

USC Annenberg

COMM 499

**Science and Technology Communication
Maymester**

Number of Units: 2

\$500 transportation fee

Spring 2026 – May 18 - May 22

Section: Five-digit section number from the [Schedule of Classes](#)

Location: Classroom and/or course-related URLs, etc. [See [Schedule of Classes](#) for assigned classroom.]

Instructors: Charles Zukoski, Allison Agsten

Office: Room or meeting area

Contact Info:

Charles Zukoski zukoski@usc.edu

Allison Agsten agsten@usc.edu

Course Description

Our society relies on complex technologies that often outpace public understanding, creating risks both for the adoption of lifesaving innovations and the unchecked deployment of disruptive ones. This course addresses those gaps by equipping scientists, technologists, managers, and communicators with the background needed for clear, productive dialogue with each other and with the public. Through this program, an interdisciplinary cohort of students will have the opportunity to learn about real-world challenges of internal and external communication, and crucially, how to navigate those challenges with a focus on technologies. Onsite meetings and experiences with leaders in areas such as nuclear energy, aerospace, and biomedicine ground these discussions in emerging technological domains.

Student Learning Outcomes

Following the completion of the course, students should:

- Understand the throughlines of cross-organizational communication dynamics in science and technology

- Possess strategies for communicating with the public about challenging subject matter
- Know how to prepare for and successfully participate in meetings with technologists, scientists, and communicators
- Hold an expanded knowledge of the science and technology industries in the Los Angeles area

Description and Assessment of Assignments

This course will involve preparation for discussions with technologists and scientists and those who manage communication of technical material. Students will be expected to participate in meeting preparation, the meetings, and to develop reflective written and oral presentations based on the discussions. Standard letter grades will be used and will be based on participation and quality of oral and written material, including a two page reflection paper.

Participation

Students are expected to engage with one another in developing and presenting preparatory material, participating in discussions, and in any follow up.

Attendance

This is a short and intensive course focussed on developing skills in communicating technical material and the issues faced by organizations that must communicate technical material. Lack of participation in the preparation for workplace meetings will be the basis of lowering of course grade earned by the student.

To receive an A grade students must:

- Attend every session and consistently contribute to class discussions by asking questions that demonstrate knowledge of class materials, highlight key issues, and that expand upon themes that emerge across readings and conversations.
- Engagement with guest speakers by posing thoughtful, well-prepared questions and offering meaningful observations.
- Demonstrate active listening by maintaining eye contact, staying attentive, and thoughtfully observing the dynamics within the workplaces we visit.

Grading

a. Grading Breakdown

Description of assessments and corresponding points and percentage of grade.

Assessment Tool (assignments)	Points	% of Grade
Preparation of pre- meeting materials		25
Participation in meetings and discussions		15
Write-ups of meeting notes		15

Assessment Tool (assignments)	Points	% of Grade
Written critical reflections		20
Oral presentations on reflections of discussions		25
TOTAL		100%

b. Course Grading Scale

Letter grades and corresponding point value ranges.

Letter grade and corresponding numerical point range		
95% to 100%: A	80% to 83%: B- (B minus)	67% to 69%: D+ (D plus)
90% to 94%: A- (A minus)	77% to 79%: C+ (C plus)	64% to 66%: D
87% to 89%: B+ (B plus)	74% to 76%: C	60% to 63%: D- (D minus)
84% to 86%: B	70% to 73%: C- (C minus)	0% to 59%: F

“A” projects have near professional production quality; one or no mistakes; clearly error-checked and edited material. All required elements included (varied vocabulary; supporting facts/figures/graphics/videos/audio segments; quotes as required). Excellent organization and flow; original thinking. Showed creativity in packaging/distribution method. High end of scale: publishable today as is; client-ready.

“B” projects have two to five spelling, grammar mistakes. One or more required elements missing or poorly displayed (i.e., poorly illustrated graphic, confusing chart, misleading language, etc.). Shows potential as a good content producer. All elements are well organized. High end of scale will have at least one extraordinary element such as astonishing lead or little-known facts or stunning graphic element. Some creativity shown. Publishable with medium editing; nearly client-ready.

