

Policy Communication: Translating Evidence into Policy Solutions

PPHA 36650/1 – Winter 2026

Day/Time: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11:00 AM – 12:20 PM

Room: Keller **TBD**

Instructor: Matthew Fleming

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Course Description:

This writing-intensive course introduces students to evidence-based communication tools, frameworks, and strategies that can be used to craft compelling 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 policy communication 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 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.

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.**

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 of your control.

Late Assignments:

The late penalty is one grade level per day (A- to a B+). I can waive the penalty if you have a timely, legitimate, and documented excuse. For example, if you are missing classes or have a late assignment because of sickness or religious observance, I can 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. Please do not wait until weeks after a missed assignment to reach out to me. I especially advise against waiting to contact me until the last week of classes or after I have submitted final grades.

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. It's far more effective to discuss why you thought your work was effective and why you feel your grade did not accurately reflect that. If I make a mistake, I will own up to it, correct it, and try not to make the same mistake again.

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; this means 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?

“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.

If, through the use of AI, you have cited a source that does not exist or have neglected to cite a source, your paper will receive an F. Simply put, the use of AI does not amend or overwrite existing policies on academic dishonesty and plagiarism.

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. While we won't assess you on course readings, it is expected that you come prepared to engage in any discussions and activities each day.</p>	<p>10%</p>
<p>Discussion Posts</p> <p>Each week, you will have an assigned discussion topic in which you are expected to both comment and reply.</p>	<p>20%</p>
<p>Drafts (Strategic Briefing, Memo, Narrative)</p> <p>Drafts are graded for completion. Complete all of the tasks asked of you and receive full marks.</p>	<p>15%</p>
<p>Presentations (Strategic Briefing)</p> <p>Students will present their strategic briefing to the class.</p>	<p>5%</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>50%</p>

Quality grades will be allocated according to the following scale:

A	94	B-	80
A-	90	C+	77
B+	87	C	74
B	84	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. Strategic Briefing

- A comprehensive and critical summary of existing research on a specific topic or research question. Briefings provide an overview of the current state of knowledge in a particular field for a specific audience or principal, identifying gaps, debates, trends, and areas where further insight is needed.

2. Policy Decision Memo — Analysis of 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. Personal Policy Writing Style Guide

- Throughout the course, students need to create a personal style guide of at least 10 writing tools, frameworks, and strategies encountered in class that helped them communicate more effectively. More than a simple list of “rules,” students will be required to name the tool they found helpful, describe when and how to use it, and provide an example of how it was used effectively.

Weekly Course Schedule (*Tentative*):

Week 1	
Topic:	Introduction to Communication in Public Policy
Agenda:	<p><u>Lecture I:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Statement Starters • Developing an Effective Research Statement • Discussion: Where Can I Find Good Evidence? <p><u>Lecture II:</u></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
Readings:	<p><u>Required:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mastering the Three Policy Narratives • Issue Rhetoric (from Eugene Bardach's <i>Eightfold Path</i>)
Assignments:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic Briefing (Draft) due Week 3 • Discussion Board: Statement Starters & Three Research Questions

Week 2	
Topic:	Four Elements of a Policy Recommendation
Agenda:	<p><u>Lecture I:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocating for Reform with the Four Elements of a Policy Recommendation • Organizing Evidence Using Affinity Clustering <p><u>Lecture II:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mastering the Briefing: Audience and Expectations • Case Study: Why is my energy bill so high (or is it)?
Readings:	<p><u>Required:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting the Unique Needs of the Reader • Literature Review Examples (Week 2 Module) • "Using Narratives and Storytelling to Communicate Science with Nonexpert Audiences," by Michael F. Dahlstrom (2014) • "Why Drug Decriminalization Failed," by Charles Fain Lehman



Assignments:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion Board: Key Findings • Policy Decision Memo + Reader Profile (Draft) due Week 4
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Week 3	
Topic:	Writing for an Audience
Agenda:	<p><u>Lecture I:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making Impactful Recommendations Using the Importance / Difficulty Matrix • Understanding the Landscape of Reform with Stakeholder Mapping <p><u>Lecture II:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing to Meet the Unique Needs of Your Reader • Peer Review: Questions Only
Readings:	<p><u>Required:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Four Elements of Persuasive Policy Writing • How to Write a Policy Memo That Matters • “Storytelling and Evidence-Based Policy: Lessons from the Grey Literature,” by Brett Davidson (2017) • Factors Influencing Recent Trends in Retail Electricity Prices in the United States • “Why the Price of Electricity Is Spiking Around the Country,” by Brad Plumer, Harry Stevens and Rebecca F. Elliott, <i>NYT</i> (2025)
Assignments:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion Board: Reader Profile • Policy Briefing (Presentation) Due Week 4

Week 4	
Topic:	Behavioral Frameworks
Agenda:	<p><u>Lecture I:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Framing Your Message Effectively with the Moral Foundations Theory <p><u>Lecture II:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review: The Moral Foundations Theory • Exercise: Identifying Frames and Reframing Arguments



Readings:	<p><u>Required:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Liberals and Conservatives Rely on Different Sets of Moral Foundations.” by Jesse Graham, Jonathan Haidt, and Brian A. Nosek (2009) • “Shifting Liberal and Conservative Attitudes Using Moral Foundations Theory,” by Martin V. Day, et al. (2014) • “You Are Contaminated,” by David Wallace-Wells, , <i>NYT</i> (2025) • “Crime in Chicago Is a Choice,” by Michael Powell, <i>Atlantic</i> (2025) • “No American Should Go to Bed Hungry,” by Sen. Josh Hawley, <i>NYT</i> (2025)
Assignments:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion Board: Moral Foundations

Week 5	
Topic:	Narrative Structure and Reform Narratives
Agenda:	<p><u>Lecture I:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why Policy Reform Narratives Matter • Five Goals of Policy Reform Narratives <p><u>Lecture II:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrative Structure • Three Types of Policy Storytellers • Exercise: Starting with One True Thing
Readings:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 • “The Narrative Construction of Reality” by Jerome Bruner, (1991)
Assignments:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy Reform Narrative (Draft) due Week 6

Week 6	
Topic:	Crafting Coherent Paragraphs and Clear Sentences



Agenda:	<p><u>Lecture I:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving Paragraph Coherence and Sentence Clarity with Strong Sentence Cores and Deductive Structure AI as Copyeditor: Prompting for Style and Mechanics <p><u>Lecture II:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Active vs. Passive Voice Tech Tools for Clearer Prose
Readings:	<p><u>Required:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chapters 7-10, <i>Public Policy Writing That Matters</i>
Assignments:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discussion Board: Dissenting Opinion Rebuttal

Week 7	
Topic:	Engaging Effectively with the Research Community
Agenda:	<p><u>Lecture I:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Finding a Narrative Arc Activity: The Bare Essentials <p><u>Lecture II:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Presenting Findings to an Informed Audience Activity: Strategic Briefing
Readings:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> TBD
Assignments:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mini-Deck: Strategic Briefing (Lecture II; bring your device)

Week 8	
Topic:	Pitching, Working with Editors, and Publishing
Agenda:	<p><u>Lecture I:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pitching for Publication Writing for the <i>Chicago Policy Review</i> <p><u>Lecture II:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Q&A: Portfolios



Week 9	
Topic:	Presentations
Agenda:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wrap Up: Students will vote on which topics that they would like to see further treatment of in class. <p>*Final Portfolios due Thursday, March 6</p>