# Course Guide

# Engl& 230/Engr 231: Introduction to Technical Writing

**Course Format**: This course was piloted in a 100% online environment during winter 2011 at both Everett and Edmonds Community Colleges. The course material has been used with equal success in both hybrid and 100% face-to-face formats. For these classroom formats, online discussions and online peer critiques become in-class assignments, and I include the following activities that relate to the subject matter: documentary films, current event discussions, and books or articles. *The History Channel* has several wonderful documentaries on technical topics, and an autobiography that I have assigned in this course is *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* by William Kamkwamba. The focus of the book relates to engineering, and it’s good material for in-class discussions.

The material in this course is designed for both the three-credit and the five-credit Introduction to Technical Writing course. The main difference between the two courses is an additional unit in the five-credit course where the students write a formal research paper on a technical topic. I piloted the three-credit course at Everett Community College and the five-credit course at Edmonds Community College. At Edmonds CC, students who are earning an ATA degree can take Engr 231 instead of Engl 102 (Compostion II). The majority of the students taking technical writing are transferring to a four-year college to major in some aspect of engineering.

**Prerequisites**: Technical writing is a rigorous college-level writing class that requires demonstrated abilities in analytical reading and writing. Completion of Engl& 101 (Composition I), or equivalent, with a grade of 2.0 (“C”) or higher is **required** for entrance into this technical writing course.

**Course Goals:** The course description at Edmonds and Everett CC reads, **“**Writing reports, memoranda, and other business and technical documents with an emphasis on layout, tone, and clear and concise communication.” For the five-credit course only, I add the follow sentence to the description: “Instruction in research technique, research paper formatting, and academic documentation, culminating in a formal report on a technical topic.”

In my syllabus, I include the following paragraph to expand on the course goals:

“Discussions and assignments in this class reveal methods for developing the writing skills and techniques needed to communicate effectively and efficiently in professional and technical industries. The course explores techniques for gathering, organizing, and presenting technical information in written reports for technical and non-technical readers. By studying the purpose and design of reports commonly used in business and technical industries, students will gain practical writing experience and stronger persuasive skills, which will also be useful in academic writing.”

**Course Objectives**

1. **Demonstrate technical control**
   * + Demonstrate control in writing Standard English at the following levels: paragraph, sentence, and word.
     + Demonstrate control of grammatical and mechanical (punctuation) elements of Standard English, including the ability to identify errors and correct them.
     + Apply the above elements for variety, clarity, and emphasis in writing.
     + Demonstrate technical control by writing at a Flesch Kincaid level accessible to the target audience, whether technical or lay audience.
     + Demonstrate technical control by writing reports with a passive sentence percentage no higher than 10.
     + Use a consistent and concise writing style appropriate to business/technical communication.
     + Produce a variety of memoranda, letters, and technical reports that meet contemporary business and industry document design standards.
     + Incorporate graphics effectively and efficiently in technical documents.
     + Demonstrate control of word processing formatting and highlighting elements in technical documents/reports.
     + Demonstrate correct use of MLA formatting and documentation for sources cited.
     + Show efficiency in information literacy skills through the use of texts, the online library references and databases, and Internet sources to research additional information needed for homework and projects.
     + Demonstrate computer and technology proficiency through the use of computers, the Internet, online postings, and online assignment submissions.
2. **Demonstrate critical thinking**
   * + Recognize target audience and employ appropriate persuasive/communication strategies and Flesch Kincaid index.
     + Read a variety of sources independently, recognize and evaluate bias, and analyze content and type.
     + Understand the purpose and design of written technical reports commonly used in business and industry.
     + Show ability to pick subject matter that fits assignment and report type.
     + Transfer concepts discussed in one context in class to another context in order to develop reports and projects.
     + Demonstrate, through written reports, an understanding of the interdependent relationship between text and graphics within technical documents.
3. **Demonstrate a variety of communication skills**
   * + Create, support, and sustain a main point through clear, coherent, and focused documents.
     + Work collaboratively in peer critique groups, and other small groups, to complete assignments.
     + Incorporate an appropriate voice and tone for the target audience and report type.
     + Participate in class discussions and oral presentations and one-on-one conferences.
4. (**For the five-credit course**) **Demonstrate ability to write a credible and analytical formal report** (1800 - 2100 word body) on a fairly new and controversial technically focused topic. The formal report will contain the following elements:
   * Evidence of a well-balanced review of the research and literature for the topic.
   * A persuasive tone that that poses a solution to the issue under discussion.
   * Citations of at least eight worthy, academic secondary sources, three of which must be current scholarly sources.(Note: for the purposes of this course, Wikipedia is not considered an academic secondary source).
   * An appropriate and well-reasoned thesis that is clearly stated and quickly identifiable.
   * Personal understanding of and engagement with the topic.
   * Language which reflects your genuine engagement with the research while still being precise and formal in tone and style.
   * Correct use of MLA for documentation of the sources you cite.
   * Correctly formatted elements of the report: front matter, body, and back matter.

**Learning Activities**

This course is comprised of four units (five units for the five-credit course), each of which focuses on a different type of technical communication/report. The units contain, at a minimum, the following learning activities:

* chapter readings
* chapter quizzes
* exercises and discussions that reinforce the chapter concepts
* a writing assignment that allows students to practice formatting/design requirements
* a draft/peer critique of the final writing assignment
* final writing assignment.

