

# 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 equivalents.

## 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 “Writing for Computer Science”, 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
- Scientific Writing: the particulars of this genre

## Grading Scheme

In-class exercises & presentations: 25%

Small writing assignments: 40%

Large writing assignments: 20%

Final exam: 15%

## Assignments and Exercises

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. Write from an outline and do at least one round of revisions before submitting.

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.

Although this course is primarily about writing, it also embraces communication more generally. Near the end of the term, each student will give an individual in-class presentation. You will prepare your own slides based on a recent CACM article or topic of interest, and present them to the class.

## A Note on L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X

I encourage you to use L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X to format all 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 L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X, as it is the preeminent tool of technical communication. Even if you have no plans for grad school, familiarity with a markup language is helpful for many technical tools as well. I recommend TeXworks ([www.tug.org/texworks](http://www.tug.org/texworks)) and, for Windows users, MiKTeX ([miktex.org](http://miktex.org)).