“C” projects have more than five errors (spelling, grammar). Poor production quality, poorly edited and/or proofread. Confusing or uninteresting content. Little or no facts/figures included. Passive rather than active verbs become the norm. Little or no creativity shown. Publishable with major editing; not client-ready.

“D” projects have more than ten errors (spelling, grammar). Needs to be completely rewritten/reproduced. Poorly organized with little or no understanding of public relations and advertising standards. Needs to work with an official writing coach.

“F” projects are not rewritable/reproducible, are late or not turned in. Material shows no

understanding of PR/advertising approaches or standards. A grade of F also will be assigned for any submitted work that is found to be plagiarized, fabricated and/or uses AI tools in unattributed ways.

d. Grading Timeline

Final papers will be graded and class grades will be submitted two weeks after the conclusion of the course.

Assignment Submission Policy

All assignments are due on the dates specified. Lacking prior discussion and agreement with the instructor, late assignments will automatically be given a grade of F.

Laptop Policy

All undergraduate and graduate Annenberg majors and minors are required to have a PC or Apple laptop that can be used in Annenberg classes. Please refer to the **Annenberg Digital Lounge** for more information. To connect to USC's Secure Wireless network, please visit USC's **Information Technology Services** website.

Add/Drop Dates for Session 001

(15 weeks: 1/12/2026 – 5/1/2026; Final Exam Period: 5/6-13/2026)

Link: <https://arr.usc.edu/academic-calendar/#spring>

Last day to add: Friday, January 30, 2026

Last day to drop a class without a mark of "W," except for Monday-only classes, and receive a refund: Friday, January 30, 2026

Last day to change enrollment option to Pass/No Pass or Audit: Friday, January 30, 2026 [All major and minor courses must be taken for a letter grade.]

Last day to add/drop a Monday-only class without a mark of "W" and receive a refund or change to Audit:

Tuesday, February 3, 2026

Last day to withdraw without a "W" on transcript or change pass/no pass to letter grade: Friday, February 27, 2026 [Mark of "W" will still appear on student record and STARS report and tuition charges still apply.]

*Please drop any course by the end of week three for session 001 (or the 20 percent mark of the session in which the course is offered) to avoid tuition charges.]

Last day to drop with a mark of "W": Friday, April 10, 2026

Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

Each day, students will convene at USC then visit one to two leading science and technology organizations in the Los Angeles region, meeting with key stakeholders, and going behind the scenes. Anticipated visits will range from a major space research center to a nuclear energy startup to a biotech innovator. Transportation for the class will be arranged by USC.

Important note to students: *Be advised that this syllabus is subject to change - and probably will change - based on the progress of the class, news events, and/or guest speaker availability.*

Course Evaluations

At the end of the semester, students will complete a university-wide course evaluation to provide feedback on their experience in this class. This evaluation is an important opportunity to reflect on the course and help improve its structure and content for future students.

Course Content Distribution and Synchronous Session Recordings Policies

USC has policies that prohibit recording and distribution of any synchronous and asynchronous course content outside of the learning environment.

Recording a university class without the express permission of the instructor and announcement to the class, or unless conducted pursuant to an Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) accommodation. Recording can inhibit free discussion in the future, and thus infringe on the academic freedom of other students as well as the instructor. (Living our Unifying Values: The USC Student Handbook, page 13).

Distribution or use of notes, recordings, exams, or other intellectual property, based on university classes or lectures without the express permission of the instructor for purposes other than individual or group study. This includes but is not limited to providing materials for distribution by services publishing course materials. This restriction on unauthorized use also applies to all information, which had been distributed to students or in any way had been displayed for use in relationship to the class, whether obtained in class, via email, on the internet, or via any other media. (Living our Unifying Values: The USC Student Handbook, page 13).

