

Course 36620: Applied Policy Communications Lab  
Fall 2025

Instructor: Meredith Shiner  
Email: [meredith@meredithshiner.com](mailto:meredith@meredithshiner.com)  
Cell: (847) 567-6373

TA: Megha Viswanath  
[meghav@uchicago.edu](mailto:meghav@uchicago.edu)

Class Date and Time: Mondays and Wednesdays, 9 AM to 10:20 PM, beginning Sept. 29

Class Location: KELL0021

Final: Written assignment and oral presentation

Office hours (in-person and virtual): Wednesdays 10:30-11:30 PM in TBA location; via Zoom anytime by direct request and scheduling with instructor (response guaranteed with 24 hours).

Course Description:

To succeed in the field of public policy, it's not enough for a practitioner to design sound, data-driven strategies. Successful public policy professionals also must convince others—elected officials, peer staffers and constituents—that their position is right, using communications to justify policy outcomes mathematically, economically and morally. In this lab-based course, students will work for a client, and simulate a policy office culture, reviewing and developing communications materials, including:

- a strategic communications plan;
- Op-Ed for a principal;
- a press release;
- policy talking points;
- social media copy;
- traditional media pitches, learning the basics of how to interact with reporters and then doing so with the support of the instructor, a veteran policy journalism and communications professional.

The course will include conversations with outside policy communications experts based in Chicago and Washington D.C., as well as policy reporters based in both cities to better understand how to write in a way that breaks through with media.

At the end of the quarter, the goal for each student in this class is to feel better prepared to enter the real world of public policy, emerging with a written portfolio and practical experience that can help them ace job interviews with potential employers, from public affairs consulting firms to members of the U.S. Congress.

This course will be grounded in five essential practices:

1. Writing: In nearly every class meeting, students will review, produce or edit a piece of writing
2. Reading: Prior to each class meeting, students will need to evaluate assigned readings, from materials provided by the client to professional communications assets, such as press releases and speeches, posted on the class's Canvas site.
3. Feedback: Students will collaborate to provide peer feedback on work-in-progress materials and will receive feedback from the instructor as the class progresses, to ensure that each student receives enough feedback on individual pieces of work to be set up for success by class's end, when the full portfolio of writing is evaluated. As this is a lab-based class working with a real-world client, students also will receive feedback, after their final presentation, from the chosen client for their class.
4. Small-Group Work: To simulate real-world policy working environments, students will work together to develop and refine communications materials as if they were a team of public policy consultants under contract from a client. Though some materials will be created and assessed individually.
5. Classroom Interaction: This course is designed to replicate real-world policymaking environments, so students will be expected to actively participate and lead conversations, assessing assigned materials, talking through their own work product and asking informed questions of weekly classroom guests who have applied experience in the field.

*Note: This course assumes proficiency in English.*

Required Text:

Required readings will include documents provided by the client to understand their communications goals and needs, as well as relevant examples of communications pegged to current events and posted for download on the class Canvas page.

This year, I am also assigning *The Invented State: Policy Misperceptions in the American Public* by Emily Thorson.

Learning Outcomes:

By committing to the process of reading, writing, discussing, collaborating, and rewriting, students who complete this course will demonstrate their ability to:

- Generate questions for the client, as well as for independent research, which allow for clear, compelling writing on policy topics that demonstrates:
  - a grasp of key policy concepts

- the client's work, needs and objectives
- writing techniques that meet the demands of the modern communications landscape
- Understand how to identify an audience for policy communications and then draft and edit policy writing accordingly, in a way that effectively conveys complicated ideas to that selected audience
- Take a strategic approach to policy communications, understanding how all writing and communications tactics can fit together as part of a broader plan or campaign
- Adapt to writing policy positions that might not reflect personal political or policy views but instead are crafted to reflect the policy goals of the client
- Use lessons learned in the course to help assess peer work as well as collaborate on written materials, as required

#### Assignments and Grading:

Students will, over the course of the quarter, complete a series of written assignments that will culminate in a complete portfolio of strategic communications writing. Assessment for this class is scaffolded, meaning the skills required for each writing assignment will build over the course of the quarter, and each assignment will be submitted in draft form first and reviewed by the professor and/or TA and, in some cases, peer-reviewed, before submission. Participation grade includes the on-time submission of draft materials.