**How do these core assignments meet the course objectives?**

The chapter readings, quizzes, and short exercises fulfill the course goal of reading independently and applying critical thinking to the concepts of technical writing. Students also demonstrate a variety of communication skills in these assignments through class or online discussions of the chapter concepts.

The “practice” writing exercise in each unit gives students the chance to write a short report in the style under study and to get feedback on their work before they start the final writing assignment. Both the practice writing assignments and the final writing assignments in each unit engage all three main course objectives of demonstrating technical control, demonstrating a variety of communication skills, and demonstrating critical thinking.

One or two peer critique forums take place in each unit; these critiques ask students to work collaboratively to complete assignments.

You will find a detailed breakdown of unit-level outcomes in each unit folder on.

**Focus of each unit**: In the first two units, the focus is on short informal reports—feasibility reports and progress reports--typical to the workplace. In the last two units, the focus is on descriptions and instructions, which make extensive use of diagrams or photos.

In Unit One, students read four chapters that introduce them to the concepts of technical writing, and then they write feasibility reports in which they can apply their newly acquired technical writing skills.

Unit Two starts with further study of technical document design: the use of audience-centered visuals and the design of user-friendly documents. These skills are used in a practice progress report. Students then read the chapter on the research process and documentation and complete a few homework assignments to practice MLA documentation. Students finish this unit by writing another progress report and incorporating in-text citations and a works cited page.

In Unit Three, students write technical descriptions and learn how to incorporate several types of visuals in their writing.

In Unit Four, students focus on technical instructions that make extensive use of diagrams or photos, hazard alerts, and specific details.

**Research Paper Unit:** In the five-credit version of the course, the unit on the formal report/research paper comes after Units One and Two. Students segue from short informal reports to the formal research paper. The same learning activities (chapter readings, quizzes, short exercises) take place in the research paper unit as all other units, except that students do not write a “practice” report. They conduct research, study the components and formatting of formal reports, and complete their reports.

This research paper unit meets the course objective of “Demonstrate ability to write a credible and analytical formal report” as well as the main course objectives of demonstrating technical control, demonstrating a variety of communication skills, and demonstrating critical thinking.

At the end of the research paper unit, students move on to the technical description and technical instruction units.

**Textbook**

Gurak, Laura J. and John M. Lannon. *Strategies for Technical Communication in the Workplace*. New York: Longman, 2010. (ISBN: 978-0205698240).

I couldn’t find a free OCL textbook that fit all the needs of the course, so I combine this standard textbook with some OCL resources. This combination works well as many of my students have limited access to computers and prefer a printed text instead of an e-text; however, I will continue to search for additional online resources to augment my text.

Students’ options for accessing the text are as follows:

* Both new and used copies can be purchased at the Edmonds CC and Everett CC bookstores or online at retailers such as amazon.com (current price range $38 - $58).
* An e-text version (valid for 180 days) of *Strategies for Technical Communication in the Workplace* is available for $28.30 at <http://www.coursesmart.com/strategies-for-technical-communication-in/laura-j-gurak-john-m-lannon/dp/9780205791859>.
* Chapter One of the book can be accessed online for free at the following link:  
  <http://instructors.coursesmart.com/strategies-for-technical-communication-in/laura-j-gurak-john-m-lannon/dp/9780205791859>. Click on "Take a Look" on the left-hand side of the page, and it will take you to a .pdf version of Chapter One.
* A copy ofthe textbook is on reserve in the campus library, and can be checked out and used in the library for 2 hours at a time.

**Other Links**

* The companion website for *Strategies for Technical Communication in the Workplace* is at <http://wps.ablongman.com/long_gurak_stcw_1/131/33666/8618731.cw/index.html>
* The OCL text that I found useful as a supplement: <http://www.io.com/~hcexres/textbook/acctoc.html>
* The LibGuide developed by a reference librarian at Edmonds Community College and designed specifically to assist students in the five-credit course with research and with the writing of the formal report: <http://edcc.libguides.com/tech_writing>

**“Future directions” for additional course development**

I am happy with the text used in this course, and I’ve received good feedback on the text from students. However, I would still like to find a textbook, versus an e-book, that costs less than $30.

I am considering adding more practice with the “language” of business and grammar/punctuation. A course reviewer recommended this, and I’ve been considering it lately based on the quality of writing I’m seeing from my students. I will explore the resources in the textbook and search for online resources. For a face-to-face course, this practice would work well for in-class activities. For an online course, it could be homework exercises.

I continue to develop a list of nonfiction books and journal articles that students can read and discuss, and I’m always on the lookout for documentary films. The quarter that I piloted this course, students read *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind.* I included this nonfiction book because it was the campus book read, and the subject matter, wind power, related to the course. I believe that the inclusion of films and bestselling books in the course material allows students to study and write about technical topics through alternative formats that they might find engaging. The more ways I can reach a student, the better, so I will continue to experiment.

**Biography and contact info**

Marcia Woodard teaches technical writing at Edmonds and Everett Community Colleges and is an associate faculty member of the English department at both colleges. She has an MFA in creative writing from the University of Washington and was the nonfiction editor at *the Seattle Review* from 2002 to 2006. She has been an award-winning columnist for the American Kennel Club *Gazette* magazine since 2004. Her book *Collected Kona*, a collection of several of her columns, was published in October 2010 by Teeny Tiny Press. Other recent publications include *Clamor, Crosscurrents,* [www.womenwriters.net](http://www.womenwriters.net), and *13th Moon.*  Marcia can be reached at marcia.woodard@email.edcc.edu