THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
HARRIS SCHOOL
OF PUBLIC POLICY
Social Impact, Down to a Science

PPHA 36640 – Fall 2026

AI-Assisted Writing for Public Policy

Wednesdays, 4:30-7:20pm – Keller 0010

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Course Description

This practice-based course will show you how to collaborate effectively and ethically with generative AI products like Claude and ChatGPT to amplify your voice—not replace it—as you blend evidence, narrative, and strategy to create writing that can inform, inspire, and drive action. In addition, you will also develop a rigorous technical understanding of how large language models generate text, where they hallucinate, and what that means for your responsibilities as a public policy professional.

Each week, you will learn and apply tools, frameworks, and strategies to make your writing more valuable to the audience that matters most to you. You will also engage in interactive lectures, case-based discussions, guest conversations, and hands-on writing workshops. With lots of personalized feedback and ample time to revise, you will have the space to experiment and grow as a communicator. By the end of this course, you will walk away with a portfolio of polished, high-quality work and the confidence to reach any audience, on any platform, in the age of AI.

Learning Outcomes

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

- **Audience, Purpose & Position:** Frame your message for maximum impact.
- **How LLMs Work:** Understand the mechanics behind AI-assisted writing, including word embeddings, attention mechanisms, reinforcement learning, retrieval-augmented generation—and the limitations they impose on a chosen model.
- **AI as Writing Partner:** Prompt strategically, revise critically, and refine with judgment.
- **Evidence & Storytelling:** Balance data with compelling narrative and make peer-reviewed research relevant to non-specialist audiences.
- **Presentation Skills:** Design and deliver impactful presentations, including adversarial Q&A.
- **Ethics & Accountability:** Navigate bias, disclosure, red-teaming, and other professional standards with responsibility.
- **Style & Clarity:** Write sharper sentences, stronger paragraphs, and tighter arguments.

Assignments & Grading

Major Assignments (75%)

Assignment	Due	Weight
Decision Memo or Strategic Briefing: Polished, evidence-based document written for a named decision-maker that identifies a knowledge gap, synthesizes research to clarify a complex or contested policy domain, and gives your reader exactly what they need—and nothing they don't.	End of Week 3	15%
Live Group Presentation: 10-minute evidence-based presentation with slide deck and Q&A, delivered in class to a specific non-specialist audience on one of three assigned research topics, evaluated on how clearly and persuasively you've translated complex evidence for people who didn't ask to become experts.	Week 5 (in class)	25%
Final Policy Writing Artifact: Every student will choose a final output format that best serves their professional aspirations. For example: • **Policy Op-Ed or Personal Essay:** 700–900-word argument for a general or professional audience that uses evidence, voice, and—in the case of a personal essay—lived experience to make a clear, compelling case for a specific policy reform or intervention. • **Policy Brief or Report:** 1,500–3,000-word document for a professional or institutional audience that defines a problem, evaluates the evidence, and delivers recommendations concrete enough for a busy decision-maker to act on. • **Public Comment or Testimony:** 3–5-page formal intervention in a real regulatory docket, legislative hearing, or public proceeding that makes a precise, evidence-grounded argument within the constraints of that process. • **Dashboard or Data Brief:** Visualization-driven argument—built in Tableau Public, Power BI, or simple HTML—that translates evidence into a clear finding or recommendation for a non-specialist decision-maker. • **Practitioner Tutorial:** Step-by-step implementation guide for agency staff, nonprofit teams, or advocacy organizations that tells readers not just what a policy requires, but exactly how to carry it out—organized around the tasks they'll face, in the order they'll face them.	End of Week 9	25%
Required for All Major Assignments: Each submission must include a personal style sheet and skill file documenting your evolving voice and AI capabilities, as well as a		10%

role declaration with a short defense—a statement of the specific role AI played in your process (research assistant, coauthor, critic, copy editor) and why that role served that particular assignment and audience.		

Pass/Fail Assignments (15%)

Five required pass/fail assignments help build the scaffolding for the major assignments in this course and develop habits of mind that will last beyond our time together.

Assignment	Due	Weight
Reader Profile: Detailed profile of the intended audience for your strategic briefing or decision memo, including what they already believe, what they're likely to resist, and what they need in order to be persuaded.	End of Week 1	Pass/Fail
Four Elements Table: Structured table that organizes the evidence for your decision memo or strategic briefing into the four elements of a persuasive policy recommendation: status, criteria, interpretation, and outlook.	End of Week 2	Pass/Fail
Role Declaration with Defense: Written statement of the specific role AI will play in your writing process—what you will and won't delegate, which tasks AI is best suited for, and why those choices serve your argument and your reader.	End of Week 4	Pass/Fail
Red-Teaming Reflection: Written reflection documenting how you used AI as an adversarial reader to stress-test your group presentation's evidence and argument—what objections it raised, which ones you took seriously, and what you changed as a result.	Beginning of Week 5 (with slide deck)	Pass/Fail
Personal Style Sheet & Skill File: A living document that captures your voice, stylistic preferences, and AI prompting protocols, revised after each major assignment to reflect what you've learned about how you write best.	End of Week 7	Pass/Fail

In-Class Workshop Participation (10%)

Structured workshops in class require students to bring work-in-progress and engage substantively with peer and instructor feedback. Participation is graded on preparation and engagement, not on the quality of the draft.

