

PPHA 36640 – Winter 2026

AI-Assisted Writing for Public Policy

Tuesdays: 3:30-6:20 pm (Keller 0010)

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Generative AI is changing the way ideas take shape, making it faster to write, refine, and share drafts. But in this new landscape, your ability to deliver clear, credible, and persuasive human-centered communication matters more than ever.

This practice-based course will show you how to make AI work for you. You'll learn to collaborate with tools like ChatGPT to amplify your voice, not replace it, and to use AI effectively and ethically as you blend evidence, story, and strategy to create writing that informs, inspires, and drives action.

Each week, you'll learn and apply tools, frameworks, and strategies to make your writing more persuasive to the audience that matters most to you. You'll also engage in interactive lectures, case-based discussions, and hands-on writing assignments. Moreover, you'll receive personalized feedback and ample time to revise, experiment, and grow.

By the end of this course, you'll walk away with a portfolio of polished writing and the confidence to reach any audience, on any platform.

Learning Outcomes:

Throughout this course, students will explore how to pair timeless principles of clear communication and persuasion with the new possibilities of AI:

- **Audience, Purpose, Position** – Frame your message for maximum impact.
 - **AI as Writing Partner** – Prompt smartly, revise critically, and refine responsibly.
 - **Policy & Public Writing Genres** – Memos, briefs, op-eds, narratives, and briefings.
 - **Evidence & Storytelling** – Balance data with compelling narrative.
 - **Ethics & Transparency** – Navigate bias, disclosure, and professional standards.
 - **Style & Clarity** – Write sharper sentences, stronger paragraphs, and tighter arguments.
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Weekly Schedule

Week 1:

First Things First: What “Good Policy Writing” Looks Like

Lecture & Demonstration:

- Clear, concise, compelling writing in action: case study on seclusion/restraints in Illinois (GAO + ProPublica) and how watchdog reporting, oversight, and legislation interact (Accountability Feedback Loop)
- Harris Triangle of Persuasion (Audience/Purpose/Position) and the human-centered / reader-friendly / solutions-oriented lens
- Tenses in policy (past = blame; present = shame; future = inspire)

Deliverables:

- Issue Pitch (300–500 words) & Initial AI Brainstorm Log
- Draft Reader Profile

Suggested Readings:

- GAO report (2020) PDF: <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-20-345>
- ProPublica/Chicago Tribune — “The Quiet Rooms” hub: <https://www.propublica.org/series/illinois-school-seclusions-timeouts-restraints>
- On the Conversational Persuasiveness of ChatGPT 4 (PDF on Canvas)
- Think Like a Detective, Write Like a Scientist: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/thinking-about-kids/202507/think-like-a-detective-write-like-a-scientist>
- Federal Plain Language Guidelines (PDF): <https://www.plainlanguage.gov/media/FederalPLGuidelines.pdf>

Week 2:

Effective Outputs vs. Slop: Fundamentals of Prompting AI

Lecture & Demonstration:

- Prompt patterns (role, constraints, exemplars, critique-and-revise loops)
- Disclosure options
- Bias and hallucination pitfalls
- Source tracking

Deliverables: Research Plan & Source List Scaffold

Suggested Readings:

- NIST AI Risk Management Framework 1.0: <https://nvlpubs.nist.gov/nistpubs/ai/nist.ai.100-1.pdf>
- NIST AI RMF Overview: <https://www.nist.gov/itl/ai-risk-management-framework>
- OECD AI Principles Overview: <https://oecd.ai/en/ai-principles>
- AP Standards around Generative AI: <https://www.ap.org/the-definitive-source/behind-the-news/standards-around-generative-ai/>
- AI Best Practices for Authors: <https://authorsguild.org/resource/ai-best-practices-for-authors/>
- AI in Academic Writing: <https://www.clemson.edu/centers-institutes/writing/writing-resources/writing-resources/ai-in-academic-writing.html>
- Can Academics Use AI to Write Journal Papers?: <https://theconversation.com/can-academics-use-ai-to-write-journal-papers-what-the-guidelines-say-258824>
- Prompt Engineering with ChatGPT: <https://medium.com/@tahirbalarabe2/prompt-engineering-with-chatgpt-the-art-of-talking-to-ai-e26555659e2b>