- Writing Assignments (75 percent):  
Each student will write/compose a:
  - Strategic communications plan and presentation (40 percent):
    - Written strategic communications plan (25 percent): Ultimately, this is a writing course building toward this work product that reflects the highest level of writing ability, strategic thinking and professional counsel. Over the course of the quarter, we'll workshop drafts to ensure students are prepared to deliver professional-grade work to the client. Assessment of these plans will include not only a grade on the final work product but also interim written materials, which factor into the participation grade.
    - Group presentation (15 percent): This plan will be a small-group project to simulate a real-world work experience, where teams collaborate on drafting and pitching a strategic communications plan to the client.
  - Op-Ed (20 percent): Successful policy communicators can write in the voice of others. For this assignment, students individually will choose a topic that is relevant to the client and write in the voice of the client's principal, with guidance and assistance from the instructor.
  - Talking points document (+/-, part of participation grade below): Each student in the group will choose a policy topic within the client's policy portfolio and draft a talking points document. Although most employees within a policy think tank or Congressional office, for example, will not be externally facing communications staff, many have to provide written materials explaining policies to communicators so they can share with external stakeholders, like the media.

This individual policy talking points document, based on a template shared by the instructor, will be peer-reviewed and the instructor will assess both the document and peer feedback.

- Press release/Media pitch (15 percent): Students will draft a press release and corresponding media pitch that will be assessed by the instructor and also workshopped during class time with guest lecturing reporters. Students will learn how to distinguish between a press release and a media pitch (they're different!) to prepare themselves for how to be savvier about media in future employment.
- Social media copy (+/-, part of participation grade below): Just because text is short does not mean it is not impactful! To exist in a modern policy environment, students must understand how to get their message across in 160 characters or less.
- Seminar Attendance and Participation (25 percent):
  - Attendance (15): Given that this intensive lab course experience requires asking questions of internal stakeholders at the client organization, as well as guest lecturers with practical field experience, class attendance and participation is mandatory. Obviously, conflicts come up over the course of the quarter, so students should coordinate with the instructor in advance of absences to ensure they are able to complete assignments successfully. Up to two missed class sessions are allowed. Failure to meet the attendance requirement will result in failure of the course.
  - Participation (10): +/- grading of draft assignments reflecting that they have been submitted or not submitted at their due date is included in student participation grading.

