

Policy Communication: Translating Evidence into Policy Solutions

PPHA 36650 – Fall 2025

Day/Time: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 3:30pm-4:50pm

Room: Keller 0010

Instructor: Isabeau Dasho

Email: isabeau@uchicago.edu

Office Hours: Tuesdays 2pm-3:00pm, Thursdays 1:30pm-3pm and by appointment

Course Description:

This writing-intensive course introduces students to evidence-based communication tools, frameworks, and strategies that can be used to craft persuasive policy narratives for audiences that need to be targeted and reached by public policy professionals. Each week, students will have ample class time to experiment with and receive extensive feedback on their writing to ensure they are able to communicate public policy as clearly, concisely, and compellingly as possible.

The writing tools we will cover in this course fall into one of three categories:

1. **Nuts and Bolts:** Tools for making meaning and creating connection at the paragraph, sentence, and individual word levels
2. **Blueprints:** Frameworks for organizing and building effective evidence-based policy narratives that meet the unique needs of the intended audience
3. **Special Effects:** Strategies to best structure policy narratives to ensure they are as clear, concise, and compelling as possible

Learning Outcomes:

By committing to the rigorous process of reading, discussing, writing, and rewriting, students who complete this course will be better positioned to:

- Discern the differences between more and less effective communication approaches and/or styles in public policy.
- Recognize the relationship between power and influence and develop sound strategies to structure policy narratives in anticipation of the audience's expectations.
- Define the limits and ethical constraints of persuasion as they apply to bias, belief, attitude, and moral foundations.
- Use a human-centered approach to ask better research questions, organize evidence

efficiently, and frame narratives to meet the unique needs of the intended audience.

- Read actively to understand and test an author’s claims, evidence, and opinions.
- Write persuasive policy narratives based on analysis and synthesis that provide valuable recommendations to address the root causes of pressing policy challenges.
- Distinguish between substantive revision and surface editing; practice both and rethink and reshape their writing based on audience and purpose.
- Assess their peers’ writing and provide useful feedback on matters ranging from content to structure and evidence to grammar.
- Practice the ethical and safe use of AI as a writing tool and thought partner

Course Expectations

Harris Academic Policies and Standards

Given this is a Harris course, [all students in this class are subject to the Harris academic policies and standards](#). Any further amendments and interpretations of these policies are documented below.

Mandatory Attendance:

Attendance is mandatory and will be tracked. Attendance will be assessed at 10 percent of your total grade and include your presence in class, in person, for the **full** class session. If you arrive halfway through the class session you will not be counted as ‘attended’. Attendance and presence means full engagement in the learning environment, asking questions, participating in peer groups and taking notes. If students are not fully present in the learning environment and found repeatedly to be disengaged your attendance grade will reflect that.

You are allowed two unexcused absences for the quarter but will still be responsible for the week’s assignments unless you have requested and been granted an extension. Any further absences in the case of bereavement, sickness, or other circumstances outside of your control may be granted on a case by case basis.

Late Assignments:

The late penalty is one grade level per day (A- to a B+). Students can request extensions 48 hours in advance of a due date. Assignments without extensions will be graded accordingly.

Re-Grading Policy:

Feel free to discuss your grades with me at any time. If, following such a conversation, you feel that an error was made, please submit a re-grade request to me by email, within two weeks of the assignment being handed back. Please include an explanation or justification for the re-grade request.

Pass/Fail Policies:

Students can request to take this course pass/fail. Students must use the [Harris Pass/Fail request form](#) and must meet the Harris deadline, which is generally 9:00 am CST on the Monday of the fifth week of courses. I keep the right to deny a student's pass/fail request if the student has not met performance or attendance standards. Students who are approved to take the course pass/fail must turn in all assignments, attend class meetings, and meet all other course requirements.

Accessibility

The University of Chicago is committed to ensuring equitable access to our academic programs and services. Students with disabilities who have been approved for the use of academic accommodations by [Student Disability Services \(SDS\)](#) and need a reasonable accommodation(s) to participate fully in this course should follow the procedures established by SDS for using accommodations. Timely notifications are required to ensure that your accommodations can be implemented. Please meet with me to discuss your access needs in this class after you have completed the SDS procedures for requesting accommodations.

Phone: (773) 702-6000

Email: disabilities@uchicago.edu

Engagement and Decorum

The Harris School welcomes, values, and respects students, faculty, and staff from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences, and we believe that rigorous inquiry and effective public policy problem-solving requires the expression and understanding of diverse viewpoints, experiences, and traditions. The University and the Harris School have developed distinct but overlapping principles and guidelines to ensure that we remain a place where difficult issues are discussed with kindness and respect for all.

