Check the instructor website daily for changes, updates, and resources! New/changed items will be flagged with “NEW!”.

If you are unsure about anything, email Brian (giving full details), come to his office hours, or phone him during normal waking hours at the number on the instructor web site.

**Toast and Assumptions**

Some observations of note about the “Toast” assignment (don’t forget there’s a whole separate handout of them on the web site):

- Assumptions are always there. You can change them, but not eliminate them. The more you consciously know, the better your results.
- The level of detail should be correct for the audience and the task. Both too much and too little detail can hurt the audience’s comprehension. You must know your audience!
- It is up to the author to determine which assumptions are important to deal with (e.g., audience has never done this before) and which are not (e.g., an asteroid won’t crash to earth during the task).
- Always test your work – try it, have it read by a peer, etc.

When starting a project, list all your assumptions, then do these two things:

1. Test them (ask the audience or your boss/professor, check instructions, etc.), and/or
2. Make a decision about them (e.g., this document is suitable only for those with high-school fluency in written English).

The result of this process is a set of specifications… more instructions that must be followed. You may be given more specifications, too, by your boss, your instructor, the agency you’re trying to work for, and so on.
The Technical Communication Process

This is a Brian invention, and you are welcome to adapt it after you leave the class. During the term, try to follow it to see if it helps. MEMORIZE Steps 1, 2, 3, 4, 14, and 15!

Step 1: Completely read, fully understand, and explicitly follow the instructions.

Even when you get detailed instructions, lots of things are either unspecified or are open to interpretation. You must nail these things down.

In this class, instructions will be graded as if they all are critically important. Assumptions will be recognized by the instructor and graded, even if they are not turned into specifications by the student. In real life, some instructions are less important than others; some instructions can even be misleading or confusing. Never fake it! If in doubt, ask!

Step 2: Know the objectives of the “product” (report, letter, brochure, etc.).

Superficially this is easy, especially if it has been assigned, as most are. If you decide to do a product on your own, don’t accept your immediate impression as the real or final purpose. If assigned, and you think it might be done a better way, and your boss/instructor is open (proposal or persuasion), you might be able to change the way it’s done.

Steps 3&4: Know Your Audience, Know your audience’s needs and wants.

This is the hardest thing for those new to tech writing. The more you learn about the audience – their background, culture, experience, knowledge, vocabulary, taboos, educational level, primary language, etc. etc. etc. – the more directly you can fulfill their needs and wants, and the better you can get your point across. What they need and want to hear is more important than what you want to say!

Steps 5 – 13, a framework to consider.
   5. Do high-level research on the topic.
   6. Reflect on and characterize the content.
   7. Decide what you’d like to say and how you want to say it (and the “spin,” if any).
   8. Choose the most appropriate medium.
   9. Organize the high-level content (with outline, mind map, etc.)
  10. Design the look and feel (or use assigned specifications).
  11. Test a prototype (“Am I on the right track?”).
  12. Do detailed research.
  13. Flesh out the outline into a draft.

Step 14: Test for fulfillment of Steps 1, 2, 3, and 4.

ALWAYS loop back to make sure that what you have created is what you intended to create.
Step 15: Refine, proofread, and edit iteratively.

It is impossible to spend too much time or effort ensuring your document is perfect in every way (like Mary Poppins!). Use the resources available to you: spell/grammar checks, self-proofreading, peer review, on-the-job testing, etc.

Step 16: Publish. Once it’s perfect, ship it.

Remember the “Creative Writer” vs. “Technical Writer” discussion? State Takeaway: The Technical Communicator is a conduit and translator who turns facts into a useful and understandable product.

Knowing Your Audience
To truly meet your audience’s needs, you must “live among them and get inside their heads”:

Emails

Emails are the most common technical communication medium you will use in the foreseeable future. They are the modern-day equivalent of “memos” or “memoranda” and have adopted the memo’s format. Email hints:

- Think before sending. (Follow the Technical Communication Process!)
- Choose your level of formality carefully
- Use a descriptive subject line (and use a “flag” like FYI or ACTION REQUESTED if appropriate).
- Use the appropriate salutation and complimentary close.
- Keep it short and direct.
- Structure it well: informative and compelling opener, detailed body, memorable closing.
- Include all required information.
- Use proper spelling and grammar.
- Keep typography simple.
- Use a “signature block” if appropriate.
• Try to use links rather than large attachments.
• Don’t Reply To All unless necessary (and don’t reply to distribution lists accidentally!).
• Keep Subject line current with content.

In the outside world, there is an infinite number of possible salutations, with formalities from “BFF-to-BFF” to applicant-to-future-employer. In this class, only one is acceptable:
• Formal: Dear title lastname: Dear Prof. Snape: (note the colon)
 Be sure the complimentary close (words leading up to signature) is same formality.

**Persuasive Writing**

Some technical writing is objective and unbiased. Some is clearly persuasive – a kind of “sales” document that is intended to convince someone to do something or think in a particular way. Persuasive writing is some of the most important technical communication that you will do. It’s used for:
• Hiring: résumés, cover letters
• School: applications to programs and grad school, requests for financial aid
• Work: proposals (to boss, clients, etc.), asking for a raise, making suggestions (you should include a solution suggestion with every problem report!)

Persuasive writing is difficult. Few students are practiced in the skills needed to change someone’s opinions or alter their actions. If you can do persuasive technical writing well, you will have mastered the “Know your audience” step of the Technical Communication Process.

The Audience will **always** have [at least] “Four Secret Questions (4SQ)” in mind when they know you want something from them:
1. “What’s in it for me if I do?” (WIIFMIID?)
2. “What do I have to lose if I do not?” (WDIHTLIIDN?)
3. “What’s in it for me if I do not?” (WIIFMIIDN?)
4. “What do I have to lose if I do?” (WDIHTLIID?)
These are “secret” because they will rarely ask them out loud.

Answer all 4SQ when planning, because they are different ways of looking at the same thing. However, don’t use all four answers separately. Instead, blend them into an “answer smoothie” when you actually write your material for the recipient.

Remember that negativity and threats are less effective than positive wording, and should be reserved as a last resort.