

Persuasive Writing Credential Program

Summer 2025

The Persuasive Writing Credential Program is a writing-intensive, practice-based course designed to help participants become confident, clear, and compelling communicators of public policy. Each week, participants will learn and apply evidence-based tools, frameworks, and strategies that make their writing more persuasive, more readable, and more relevant to the audiences they most need to reach.

In a supportive, workshop-style environment, participants will receive extensive individualized feedback and ample time to revise, experiment, and grow. The writing tools taught in the course fall into three key categories:

1. **Blueprints** – Organize and structure policy narratives around the needs, interests, and values of your target audience.
2. **Nuts and Bolts** – Craft sharper paragraphs, stronger sentences, and more precise word choices.
3. **Special Effects** – Learn advanced techniques to ensure your policy writing is engaging, credible, and impossible to ignore.

Whether you're writing to inform, advise, or persuade, this program will equip you with the skills to make your message matter.

Learning Outcomes:

By committing to the rigorous process of reading, discussing, writing, and revising throughout this six-week program, participants who complete the Persuasive Writing Credential will be able to:

- **Identify and evaluate** effective and ineffective communication strategies in public policy writing, with an eye toward clarity, audience engagement, and persuasive power.
- **Apply a human-centered approach** to develop focused research questions, organize evidence logically, and frame narratives that speak directly to the values and needs of specific audiences.
- **Analyze the dynamics of power and influence** to strategically structure policy narratives that anticipate decision-maker expectations and constraints.
- **Recognize and navigate** the ethical boundaries of persuasive writing, particularly as they relate to bias, belief systems, and moral foundations.

- **Read critically and analytically** to assess an author’s claims, use of evidence, and rhetorical choices.
- **Write clear, compelling policy memos and reform narratives** that are grounded in research, tailored to the audience, and oriented toward real-world impact.
- **Distinguish between surface editing and substantive revision**, and revise their own writing intentionally to strengthen clarity, coherence, and persuasive force.
- **Provide constructive, targeted feedback** on peers’ writing at every level—from content and organization to tone, evidence, and language.

Weekly Schedule

Week 1	July 14-20
Topic:	Introduction to the Triangle of Persuasion
Readings:	Required Readings • GAO: K-12 Education: Education Needs to Address Significant Quality Issues with its Restraint and Seclusion Data • ProPublica Illinois: The Quiet Rooms Supplemental Readings • Incremental Change Is a Moral Failure -- Denzel Smith (2020). • Brokenism -- Newhouse (2022). • The Gray Area Podcast: Is America Broken? • The Mobilizer’s Dilemma -- Vasi & Macy (2003)
Assignments:	Research Statement & Three Research Questions

Week 2	July 21-27
Topic:	The Foundations of Persuasive Writing about Public Policy
Readings:	Supplemental Readings • USAID: A Four Elements Case Study

	How to Write a Policy Memo That Matters
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Week 3	July 28-August 3
Topic:	Writing for the Reader
Readings:	Supplemental Readings - Using Moral Foundations Theory to Analyze Audiences - Liberals and Conservatives Rely on Different Sets of Moral Foundations -- Graham, Haidt & Nosek (2009) - Shifting Liberal and Conservative Attitudes Using Moral Foundations Theory -- Day, et al. (2014)
Assignments:	Draft Profile for Decision Maker

Week 4	August 4-10
Topic:	Fundamentals of Persuasive Policy Narratives
Readings:	Required Readings - Local Government Has Too Much Power -- Demsas (2023) - Never Give AI the Nuclear Codes -- Andersen (2023) Supplemental Readings - Crafting Compelling Policy Narratives: Using Aristotle's Dramatic Arc - Crafting Compelling Policy Narratives: Kurt Vonnegut's "Man-in-Hole" Story - Using Narratives and Storytelling to Communicate Science with Nonexpert Audiences -- Dahlstrom (2014) - Storytelling and Evidence-Based Policy -- Davidson (2017) - Narratives as Tools for Influencing Policy Change -- Anderson Crow & Jones (2018)
Assignments:	Draft Policy Memo with Final Reader Profile

