inclusive of all members, setting each up to succeed rather than fail, and to be alert to choices the group makes that can marginalize others. Once they are able to assure that they've done all they can and if there is \*still\* a problem, then we can look at more extreme options. But often it comes down to a thing where the group decided when to meet and voted someone off the island who had to work at that time. Or they played divide and conquer on the work itself in a way that put someone who struggled to find a contribution in more difficulty to do so, then the story is "well so and so isn't doing anything." For every "slacker" who may be dragging the group down, there is usually a "martyr" who is lifting the pace and intensity in ways that alienate one or more people. Not cool. Not the team dynamic I want folks to learn. And not good "writing stewardship" in a team-oriented writing situation.

Bill Hart-Davidson

As both John and Sherri note, sometimes there is no other option but to have a conversation with the person who is not showing up about their priorities and the class expectations...so that's never fun. I just try to get those situations to a minimum by ensuring, first, that the teams themselves see working together well as a value and a practice to be learned.

Bill Hart-Davidson

What makes my approach oddly controversial - and I say that because if I was the basketball coach this is perfectly normal - is that I expect and grade them based on how well they care about each others success and act in ways to support each others work. I teach these things in class - we work on ways to make collaborative writing work other than divide and conquer, we work on deliberative patterns of decision making that don’t involve voting in small groups which alienates members… all of this is central to what I want them to learn even more than document-focused outcomes. So much of school teaches them only to care about themselves and to screw over others the first chance they get to get ahead and I’m done contributing to that. It’s not the world I want to help make. If Izzo can teach them to care about each other, so can I.

Traci Gardner

Bill Hart-Davidson I LOVE this! It’s in line with what I was trying to come up with, and it seems like it’s in line with a project management unit (with writing). Rather than a writing unit (with project management). I’m not sure how much the dept and TW program will love that, but you’ve given me something to think about for next semester, if not now.

Bill Hart-Davidson

All of this is holistically presented under the category of "Writing Stewardship" which I have written a bunch about. I mark that as a core learning goal, adjusting of course for the type and level of the course. A core component of the "team based writing" stuff is another BHD three-step pattern! This one I adapted from my wise and amazing colleague at RPI Cheryl Geisler. It is: Propose, Deliberate, Ratify. This reasoning pattern helps teams structure working meetings where they make critical decisions about what they are researching and writing/designing. Each member comes to the group with proposals that they discuss and ratify. Once they do, those decisions are owned by the group and CAN be delegated to one person, but that person always can come back to the group for help. We talk through the project management aspects of that implementation process too. There I draw on work by Ben Lauren and his excellent book on the topic.

Bill Hart-Davidson

What all of that gets me to is the ability for the teams process to count for as much as the final outcome. How they work matters and building relationships of trust and goodwill is among the most beneficial things they can learn.

Bill Hart-Davidson

Writing stewardship: <https://alexanderianparry.files.wordpress.com/2016/06/hart-davidson-technical-communication-article.pdf>

Bill Hart-Davidson

Writing stewardship/PM/CM with Ben: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780429059612-10/extending-work-writing-stewardship-william-hart-davidson-benjamin-lauren>

John walter

 Burnett, Cooper, and Welhausen’s “What Do Technical Communicators Need to Know about Collaboration” in Johnson-Eilola and Selber’s \*Solving Problems in Technical Communication\*

First, let me explain some basic details about the projects you’ll write individually and those you’ll write with your group in the following table:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Individual Projects & Work | Group Projects & Work |
| Major Projects Involved | You will work individually on the first two Major Projects:   * Report on Website Writing in Your Field * User Documentation Revision   You will also do individual work that contributes to your group projects, like writing a section of your proposal individually. | You will work with your group on the remaining Major Projects:   * Group Proposal * Progress Report * Recommendation Report   You will combine work from everyone in the group to create one, unified document for each project. |
| Other Course Work | You will also work individually on many of the weekly activities and all the Self-Checks and Check-In Surveys. | You will work with your group on some Try-Its and in Group Discussions. Everyone in the group should contribute to these group activities. |
| Working Methods | You will write these projects on your own. You can consult with others for feedback, but all of the writing should be your own work. You may also share these projects with your group for feedback and advice. | You will write these projects as a group. Everyone in the group should contribute in a significant way to every one of the group projects. Your group can divide the work on each project in whatever way you agree on. |

Table 1 Individual vs. Group Projects and Work in Technical Writing

# How You’ll Collaborate This Term

A close-up of a diagram

Description automatically generatedYou will collaborate in six primary ways this term. In addition to the activities listed here, you will collaborate on some Weekly Activities, including Group Try-Its and Discussions.