Week 3:

Building an Evidence-Based Case for Reform: Researching with AI

Lecture & Demonstration:

- Query expansion, scoping reviews at speed, summarizing responsibly
- Four Elements of a Persuasive Policy Recommendation (Status/Criteria/Interpretation/Outlook) evidence table
- Building robust citations

Deliverables: Four Elements Table & Annotated Source List

Suggested Readings:

- Harris Writing Workshop:
 - How to Write a Policy Memo That Matters: <https://writingworkshop.harris.uchicago.edu/2024/01/24/how-to-write-a-policy-memo-that-matters/>
 - The Four Elements of Persuasive Policy Writing: <https://writingworkshop.harris.uchicago.edu/2023/03/15/the-four-elements/>

- USAID: A Four Elements Case Study:
<https://writingworkshop.harris.uchicago.edu/2023/03/15/usaaid-a-four-elements-case-study/>
- HKS — How to Write a Policy Memo: https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/hks-communications-program/files/lb_revised_1_31_18_lb_how_to_pol_mem.pdf
- USC Libraries Policy Memo Guide:
<https://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/assignments/policymemo>
- Can Researchers Stop AI Making Up Citations?:
<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-025-02853-8>
- Does ChatGPT Ignore Article Retractions and Other Reliability Concerns:
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/leap.2018>
- University Students Offload Critical Thinking, Other Hard Work to AI:
<https://hechingerreport.org/proof-points-offload-critical-thinking-ai/>

Week 4:

Telling What You Know: Writing Policy Memos and Briefs with AI

Lecture & Demonstration:

- Deductive paragraphs
- Sentence cores
- Reader navigation
- Genre checklists

Deliverables: Draft Policy Memo, AI Use Log & Reflection

Suggested Readings:

- Harris Writing Workshop:
 - Deductive Structure:
<https://writingworkshop.harris.uchicago.edu/2023/04/11/deductive-structure/>
 - Strong Sentence Cores:
<https://writingworkshop.harris.uchicago.edu/2023/04/11/improving-sentence-clarity-with-strong-sentence-cores/>
- UNC Writing Center — Paragraphs: <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/paragraphs/>
- Yale Poorvu — Coherence & Flow: <https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/sites/default/files/2024-12/Coherence%20and%20Flow%20From%20Old%20to%20New%20Information%20GWL%20Handout.pdf>

- PlainLanguage.gov — Guidelines (Organization & Sentences): <https://www.plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/>
- LLMs and the Problem of Meaning: <https://theimportantwork.substack.com/p/llms-and-the-problem-of-meaning>

Week 5:

Diagnosing Issues with Structure, Clarity & Bias: Revising with AI

Lecture & Demonstration:

- Fact-checking & red-teaming
- Trauma-informed language
- Reader Profile (with insights from the Moral Foundations Theory)

Deliverables: Final Policy Memo, Reader Profile & Reflection

Suggested Readings:

- Belief in the Utility of Cross-Partisan Empathy Reduces Partisan Animosity (PDF on Canvas)
- Liberals and Conservatives Rely on Different Sets of Moral Foundations (PDF on Canvas)
- Shifting Liberal and Conservative Attitudes Using Moral Foundations Theory (PDF on Canvas)
- Harris Writing Workshop:
 - Moral Foundations Theory (applied): <https://writingworkshop.harris.uchicago.edu/2023/03/15/using-moral-foundations-theory-to-analyze-audiences/>
- Self-editing strategies: <https://writingworkshop.harris.uchicago.edu/2024/03/12/pruning-needless-words-and-other-self-editing-strategies/>

Week 6:

Showing What's True: Writing Policy Op-Eds & Narratives with AI

Lecture & Demonstration:

- Aristotle's dramatic arc
- Vonnegut's "shapes of stories"
- Object of Desire

- Weaving data and people
- Ethical persuasion

Deliverables: Draft Op-Ed/Narrative, AI Use Log & Reflection

Suggested Readings:

- Harris Writing Workshop:
 - How to Write an Impactful Op-Ed:
<https://writingworkshop.harris.uchicago.edu/2024/02/08/how-to-write-an-impactful-op-ed/>
 - Aristotle's Dramatic Arc:
<https://writingworkshop.harris.uchicago.edu/2024/03/12/aristotles-dramatic-arc/>
 - Vonnegut's Man-in-Hole:
<https://writingworkshop.harris.uchicago.edu/2024/03/12/kurt-vonneguts-man-in-hole/>
 - Object of Desire:
<https://writingworkshop.harris.uchicago.edu/2024/03/12/understanding-the-object-of-desire/>
- The OpEd Project — Resources: <https://www.theopedproject.org/resources>
- Narratives as Tools for Influencing Policy Change (PDF on Canvas)
- Unsing Narratives and Storytelling to Communicate Science (PDF on Canvas)
- Storytelling and Evidence-Based Policy – Lessons from the Grey Literature (PDF on Canvas)

Sample Policy Narratives:

- Never Give Artificial Intelligence the Nuclear Codes (PDF on Canvas)
- Missing in Chicago (PDF on Canvas)
- Gaslighting an Entire Nation (PDF on Canvas)

Week 7:

Providing Insights to Decisionmakers: Executive Briefings

Lecture & Demonstration:

- Pitching Your Writing to Publishers
- Making More Impactful Recommendations: The Importance/Difficulty Matrix
- Understanding the Landscape of Reform: Stakeholder Mapping

- Creating and Delivering Impactful Presentations

Deliverables: Slide Deck Outline, Stakeholder Map & Reflection

Suggested Readings:

- MindTools — Stakeholder Analysis (Influence/Interest):
<https://www.mindtools.com/at2o1co/what-is-stakeholder-management>
- ProjectManagement.com — Power/Interest Grid Explainer:
<https://www.projectmanagement.com/wikis/368897/stakeholder-analysis--using-the-power-interest-grid>

Week 8:

Professional AI Workflows

Lecture & Demonstration:

- Pei-Chin's real-world process for:
 - Brainstorming → researching → outlining → drafting → revising → fact-checking → polishing → publishing with AI

Deliverables: Final Op-Ed/Narrative, QA checklist & Reflection

Suggested Readings:

- A Researcher's View on Using AI to Become a Better Writer:
<https://hechingerreport.org/proof-points-ai-writing-meyer/>
- A Better Way to Think About AI (PDF on Canvas)
- The AI Takeover of Education Is Just Getting Started (PDF on Canvas)
- Teach Students How to Think, Not What to Think (PDF on Canvas)
- How AI Impacts Academic Thinking, Writing and Learning:
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/in-one-lifespan/202509/how-ai-impacts-academic-thinking-writing-and-learning>
- People Are More Likely to Cheat When They Use AI:
<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/people-are-more-likely-to-cheat-when-they-use-ai/>

Week 9:

Putting It All Together: Final Presentations

Lecture & Demonstration:

- 3-minute individual briefings + Q&A

Deliverables: Final Slide Deck for Executive Briefing

Suggested Readings:

- Brokenism: <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/brokenism-alana-newhouse>
 - When a Nation Embraces a False Reality:
<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/when-a-nation-embraces-a-false-reality/>
 - AI Doomers Are Getting Doomier (PDF on Canvas)
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Course Expectations:

Harris Academic Policies & Standards

All students in this course are subject to the [Harris academic policies and standards](#). Any further amendments and interpretations of these policies are documented below.

Mandatory Attendance

In-person attendance for the full class session is required and will be tracked.

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 may be excused in the case of bereavement, sickness, or other circumstances outside your control.

Late Assignments

The late penalty is one grade level per day, and I no longer accept submissions if they are absent longer than a week. I can waive the penalty if you have a timely and legitimate excuse. For example, if you are missing classes or have a late assignment because of sickness or religious observance, I can certainly accommodate you. If possible, please alert me by email before being late on an assignment to make specific arrangements for extensions. It is much easier to accommodate timely requests.

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.

Phone: (773) 702-6000

Email: disabilities@uchicago.edu

Engagement & Decorum

The Harris School of Public Policy 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 Harris 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."
- Harris'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 & 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.

"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](#).

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."

Harris'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](#).

Most 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 came from. To help you avoid unintentional plagiarism, 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*](#).