- The University's policies are available [here](#). Specifically, the University identifies the freedom of expression as being "vital to our shared goal of the pursuit of knowledge, as is the right of all members of the community to explore new ideas and learn from one another. To preserve an environment of spirited and open debate, we should all have the opportunity to contribute to intellectual exchanges and participate fully in the life of the University."
- The Harris School's commitments to lively, principled, and respectful engagement are available [here](#): "Consistent with the University of Chicago's commitment to open discourse and free expression, Harris encourages members of the leadership, faculty, student body, and administrative staff to respect and engage with others of differing backgrounds or perspectives, even when the ideas or insights shared may be viewed as unpopular or controversial." We foster thought-provoking discourse by encouraging

community members not only to speak freely about all issues but also to listen carefully and respectfully to the views of others.

While I respect a lively and engaging discussion and at times may encourage it, learning is the primary goal of this course, so if that engagement becomes disruptive or a barrier to advancing through the day's lesson, I may move us back on topic. In these cases, the expectation is professionalism; simply put, you may need to table your discussion for later so the class can move forward.

Academic Integrity and Dishonesty

All University of Chicago students are expected to uphold the highest standards of academic integrity and honesty. This means that students shall not represent another's work as their own, use un-allowed materials during exams, or otherwise gain unfair academic advantage.

What is plagiarism?

“Simply put, plagiarism is using words and thoughts of others as if they were your own. Any time you borrow from an original source and do not give proper credit, you have committed plagiarism,” according to the University of Chicago’s [Office of International Affairs](#). “While there are different degrees and types of plagiarism, plagiarism is not just about honesty, it is also a violation of property law and is illegal.”

Furthermore, “It is contrary to justice, academic integrity, and to the spirit of intellectual inquiry to submit another’s statements or ideas as one’s own work,” according to the University of Chicago’s [policies and regulations on academic honesty and plagiarism](#).

What are the consequences if you plagiarize?

Besides earning a grade of 0 on the assignment (and no higher than a B- in the course, regardless of performance on other assignments), students will also be reported to the Dean of Students and may be punished under the University of Chicago’s [discipline procedures](#), which “can result in sanctions that severely disrupt or even end your studies at the University.”

The Harris School’s policies related to academic integrity and dishonesty can be found on this [page](#). Harris’s specific procedures for handling suspected violations of these policies are available in the section *Harris Procedures for Allegations of Plagiarism, Cheating, and Academic Dishonesty*.

If a student has been found in violation of academic honesty and does not believe that either the finding or the sanction is fair or correct, the student has the right to appeal the finding by requesting a hearing from the Area Disciplinary Committee. More information about the Area Disciplinary Committee is available [here](#).

How to Avoid Unintentional Plagiarism:

The majority of incidents related to plagiarism are unintentional. The best way to avoid unintentional plagiarism is to keep good notes of your sources so that you do not forget where a piece of information comes from. The University of Chicago has created several citation management resources you may want to consult:

- [Citing Resources](#): A detailed guide to citation from the University of Chicago Library. Includes instructions on locating and using major citation manuals and style guides, as well as information about using RefWorks bibliographic management tool.
- [RefWorks](#): RefWorks is a web-based bibliographic management tool provided by the University of Chicago Library that makes creating bibliographies and citing resources quick and easy. The Library's RefWorks' web site links to information about classes and extensive online tutorials, as well as help guides on keeping organized and citing resources using RefWorks' Write-N-Cite feature.
- [Citation Management](#): A helpful guide on how to use RefWorks and other citation management tools, including EndNote and Zotero.

We expect you to acknowledge the source material consulted—whether that's by using direct quotations or paraphrases—with proper citations according to the [Chicago Manual of Style](#).

Use of AI in the Classroom

While AI tools offer valuable assistance in research and idea generation, it is imperative to not let these tools become substitutes for your intellectual engagement with the material. You are permitted to use AI tools as supplementary aids for refining your ideas, finding research material, and editing language to help with translation, spelling, grammar, and improving sentence flow.

When you use AI tools, you take full responsibility for the content they generate, so you are responsible for reviewing and editing any generated content to avoid inaccurate information and copyright infringement.