**01: Introductions**

Once you’re assigned to a group, introduce yourself to everyone and begin getting to know one another.

Establish a backup plan for connecting in case someone is missing from discussions.

**02: Group Discussions**

Discuss technical writing concerns together, and decide on style and ethical guidelines for your group projects.

Share your second projects with one another for feedback before you submit your work.

**03: Teamwork Agreement & Schedule**

Prepare for the group projects by composing a teamwork agreement to guide your collaboration.

Create the schedule for your drafts and meetings for the rest of the term.

**04: Research Proposal**

Choose a website to examine for your Recommendation Report.

With your group, compose a research proposal that pitches the website you’ve chosen and outlines your research and writing plans.

**05: Progress Report**

Assess the progress your group has made on the Recommendation Report.

Compose a Progress Report that tells me the project’s status and your plans to finish the work.

**06: Recommendation Report**

Collaborate to discuss your website’s usability and to identify how to improve it.

Figure Hou You'll Collaborate in Technical Writing

Together, compose a formal report that explains your research and recommendations.

# How Groups Are Set Up

In an asynchronous course like this one, groups are most successful when they have a shared time when everyone can meet and collaborate. In courses where everyone meets in a classroom on campus, it’s easy to arrange time to meet and work on your projects. In a course like ours however, we cannot assume everyone will be available at the same time to work.

The system that I use to set up your groups focuses on connecting people who all have similar open time in their schedules and who like to work in the same ways. Here I’ll share more details on how that process works.

## Group Setup for Projects

**How I Decide on Groups:** I use details from the Student Information Form that you fill out during the first week of class. In your answers, you’ll tell me when you are available to work and how you like to work (for instance, do you like to work ahead or do you prefer to work at the deadline?).

**Schedule for Group Setup:** I will set up groups during or after the second week of the course. There are two reasons for this schedule. First, everyone needs to submit the Student Information Form to give me the information I need to group people based on their availability. Second, Monday, January 22 is the last day to add, so I have to wait for any new students to fill out the Info Form.

**Group Size:** Your groups will include 4–5 members each. There may be a group with as many as 6 members, but I will do my best to avoid any groups with fewer than 4 members.

**Group Duration:** You will be in the same group for the entire semester so that you can develop strong teamwork strategies as you work on increasingly more difficult projects.

**Where to Find Your Group:** You’ll be able to connect with your Group in Canvas and in Microsoft Teams. I will provide more details on how to use these tools later in the term.

**In Canvas**I’ll set up your groups using tools in Canvas. You will be able to find your Group by clicking the Groups button (shown in Figure 2) in the left Canvas toolbar. You’ll participate in Canvas Discussions and submit all your group work in Canvas

A screenshot of a phone

Description automatically generated

Figure 2 Main Canvas toolbar, showing the Groups button

**In Microsoft Teams**I will set up a private channel in Teams for your group (only your group members and me can join the channel). For Teams, you will click on the name of your group in the Channel List, immediately left of the pane for channel messages (shown in Figure 3). You will use Teams for group chats, to post your schedule, and to share your documents with your group.

A screenshot of a chat

Description automatically generated

Figure 3 Channel List in Microsoft Teams, with the mouse pointer over the Morning 1 Group Channel

# How Groups Will Connect

When you first heard about the group projects in this course, you may have immediately wondered, “How will that work in an asynchronous course?”

It’s a good question, so I want to outline what we’ll do right from the start to be sure everyone is connected. You and your group will complete a series of tasks, using instructions that I’ll post in Canvas during or after the second week of class.