#### Weekly Course Schedule:

Week	Topic Covered & Assignments Due
1	<p>The Principals of Public Policy Communications</p> <p>How To Prepare Questions For Client Interviews To Create Effective Communications Outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Learning how to ask good questions</li> <li>● Situation analysis: What is it? Why is it important? How is identifying a problem for a client the first step toward creating a policy solution?</li> <li>● What is a strategic approach?</li> <li>● What are communications tactics?               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What are the most important communications tactics to understand for any policy professional?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Week	Topic Covered & Assignments Due
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What does effective policy communication look like?</li> <li>● How to prepare to meet <i>our</i> client</li> <li>● Division into small groups for the duration of class</li> </ul> <p>Guest Presenter A Preparing To Meet A Client: How to Generate Effective Questions for Communications Impact, with a Top Policy PR Professional</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Q&amp;A with a leading policy and politics communications professional on how they approach client meetings, forming questions to get the right answers, presenting to clients and thinking through communications strategy</li> </ul> <p>ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT CLASS: Questions for client meeting (5-8 thoughtful questions to direct to the client in intro session)</p>
2	<p>Strategic Communications Plan Workshop I — Meet the Client</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Review as a class prepared questions for client meeting; workshop any additions or changes in anticipation of visit</li> <li>● Talk through anticipated challenges and goals for the time with client</li> </ul> <p>Client visit and conversation with class</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Client to introduce themselves and give personal overview of organization's work</li> <li>● Students to ask questions based on their research and active listening to client's needs</li> </ul> <p>ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT CLASS: DRAFT Situation analysis for strategic communications plan</p>
3	<p>Policy Talking Points: Translating Complex Policy for The Outside World</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Why do talking points matter? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ In the modern political climate, "talking points" have been relegated to derogatory status and dismissed as empty words from politicians appearing on television, but talking points, done correctly, can be the foundation of enacting good public policy by clearly defining to audiences:</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Week	Topic Covered & Assignments Due
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The challenge we're facing;</li> <li>▪ What happens if we do nothing;</li> <li>▪ What happens if we do something;</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What is a "message triangle" and how can policy professionals use it to get their way?</li> <li>● Review of a current events news cycle and assessment of how well a communications campaign was organizing, reverse engineering the existing communications into the "message triangle" tool</li> </ul> <p>Guest Presenter B</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Policy professional(s) discuss in conversation with instructor and class the importance of talking points and clear communication assets to non-communications policy staff</li> <li>● Client situation analysis review</li> </ul> <p>ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT CLASS: Message triangle for client topic</p>
4	<p>Press Release/Media Pitch/Social Media Workshop</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What is a press release? When should you use a press release?</li> <li>● What is a pitch? How is it different from a press release?</li> <li>● What is the difference between earned media and owned media and when is it appropriate to pursue earned v. owned?</li> </ul> <p>ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT CLASS: DRAFT press release, media pitch, social text</p> <p>Discussion: Misconception/Misinformation/Disinformation: What should we know about audiences and how to navigate the world in 2024, a discussion of <i>The Invented State</i>.</p>
5	<p>Strategic Communications Plan Workshop II — Strategic Approach and Tactics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Review of contemporary case studies in enacted public policy and their political reception</li> <li>● Group discussion and workshop on approach and tactics, incorporating assets worked on in first half of quarter, applying core principles acquired throughout</li> </ul>

Week	Topic Covered & Assignments Due
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Peer review of press release, media pitch and social media</li> </ul> <p>ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT CLASS: Draft strategic plan approach and tactics, FINAL press release, media pitch and social text</p>
6	<p>How to Write an Op-Ed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Op-Eds can bring attention and prestige to public policy campaigns, but how do you even start to write an opinion, in your own voice and in the voice of others?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Know your audience</li> <li>Know your purpose</li> <li>Know your call to action</li> </ul> </li> <li>Op-Ed worksheet workshop</li> </ul> <p>Guest presenter C: a real-life editor! Hear from the direct source what works and what doesn't when pitching a policy piece</p> <p>ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT CLASS: Draft Op-Ed for client, to be workshopped in next session</p>
7	<p>In-class Op-Ed workshop</p> <p>A full session for peer review and instructor feedback of your two Op-Eds</p> <p>ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT CLASS: Final Op-Ed for client</p>
8	<p>Strategic Communications Plan Workshop III: Putting It All Together</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A full session dedicated to workshopping your two final work products: a strategic communications plan and a deck for presenting your plan to the client; all of the components will be in progress, but a communications plan, if effective, can be a narrative story you're telling a client so they can tell their key audiences</li> </ul> <p>ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT CLASS: Final presentation</p>
9	NO CLASS — THANKSGIVING

Week	Topic Covered & Assignments Due
10	TBA ASSIGNMENT FOR EXAM PERIOD: Final full, written communications plan

#### Harris School of Public Policy Academic Policies

This is an intensive writing course, so the instructor's expectation is that your writing will be original. Because the writing produced in this course directly reflects strategic concepts taught and the biggest assignments are designed to replicate non-publicly available material, reliance or over-reliance on generative AI will not lead to success.

Please see the below school-wide policies and resources:

#### Harris School and University of Chicago Policies

- [Harris School Policies](#)
- [University General Policies](#)
- [University Academic Policies](#)
- Policy on audio and video [recordings](#)

#### General Resources Available to Students

- [Harris Academic Support Programs and Handbook](#)
- [Student Wellness](#)
- [UChicagoGRAD](#)