Live Group Presentation: Assignment Description

Groups of two to three students will select one of three research topics below. For their chosen topic, each group will receive a set of four to five peer-reviewed articles from the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*—all drawing on rigorous empirical evidence, but not all reaching the same conclusions. That tension is the point.

Each group must select an audience that holds power, influence, or resources but is not yet paying meaningful attention to the issue—or has little stake in addressing it. The audience must be real and specific (e.g., a particular congressional committee, foundation, professional association, corporate board, etc.). The group's task is to use the provided evidence to make a compelling case for why this audience should direct their power, influence, or resources toward the issue.

Presentations are 10 minutes, followed by a Question & Answer session. Each group must submit a slide deck and an individual Red-Teaming Reflection before presenting. Evaluation criteria include clarity of argument, quality of evidence use, audience awareness, slide design, and effectiveness under questioning.

Topic 1: Global Housing Costs

Researchers disagree about the primary causes of rising housing costs—and therefore about the most effective remedies. The articles you'll be provided examine building costs, zoning and land-use regulation, regional inequality, demand-side financing, and international capital flows.

Topic 2: Global Fertility Rates

Birth rates are falling across nearly every country, but researchers diverge sharply on what this means and what should be done about it—if anything. The articles you'll be provided examine the persistence of low fertility, its economic consequences, cultural and institutional drivers, and the potential of labor migration as a policy response.

Topic 3: Global Climate Policy

Climate policy is currently made at the national level, but the problem is global—creating mismatches, competitive pressures, and opportunities for strategic intervention. The articles you'll be provided examine cost-effective mitigation, pollution outsourcing, carbon border adjustments, and transportation decarbonization.

Weekly Schedule

Week 1
First Things First: *What Is "Good" Policy Communication?*

What We Cover:

- **Appreciation Comes First:** What Does "Good" Policy Communication Actually Look Like?
- **The Triangle of Persuasion:** Audience, Purpose & Position
- **Claude Skill Demo:** Problem Definition Refiner
- **Audience:** Building an Effective Reader Profile
- **How LLMs Actually Work, Part I:** Word Embeddings, Tokenization & Why AI Doesn't Know Anything
- **Demonstration:** Stakeholder Mapping
- **AI-Assisted Project Management:** Introduction to Obsidian

Week 2
Telling What's True: *Building an Evidence-Based Case for Reform*

What We Cover:

- **Working with an Apprentice:** Prompting AI for Strategy, Not Slop
- **The Four Elements of a Persuasive Policy Recommendation:** Status, Criteria, Interpretation & Outlook—A Framework for Strategically Organizing Evidence
- **The Importance/Difficulty Matrix:** Evaluating & Ranking Recommendations
- **Back to the Beginning:** Seven Types of Executive Summaries
- **How LLMs Actually Work, Part II:** Attention Mechanisms, RLHF & RAG—What These Mean for Accuracy & Hallucinations
- **Intellectual Fellowship & Accountability**: sIfA & the Knowledge Creation Process

Week 3
Framing Arguments around Values & Revision as a Human Practice

What We Cover:

- **Showing Purpose:** Three Tenses in Public Policy Communication
- **Framing around Values:** The Moral Foundations Theory as a Strategic Messaging Tool

- **Red-Teaming for Bias:** Using AI as an Adversarial Reader
- **Revision 101:** Re-seeing Structure before Fixing Sentences
- **Being Your Own Best Editor:** Introduction to Corespresso
- **Understanding Your Style:** How to Make AI Outputs Sound More Like You
- **Claude Skill Demo:** Evidence Checker & Lit Triage

Week 4

Foundations of Effective Presentations: *Design & Deliverance*

What We Cover:

- **Starting with Structure:** Presenting Persuasively to a Powerful/Influential, Non-specialist Audience
- **Group Formation & Audience Analysis:** Who Holds Power over This Issue? Who Isn't Paying Attention Yet? How Might They Be Reached?
- **Slides That Work:** Design Principles, Data Visualizations & Avoiding the Most Common Mistakes Presenters Make
- **Delivering Under Pressure:** Commanding a Room, Handling Q&A Effectively & Presenting with Confidence

Week 5

Live Group Presentations: *Evidence, Audience & Persuasion Under Pressure*

Special Guest Judge: *Mareike Schomerus*

This session belongs to the students. All groups will present their research and make their case to their chosen audience. The instructor and TA will participate in Q&A alongside any invited guests.