Your group will collaborate to fill out forms/documents in your group’s private channel in Teams to complete the tasks listed below in Table 2:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Task | Description |
| Post contact info for group members | You’ll share contact information in a central location that everyone can find. Contact info can be whatever you want (email, phone numbers, etc.). |
| Choose a name for your group. | You’ll choose a name for your group after considering options. Once you let me know your new name, I’ll update the tools we’re using. |
| Set roles for each group member. | Your group will choose members to fill different roles, like a group leader and a group technology specialist. These roles will help ensure smooth collaboration. You can add more roles once you begin work on your teamwork contract, around Week 7. |
| Choose the tools you’ll use to collaborate. | Your group can decide how to collaborate based on your schedules and access. You can meet in person or online. Your whole group can meet, and you can also have smaller meetings with two or three people.  You will use Teams to share schedules and messages; however, your group can share documents using Office 365 or Google Drive. Either is fine. You can also set up a GroupMe, Discord channel, or Google Group to streamline communication if your group wants.  Meetings  Writing  Checking in |
| Create a team calendar for the rest of the term. | Your group can track meetings and due dates in the channel calendar in Teams.  Begin my adding the Target Due Dates and then add the dates for meetings and submitting drafts that your group has come up with. A Gantt Chart is a kind of schedule that shows the ranges of time people work on aspects of a project. It is more specific than a simple list of deadlines because it shows how long people work on particular areas of a project as well as how different tasks can overlap.  There's more information and examples on this page from Team Managment readingsLinks to an external site. and on the Gantt Chart websiteLinks to an external site.. Additional information and tips are on the Gantt Chart page in the Progress Report Resource Module.  You can see lots of examples on the Gantt Chart Templates Pinterest boardLinks to an external site. |
|  |  |
|  |  |

Table First Tasks to Connect Group Members

* **Know what you can do as a group in Canvas.**Your group is all yours. You can add Discussions, Pages, and Files. You can add dates to your group’s Calendar. Here are links to the documentation:
  + [How do I upload a file to a group?](https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Student-Guide/How-do-I-upload-a-file-to-a-group/ta-p/278)
  + [How do I start a collaboration in a group?](https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Student-Guide/How-do-I-start-a-collaboration-in-a-group/ta-p/438)
  + [How do I create a discussion in a group?](https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Student-Guide/How-do-I-create-a-discussion-in-a-group/ta-p/350)
  + [How do I close a discussion for comments in a group?](https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Student-Guide/How-do-I-close-a-discussion-for-comments-in-a-group/ta-p/376)
  + [How do I manage groups as a student group leader?](https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Student-Guide/How-do-I-manage-groups-as-a-student-group-leader/ta-p/473)
* **Check your Canvas Notifications settings.**To make sure that your group can get in touch with you, check the settings for your Canvas Notifications. Check this documentation:
  + [How do I manage my Canvas notification settings as a student?](https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Student-Guide/How-do-I-manage-my-Canvas-notification-settings-as-a-student/ta-p/434)
  + [How do I add contact methods to receive Canvas notifications as a student?](https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Student-Guide/How-do-I-add-contact-methods-to-receive-Canvas-notifications-as/ta-p/516)
  + [How do I add a text (SMS) contact method in Canvas as a student?](https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Student-Guide/How-do-I-add-a-text-SMS-contact-method-in-Canvas-as-a-student/ta-p/411)

# How to Support Every Group Member

* Track meetings and plans in the new [**Group Updates Discussion**](https://canvas.vt.edu/courses/177045/discussion_topics/1732075).  
  You can help solve some of the issues by adding details to the new [Group Updates Discussion](https://canvas.vt.edu/courses/177045/discussion_topics/1732075). Keep a running update on what the group and group members are doing (group meetings, when a group member is out of town for the weekend, etc.). I’ll check this Discussion to find details on your group when I need them.
* **Focus on Project Management.**The focus of the group projects is not just to learn how to write proposals, progress reports, and formal reports. They’re also to learn about project management. Keep in mind that the *process* of writing the projects is just as important as the *product* you end up with.
* **Track your individual work for the Project Wrappers.**The Project Wrappers for these last three Major Projects will ask you to record how you contributed to each project. Keep track while you’re working so it will be easy for you to add them to the wrapper later.