While chatbots like Chat-GPT may be used in the aforementioned contexts, I **do not** advise using their text generation capabilities in your final written output given the purpose of this course is to develop **your** skills as a professional policy communicator, and your ability to apply the lessons learned in class is the focal point of assessment. **However, all instances in which AI tools have been used, whether for translation, ideation, or generation, must be cited in the footnotes in accord with [the Chicago Manual of Style's guidance](#).**

Managing Any Disruptions That May Arise:

We're committed to helping everyone pass this course in a way that ensures the materials are learned and the work gets done. That said, our students' safety and wellbeing is more important than anything going on in class. If you find yourself unable to complete an assignment because

of illness or other personal reasons, here's what we suggest: As soon as possible, you should email your instructor and copy your academic advisor with a note about the missed work and an explanation. We hold everything in the strictest confidence, and we will work together to find a way for you to make up missed assignments.

Any student who faces challenges securing food or housing or personal safety should notify us, if you are comfortable doing so. If we cannot help, we will connect you with someone who can. Students can also reach out to their academic advisor and the Dean of Students, Kate Shannon Biddle, for support.

Assessment

Your grade is weighted as follows:

<p>Attendance and Participation</p> <p>Your presence in class and your preparation for it. It is expected that you come prepared to engage in any discussions and activities each day.</p>	<p>10%</p>
<p>Small Group Leading Discussion</p> <p>Each week, you will come prepared to discuss a piece writing you've encountered in your research. You'll walk your team through the research highlights and what about the writing style was most effecting to you and why.</p>	<p>15%</p>
<p>Individual Drafts (Analytical Brief, Policy Memo, Policy Reform Narrative)</p> <p>Drafts are graded mostly for completion. Complete all of the tasks asked of you in the rubric and receive full marks.</p>	<p>15%</p>
<p>Presentations + Memo</p> <p>Students will present policy proposal pitches in teams to a Representative of the Wisconsin State Legislature. Presentations will be based on a memo that teams write together. Presentation will take place at the end of the quarter for final evaluation by myself and the Representative</p>	<p>20%</p>
<p>Final Portfolio</p> <p>Portfolio rubrics will be provided well in advance of the due date. Final portfolios are further outlined below.</p>	<p>40%</p>

Quality grades will be allocated according to the following scale:

A	100-94	B-	80
A-	93-90	C+	79-76
B+	89-87	C	75-71
B	86-81	C-	70

Final Portfolios

You will need to submit your final portfolio by the end of the day on **the last day of instruction** that includes:

1. Analytical Brief

- A comprehensive and critical summary of existing scholarly research on a specific topic or research question. Analytical Briefs provide an overview of the current state of knowledge in a particular field and identify gaps, debates, trends, and areas where further research is needed. While comprehensive this is not meant to be exhaustive. Analytical briefs should not exceed eight (8) pages.

2. Individual Policy Decision Memo — Analysis of Your Own Proposed Policy Reform

- A 1000-word document that communicates key information, recommendations, and justifications to decision-makers within an organization or government. Policy decision memos are crucial tools in policy analysis and decision-making processes, as they help stakeholders understand the context, implications, and potential outcomes associated with a particular policy choice.

3. Policy Reform Narrative

- A 1,500-word narrative that shows the changes, intentions, and impacts associated with a specific policy reform. Such narratives should communicate the rationale behind the reform, the process of its development, the key stakeholders involved, and the observed or expected outcomes. They should also aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the policy reform, making it accessible to a diverse audience, including policymakers, the public, and other key stakeholders.

4. Presentation

- In a scripted policy presentation student teams will have 5-7 minutes to pitch their policy reforms to an elected representative of the Wisconsin State Legislature.
- Policy Reform Pitch will be based on a memo crafted by the pitch team in Week 5 based on the format and rubric of the Individual Policy Decision Memo