Presentations are evaluated on clarity of argument, quality of evidence use, audience awareness, slide design, and performance under questioning.

Week 6

Live Group Presentations: *Evidence, Audience & Persuasion Under Pressure*

Special Guests: *Sarah Conway, Trina Reynolds-Tyler & Hannah Flint*

What We Cover:

- **Why Narratives Matter in Public Policy:** The Limits of Telling & the Power of Showing
- **Five Elements of an Effective Policy Narrative:** Aristotle's Dramatic Arc
- **Sarah Conway & Trina Reynolds-Tyler (MPP'20):** Researching and Writing the Pulitzer Prize-winning "Missing in Chicago" Series

- **Meeting Readers' Expectations:** Kurt Vonnegut's "Shapes of Stories"
- **Hannah Flint (MA'25):** Translating Evidence-Based Accountability Journalism into Internal Policy Communication
- **Workshop:** Writing an Executive Summary for Chicago Police Department Leadership

Week 7

The Ethics of AI-Assisted Writing: *Understanding the Broader Stakes*

What We Cover:

- **Benefits & Costs of AI-Assisted Writing:** Who Is Being Left Out? Who Is Being Harmed?
- **Environmental & Labor Costs of AI Systems:** The Material Consequences of AI
- **Misinformation & Institutional Credibility:** What AI-generated Content Has Done to Public Trust
- **Why Responsibility Cannot Be Automated:** The Irreducible Role of Human Judgment in Professional Communication

Week 8

Finishing the Work: *Peer Review, Revision & Publishing Your Final Artifact*

Session Led by Matt Fleming

What We Cover:

- **Reading Like Your Format:** Peer Review Groups Organized by Final Artifact Type
- **Structured Peer Feedback:** Does the Writing Serve Its Audience and Purpose?
- **From Draft to Published:** Formatting, Linking & Publishing Final Artifacts in Obsidian
- **Independent Revision Time:** Applying Feedback with TA Available for Individual Consultations

Week 9

Putting It All Together: *Human-Centered Storytelling & Course Synthesis*

Special Guests:

Dr. Brian Williams, author of The Bodies Keep Coming
Kevin Fagan, author of The Lost and the Found

What We Cover:

- **Dr. Brian Williams & Kevin Fagan:** The Importance and Impact of Human-centered Storytelling & the Practical Realities of Getting Published

- **Pitching Your Policy Op-Ed or Personal Essay to Publishers:** Outlet Selection, Pitching & Submission Best Practices
    - Introduction to the *Chicago Policy Review* with Louis Berkowitz
- **Course Synthesis:** What Have We Learned? What Will Be Carried Forward? What Does It Mean to Be an Effective Policy Communicator in the Age of AI?

Course Policies

Harris Academic Policies & Standards

All students who are enrolled in this course are subject to the policies and regulations of the University of Chicago and the Harris School of Public Policy. Any further amendments and interpretations of those policies are documented below.

Attendance

In-person attendance for the full class session is required and will be tracked at the beginning and end of each class. Students are allowed one unexcused absence for the quarter without penalty. A second unexcused absence triggers a 10 percent reduction to the final grade. If a student misses three of the first five sessions, the instructor will encourage that student to drop the course.

Absences for bereavement, illness, or circumstances outside a student's control may be excused. If possible, notify the instructor and TA by email before the absence—or as soon as possible afterward.

Late Assignments

The late penalty is one grade level per day (A → A-, B+ → B, etc.). Assignments more than one week late will not be accepted. The penalty may be waived for timely, legitimate requests. Please, whenever possible, alert the instructor and TA by email before being late.

Re-Grading Policy

Students may discuss grades with the instructor and TA at any time. If a student believes an error was made, they should submit a re-grade request by email within one week of the assignment being returned, with an explanation.

Pass/Fail

Students may request to take this course pass/fail using the Harris Pass/Fail request form, by the Harris deadline (generally 9:00 am CST on the Monday of Week 5). The instructor may deny a pass/fail request if the student has not met performance or attendance standards.

Accessibility

Students with disabilities approved for accommodations by Student Disability Services (SDS) should follow SDS procedures and notify the instructor early in the quarter. SDS works to provide resources, support, and accommodations for all students with disabilities and works to remove physical and mitigate attitudinal barriers, which may prevent their full participation in the life of the university.

Engagement & Decorum

The Harris School of Public Policy welcomes, values, and respects students, faculty, and staff from a wide range of backgrounds. The University's freedom of expression principles and Harris's commitments to principled and respectful engagement both apply.

Intellectual Fellowship & Accountability

This course takes a distinct position on the use of AI. We expect students to thoughtfully use and critically evaluate any AI-assisted writing they submit for a grade. What is not permitted is a student submitting AI-generated text without meaningful judgment, revision, and accountability.