# What to Do When Something Goes Wrong

* **What to do if something goes wrong for you**
* **Document any issues that come up with team members.**If the group is experiencing any conflicts or issues, be sure to document what’s going on and how you have worked to resolve the challenges. In the workplace, documentation can be critical.
* **Focus on these actions if someone does not do their part.**  
  Whether someone disappears, can’t be contacted, or is having trouble with the work, your group can search for a way to collaborate and get the work done. Here are the steps I would like you to try if this situation comes up:
  + *Try to find out why.* Things happen. Maybe the person is sick (physically or mentally). Maybe the person is swamped with work. Maybe the person needs help finding the resources to get the work done. Whatever the reason, your group should start by trying to find out. Being humane and supportive is more valuable than a perfect memo.
  + *Get them help if needed.* In some cases, you can help them yourselves. In other cases, you might want to suggest other resources. The Writing Center is a great resource if someone is having trouble getting started or needs help with any part of the writing process. You can also let me know what I can do to help.
  + *Solve the issue among the group members.*Once you know what’s going on and address the issue, your group should be able to find a way forward. Maybe you need to adjust the work schedule. Perhaps you need to have a working meeting where members write together. As much as possible, try to solve the problem as a group.
  + *Talk to me if you need more help.* Finding your own way is a large part of what project management is about. That said, I’m *not* saying that you can’t ask for help. Let me know what you’ve tried and what you’d like me to do.
  + *Note what’s going on if it’s time to submit your work.* Everyone should have until the Target Due Date for each of the assignments. If the Target Due Date is here however and you’re not sure when the missing person will deliver their work, add a note in your project that explains what’s going on. You can write something like this:  
    This section is missing from our report. Tian Tian has COVID and is not able to do their part of the report for at least another week.  
    Additionally add a Submission Comment to tell me what’s going on. Be sure to include details on when (or if) the missing work can be added.

# How Groups and Group Work Are Assessed

## Group Project Assessment

I will mark group projects and activities Complete or Incomplete. In some cases, Canvas will auto-mark your work.

Everyone in the group will usually receive the same mark. You need to participate fully in the group projects to earn a Complete on the group projects. If a group member does not participate or participates only minimally, that person will receive an Incomplete. If the group project is marked Incomplete, the group can revise and resubmit as long as the end of the grace period has not passed.

# FAQs

I’ve answered the questions that have come up about how groups will work. If you have a question that isn’t answered below, reply to this message and I’ll add an answer. Everyone in the class will see your reply so do not share private information.

To view the answers to the questions, just click on the question and the answer will appear underneath it.

## Assessment and Feedback

 Do the group projects have an impact on our course grades?

Of course. You need to both participate fully in the group projects and earn a Complete on the group projects.

 Will everyone in the group get the same grade?

The documents will either be marked Complete or Incomplete. Everyone in the group will receive the same mark. If the group project is Incomplete, the group can revise and resubmit as long at the end of the grace period has not passed.

 Is there a group-member grading system?

This course has no grades other than the course grade at the end; therefore, there is no grading system. Group members will, however, have the opportunity to provide feedback on one another’s work.

 How will poor or missing work from one group member impact the grade for the project?

Remember that documents will either be marked Complete or Incomplete. Everyone in the group will receive the same mark. In the case of a group member who does not participate at all or participates only minimally, that person will receive an Incomplete.

## Group Meetings and Collaboration

 Do we have to coordinate a time for meetings?

You can if you want to. Your group will decide how you want to meet and work together. Here are some tips:

* Create a shared Google calendar or use scheduling apps like Doodle or When2meet to find common meeting times.
* Be flexible and accommodating of each other’s schedules.
* Use online communication tools like Canvas Discussions, Zoom, or Slack if physical meetings are not possible.
* Assign a group member to be responsible for scheduling and reminders to keep everyone on track.

 Will there be any mandatory meetings set up?

