

COMP 3301: Technical Writing

Contact

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Prerequisites

This course is aimed at upper-level computer science students. I will assume a general familiarity with data structures, software engineering, and technology. Some of this can be acquired within the framework of the course, but at minimum, you will have taken COMP 2401 and COMP 2402 or the equivalent.

Textbooks and Resources

There are two required textbooks: the venerable reference “The Elements of Style”, by Strunk and White, commonly referred to by the authors’ names; and the more modern “The Craft of Scientific Writing”, by Justin Zobel.

In addition, we will have many assigned readings from the computer science literature, mainly from the Association for Computing Machinery’s journal *Communications of the ACM*, sometimes referred to as *CACM*. You may have access to an online version of the journal through a student membership in the ACM, but if not, you have online access through Carleton’s institutional subscription to the ACM Digital Library.

Topics

The course’s main topics include the following:

- Writing process: how to approach the task of writing; what is involved in writing a long-form document
- Genre: how your approach to writing should vary depending on the audience and the audience’s expectations
- Organization: strategies for arranging your content; macro- and micro-level organization
- Grammar: the low-level mechanics of writing
- Clarity: advice for making your writing more understandable
- Epistemology: making plain your reasoning and the sources of your information; “how do you know what you know?”
- Scientific Writing: the particulars of this genre

Grading Scheme

In-class writing: 20%
Small writing assignments: 45%
Large writing assignments: 20%
Final exam: 15%

Writing Assignments

Attaining expertise in writing requires practice. In this course, we will undertake numerous short writing exercises, both in class and outside of class. A typical assignment will be to read a designated article from CACM and summarize it in 400-600 words. Assignments will be graded on clarity, readability, and organization.

We will also undertake three longer writing tasks during the term. Each will require approximately 2000-3000 words. A typical longer-form writing assignment will ask for a discussion of a broad question, and you should try to devise an answer and present evidence supporting your stance. The final exam will be a take-home exam structured at least in part as a long-form written exercise.

A Note on \LaTeX

I encourage you to use \LaTeX to format your submissions. While more difficult to use than a WYSIWYG word processor, it produces technical typesetting of unparalleled quality. If you enter graduate school, you will likely be required to use \LaTeX , as it is the preeminent tool for preparing technical and scientific documents. Even if you have no plans for grad school, familiarity with a markup language is helpful for many technical tools as well.