Week 5	August 11-17
Topic:	Clear, Concise & Compelling Paragraphs & Sentences
Readings:	Supplemental Readings • Using Deductive Structure to Create Coherent Paragraphs • Improving Sentence Clarity with Stronger Sentence Cores • Pruning Needless Words and Other Self-Editing Strategies
Assignments:	Draft Policy Reform Narrative with Cover Memo

Week 6	August 18-24
Topic:	Final Reviews & Pitching for Publication
Readings & Resources:	Supplemental Readings • How to Write an Impactful Op-Ed Resources for Pitching & Publishing Your Reform Narratives • Newsrooms to Pitch 2024 • Op-Ed Publishers to Pitch 2024
Assignments:	Final Persuasive Writing Credential Portfolio

Overview of Assignments

Throughout the Persuasive Writing Credential Program, you'll complete a series of four major writing assignments, each building the core skills you need to become a more confident, persuasive, and audience-focused policy communicator. Not to worry: You'll receive regular, detailed feedback at every stage to help you revise and improve.

Here's what to expect:

1. Research Statement & Policy Research Questions

You'll begin by choosing a public policy issue that matters to you. In a short research statement, you'll clearly define the issue, explain why it's important, and outline what's at stake. You'll then develop three focused research questions—descriptive, evaluative, and prescriptive—that will guide your analysis and help you better frame persuasive policy arguments.

Goal: Learn how to clarify complex issues and ask better, more actionable questions.

2. Draft Profile for Decision Maker

Next, you'll research and write a strategic profile of a real decision maker who has the power to act on your policy issue. This profile will go beyond the basics to help you understand their motivations, priorities, and constraints—so you can tailor your writing to be as persuasive and effective as possible.

Goal: Learn how to write for a specific audience by understanding what matters most to them.

3. Draft Policy Memo with Final Reader Profile

You'll then write a policy memo addressed directly to the decision maker you profiled. The memo will present your recommendation, supported by evidence and organized using the four elements of a persuasive policy recommendation. You'll revise and finalize your reader profile alongside your memo to ensure both are aligned.

Goal: Learn how to synthesize evidence, craft clear recommendations, and make a compelling case for change.

4. Draft Policy Reform Narrative with Cover Memo

For your final assignment, you'll write a longer-form narrative (1,500–2,000 words) that shows—not just tells—why a policy reform is needed and what difference it can make in people's lives. You'll also submit a short cover memo explaining the rationale behind your narrative choices.

Goal: Learn how to use narrative to make policy personal, memorable, and persuasive.

Each assignment in this program has been designed to build a different aspect of your persuasive communication toolkit so by the end of our time together, you'll be ready to write clearly, confidently, and with purpose for real-world audiences who can make change happen.

Finals Week: August 18-24, 2025

The objective of this final portfolio assignment is to refine and compile your key assignments into a cohesive and polished portfolio. This portfolio will demonstrate your ability to effectively analyze and advocate for policy reforms.

Your final portfolio should include: (1) Final Policy Memo with Reader Profile and (2) Final Policy Reform Narrative with Draft Email Pitch to a Publisher.

Instructions:

1. Final Policy Memo with Final Reader Profile:

- **Revise and refine your draft policy memo** based on feedback received throughout the course--either from me or your peers. Ensure that your memo is clear, concise, and compelling.
- **Incorporate insights from your reader profile** into your memo to tailor your arguments, language, and recommendations to the specific needs and preferences of your chosen decision maker.

2. Final Policy Reform Narrative & Draft Email Pitch to a Publisher:

- **Revise and refine your policy reform narrative** based on feedback received throughout the course. Ensure that your narrative effectively communicates the changes, intentions, and impacts associated with the policy reform.
- **Email Pitch to a Publisher:**
 - Craft a compelling email pitch to a publisher, proposing your policy reform narrative for publication. Your pitch should include:
 - **Subject Line:** A concise and attention-grabbing subject line.
 - **Greeting:** A professional greeting addressed to the publisher or editor.
 - **Introduction:** Introduce yourself and briefly explain the purpose of your email.
 - **Brief Summary:** Provide a brief summary of your policy reform narrative, highlighting its significance and relevance to the publisher's audience.
 - **Justification:** Explain why the narrative is important and how it aligns with the publisher's interests.
 - **Conclusion:** Offer to provide additional information and express your enthusiasm for the opportunity to publish your work.
 - **Contact Information:** Include your contact information for further communication.