I will not set up mandatory meetings. Your group can however. The goal of the tasks is to learn about project management as it relates to collaborative writing. You need to make the decisions and evaluate how they work.

 How does a group project work in an asynchronous course?

Your group can decide how to collaborate based on your schedules and what works best for you. You can meet in person or on Zoom. Your whole group can meet, and you can also have smaller meetings with two or three people. You can also use the resources in Canvas Discussions to connect.

 How many times a week do you recommend for groups to meet?

I believe that groups will benefit from at least meeting once a week to arrange work, update one another, and address any challenges that come up. You can meet more than that if you want.

 Are we able to adjust the work schedule and group assignments after?

Of course. Your group decides what kind of meetings and schedule work for everyone involved. You’re in control.

 How will we contact group members?

You can choose whatever will work best for the members of your group. Your group can exchange email addresses, and you can connect in Canvas Discussions. If you want, you can exchange cell numbers so you can text one another or set up a GroupMe for your group.

 How will the group share documents?

I recommend Google Drive, primarily because it is what I use the most. If you are used to sharing work with Office 365, that’s fine too. I just can’t help much with Office because I haven’t used it.

## General Questions about the Group Projects

 How long will the group projects take?

You can check the Target Due Dates on the [Short Course Schedul](https://tracigardner.github.io/TechComm/semester/2023-08-Fall/ShortGuide2TW-Fall23.pdf#page=4)e to see the amount of time for each.

 Will the group collaborate on projects, or will we each write our own report?

These are group projects, so everyone will collaborate to write and submit a single document for each of the projects. For instance, your group will collaborate to write and submit a proposal.

 What Major Projects will we write as a group?

The Major Projects are all listed in the [How You’ll Collaborate This Term Announcement](https://canvas.vt.edu/courses/177045/discussion_topics/1700429).

 Will each group member have a specific page count to complete?

I won’t set up any page counts. I don’t set up page counts for the documents either. I give you a typical range that describes (but does not prescribe) the length. Length depends upon what you have to say, your document design, your use of graphics and illustrations, and other document elements.

 How can we ensure work is evenly divided among group members?

* Set clear expectations at the beginning of the project. Discuss roles and responsibilities for each member, and make sure everyone agrees on their tasks.
* Communicate openly with your group. If you’re struggling or unable to contribute, discuss it with the group. If a member of the group is struggling, do what you can to support them. Rearrange tasks as a group if you need to.
* Track your group progress and responsibilities so it's clear who is doing what. You can keep a running list of accomplishments in a Canvas Discussion thread.
* Remember that the natural process of the work may mean that one person works more during one week than the others. For instance, the person who proofreads the entire document for consistency will have more to do at the end of the writing process.

## Group Challenges and Disagreements

 What should groups do if a member does not respond to email or messages in Canvas?

Your group can decide on the general methods when you begin collaborating. That might be a phone call to check on anyone who is missing. Start from assuming everyone means well, so check on people before the project. If you continue to be unable to contact the person, your group can contact me in Canvas Inbox.

 When should we be concerned about a missing student?

If someone is missing for a day, I wouldn’t worry about it. Everyone has a bad day from time to time. If the person is missing a week or more, you definitely need to let me know.

 What should groups do if a member does not contribute to the documents?

* Your group can decide how to deal with this situation as well. For example, your group can negotiate with the person, outlining what they need to do to catch up.
* Be sure that your group documents the situation as it happens. You need to have clear facts about what is doing on.
* If you decide to contact me, the group members should all agree (except the member who is not contributing, of course). Once you all agree, send me one message from the group in Canvas Inbox. Be sure to also copy the message to group members, and include the documentation that you have on the situation in the message.

 How should groups deal with disagreements among members?

Your group should work together to resolve any disagreements, as you will do in the workplace. Here are some things that will help:

* You’ll create a Teamwork Agreement and Schedule during the first week of collaborative writing. In it, you’ll indicate how you agree to resolve conflicts.
* If conflicts persist, ask me for help. As a group send one Canvas Inbox message to me explaining the situation. Copy all your group members on the message.