Week, Dates & Readings	Agenda & Assignments
<p>Week 1 – Sept 30–Oct 2 Readings (Required):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mastering the Three Policy Narratives - Organ Transplant System 'In Chaos' as Waiting Lists Are Ignored 	<p>Agenda: Lecture I:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Why Does This Matter? - One True Thing - Statement Starters - Developing an Effective Research Statement - Discussion: Where Can I Find Good Evidence? <p>Lecture II:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Review: Research Statements - Moving from a Research Statement to Strong Policy Research Questions - Refining Scope Using Abstraction Laddering - Introduction of Representative and District <p>Assignments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Analytical Brief (Draft) due Week 3 - Discussion: Statement Starters & Three Research Questions
<p>Week 2 – Oct 7–9 Readings (Required):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Meeting the Unique Needs of the Reader - Analytical Brief Examples (Week 2 Module) - Dahlstrom (2014) 'Using Narratives and Storytelling to Communicate Science with Nonexpert Audiences' - Lehman 'Why Drug Decriminalization Failed' 	<p>Agenda: Lecture I:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Advocating for Reform with the Four Elements - Organizing Evidence Using Affinity Clustering - Research Groups Assigned <p>Lecture II:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Group Discussion #1: State of the research - Mastering the Analytical Brief - Finding a Narrative Arc for the Analytical Brief - Citing Sources Appropriately <p>Assignments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Individual Policy Decision Memo + Reader Profile (Draft) due Week 4
<p>Week 3 – Oct 14–16 Readings (Required):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Four Elements of Persuasive Policy Writing - How to Write a Policy Memo That Matters - Davidson (2017) 'Storytelling and Evidence-Based Policy: Lessons from the Grey Literature' - Anderson (2023) 'Never Give AI the Nuclear Codes' 	<p>Agenda: Lecture I:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Making Impactful Recommendations Using the Importance/Difficulty Matrix - Understanding the Landscape of Reform with Stakeholder Mapping - Wisconsin Case Study <p>Lecture II:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Research Group Discussion: Refining Policy and Who Are the Players - Peer Review: Questions Only - Writing to Meet the Unique Needs of Your Reader <p>Assignments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Group Memo Draft assigned (Due Week 5)

<p>Week 4 – Oct 21–23 Readings (Required): - Graham et al. (2009) 'Liberals and Conservatives Rely on Different Sets of Moral Foundations' - Day et al. (2014) 'Shifting Liberal and Conservative Attitudes Using Moral Foundations Theory' Declining Fertility Rates Case Study</p>	<p>Agenda: Lecture I: - Framing Your Message Effectively with the Moral Foundations Theory Lecture II: - Review: The Moral Foundations Theory - Exercise: Identifying Frames and Reframing Arguments - Research Group Discussion: What Frames are Present in your policy space?</p>
<p>Week 5 – Oct 28–30 Readings (Required): - Crafting Compelling Policy Narratives: Using Aristotle’s Dramatic Arc - Crafting Compelling Policy Narratives: Kurt Vonnegut’s 'Man-in-Hole' Story - Crafting Compelling Policy Narratives: Understanding the Object of Desire - Bruner (1991) 'The Narrative Construction of Reality' - Chapters 5 & 12, Public Policy Writing That Matters</p>	<p>Agenda: Lecture I: - Why Policy Reform Narratives Matter - Five Goals of Policy Reform Narratives - Exercise: Starting with One True Thing Lecture II: - Narrative Structure - Three Types of Policy Storytellers - Research Group Discussion: A Narrative that Changed Your Thinking Assignments: - Individual Policy Reform Narrative (Draft) due Week 6</p>
<p>Week 6 – Nov 4–6 Readings (Required): - Chapters 7–10, Public Policy Writing That Matters - Demsas (2023) 'Local Government Has Too Much Power'</p>	<p>Agenda: Lecture I: - Improving Paragraph Coherence with Deductive Structure - Improving Paragraph Cohesion with the Old-to-New Sequence - Improving Sentence Clarity with Strong Sentence Cores Lecture II: - Active vs. Passive Voice - Tech Tools for Clearer Prose - Research Group Discussion: Who doesn’t agree and why? Assignments: - Discussion Board: Dissenting Opinion Rebuttal Canvas Discussion Board Post</p>
<p>Week 7 – Nov 11-13 Readings (Required): - TBD CASE STUDY: Sports Stadium and Public Funds</p>	<p>Agenda: Lecture I: - Activity: The Bare Essentials - Why This Matters: Revisited Lecture II: - Presenting Findings to an Informed Audience - Research Group Discussion: Who do you need to reach and how will you do it?</p>

	Assignment: Strategic Briefing on Individual Policy Proposal: 2-3 slides due week 8
Week 8 – Nov 18-20 CASE STUDY: Public Transit/Micro Plastics	Agenda: Lecture I: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strategic Briefing: Individual Policy Proposal - Writing for the Chicago Policy Review Lecture II: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Portfolio Q&A - Presentation Q& A - Research Group Discussion: Has anything changed in the last 8 weeks that changes your thinking/ability to propose new policy?
Thanksgiving Break	NO CLASS
Week 9 – Dec 2-4	Agenda: Lecture I: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Presentation Practice Lecture II: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Presentations Winner Selected! Assignments: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Final Portfolios due Thursday, Dec 4th