3. Portfolio Formatting and Submission:

- Compile all components into a single, well-organized document or digital file.
- Ensure that the portfolio is professionally formatted, with clear headings and subheadings as appropriate.
- Proofread all components to eliminate any grammatical or typographical errors.

Submission:

- Submit your final portfolio as a single document or digital file. Ensure all sections are clearly presented and well-organized.

Evaluation Criteria:

- Clarity and persuasiveness of the policy memo.
- Relevance and depth of the final reader profile.
- Coherence and impact of the policy reform narrative.
- Effectiveness and professionalism of the email pitch to a publisher.
- Overall organization, formatting, and quality of writing.

By completing this final portfolio, you will demonstrate your ability to analyze policy issues, communicate effectively, and advocate for policy reforms through well-crafted written documents tailored to specific audiences.

How You Will Be Evaluated

Harris Grading Scale

- **A (94-100%):** Exceptional work demonstrating a comprehensive understanding of trauma-informed policy communication principles. The writing is clear, persuasive, empathetic, and ethically sound, with strong organization and minimal errors.
- **A- (90-93%):** Excellent work with minor errors. Demonstrates a high level of understanding and application of course concepts with strong clarity, organization, and attention to ethical considerations.
- **B+ (87-89%):** Very good work that meets assignment expectations with some areas for improvement in clarity, organization, or application of trauma-informed principles.
- **B (84-86%):** Good work that demonstrates understanding of key concepts but lacks consistency in clarity, depth, or ethical engagement. Some weaknesses in structure or analysis.

- **B- (80-83%):** Satisfactory work that fulfills basic requirements but shows limited insight or weaker application of trauma-informed communication principles. Noticeable issues with organization or coherence.
- **C+ (77-79%):** Marginal work with significant issues in clarity, ethical considerations, or understanding of key concepts. Needs substantial improvement in structure and content.
- **C (74-76%):** Below-average work with limited understanding of course material. Major issues with organization, analysis, and trauma-informed principles.
- **C- (70-73%):** Poor work that barely meets course requirements. Demonstrates minimal understanding of trauma-informed communication, with numerous errors and lack of coherence.
- **D (60-69%):** Work does not meet graduate-level expectations. Fails to address key concepts, with pervasive issues in clarity, structure, and ethical engagement.
- **F (Below 60%):** Failing work. Does not meet assignment criteria, lacks understanding of core concepts, or contains significant ethical concerns in communication.

Harris Academic Policies and Standards

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

Mandatory Attendance

Attendance for the full class session is required and will be tracked. If you need to miss a class session for whatever reason, you are still responsible for the week's assignments, unless you have requested and been granted an extension. Absences may be excused in the case of illness, bereavement, or other circumstances outside your control.

Late Assignments

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

Re-Grading Policy

Please feel free to reach out to me discuss any concerns you have about your grades or the feedback I provide. 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 initial grade having been assigned. Please include an explanation or justification for the re-grade request. If I make a mistake, I will own up to it, correct it, and try not to make the same mistake again.

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 & 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 program, 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.

Using AI to Write about Public Policy

AI tools can be valuable aids in the writing process, but they should never replace your own critical thinking and engagement with the material. You may use AI to help refine your ideas, locate research sources, or improve language—such as for translation, grammar, spelling, or sentence flow.

However, you are fully responsible for any content generated by AI. Always review and revise carefully to avoid inaccuracies, copyright issues, and other ethical concerns.

While tools like ChatGPT may be helpful during the drafting and revision process, I strongly discourage relying on AI-generated text in your final submissions. This program is designed to develop your skills as a persuasive communicator, and your work will be assessed based on your ability to apply what you’ve learned—not on what an AI tool can produce.

Academic Integrity & Dishonesty

All University of Chicago students and program participants are expected to uphold the highest standards of academic integrity and honesty. This means that students and program participants 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?

You will earn a grade of 0 on the assignment and no higher than a B- in the course, regardless of performance on other assignments.

How to Avoid Unintentional Plagiarism:

After all my years of teaching writing, I believe that the vast 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 could 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.