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

Academic Conduct

The USC Student Handbook (<https://policy.usc.edu/studenthandbook/>)

Academic Integrity

The University of Southern California is foremost a learning community committed to fostering successful scholars and researchers dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the transmission of ideas. Academic misconduct is contrary to this fundamental mission and includes any act of dishonesty in the submission of academic work (either in draft or final form), as well as cheating, plagiarism, fabrication (e.g., falsifying data), knowingly assisting others in acts of academic dishonesty, and any act that gains or is intended to gain an unfair academic advantage. Students are expected to uphold the highest standards of academic integrity in all coursework.

This course follows the expectations for academic integrity as stated in the [USC Student Handbook](#). All students are expected to submit assignments that are original work and prepared specifically for the course/section in this academic term. Students may not submit

work written by others or “recycle” work prepared for other courses without obtaining written permission from the instructor(s). Students suspected of academic misconduct will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

Academic dishonesty has a far-reaching impact and is considered a serious offense against the university. Violations will result in a grade penalty, such as a failing grade on the assignment or in the course, and disciplinary action from the university, such as suspension or expulsion.

For more information about academic integrity see the [Student Handbook](#), the [Office of Academic Integrity’s website](#), and university policies on [Research and Scholarship Misconduct](#).

Please ask your instructor if you are unsure what constitutes unauthorized assistance on an exam or assignment or what information requires citation and/or attribution.

USC School of Journalism Policy on Academic Integrity

https://catalogue.usc.edu/preview_entity.php?catoid=20&ent_oid=4369

“Since its founding, the School of Journalism has maintained a commitment to the highest standards of ethical conduct and academic excellence. Any student found plagiarizing, fabricating, cheating on examinations, and/or purchasing papers or other assignments faces sanctions ranging from an “F” on the assignment to dismissal from the School of Journalism.”

In addition, it is assumed that the work you submit for this course is work you have produced entirely by yourself and has not been previously produced by you for submission in another course or Learning Lab, without approval of the instructor.

Academic Integrity violations (academic dishonesty) include, but are not limited to: Plagiarism and Cheating

- The submission of material authored by another person or entity (such as an AI tool – see below) but represented as the student’s own work, whether that material is paraphrased or copied in verbatim or near-verbatim form.
- Reusing any portion of one’s own work (essay, term paper, project, or other assignment) previously submitted without citation of such and without permission of the instructor(s) involved.
- Improper acknowledgment of sources in essays or papers, including drafts. Also, all students involved in collaborative work (as permitted by the instructor) are expected to proofread the work and are responsible for all particulars of the final draft.
- Acquisition of academic work, such as term papers, articles solutions, or other assignments, from any source and the subsequent presentation of those materials as the student’s own work, or providing academic work, such as term papers, solutions, articles or assignments that another student submits as their own work.

Generative AI Policy

Creating a policy for the use of AI Generators in your course

[Note to Faculty: Review the considerations and sample options below to include language in your syllabi regarding the use of AI in your courses.

Considerations when crafting a policy for AI/Chat GPT use in your course:

- Does your department, program, or school have an existing policy?
- Under what circumstances is AI use permitted in the course and/or for specific assignments?
- How should students cite or credit AI-generated material? ([USC Libraries Citing Generative AI.](#))
- How will students be held accountable for AI's tendency toward hallucination (i.e., deceptive data)?
- What are the ethical considerations of using AI in general and in your discipline?
- How can AI be used as an effective learning tool, rather than a content creator for course assignments?

Sample Option A—not permitted

This course aims to develop creative, analytical, and critical thinking skills. Therefore, all assignments should be prepared by the student working individually or in groups. Students may not have another person or entity complete any substantive portion of the assignment. Developing strong competencies in these areas will prepare you for a competitive workplace. Therefore, using AI-generated text, code, or other content is prohibited in this course, will be identified as plagiarism, and will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

Sample Option B—permitted on specific assignments

In this course, students are encouraged to use artificial intelligence (AI)-powered programs to help with assignments that indicate the permitted use of AI. Students should also be aware that AI text generation tools may present incorrect information, biased responses, and incomplete analyses; thus, they are not prepared to produce text that meets the standards of this course. To adhere to our university values, you must cite any AI-generated material (e.g., text, images, etc.) included or referenced in your work and provide the prompts used to generate the content. Using an AI tool to generate content without proper attribution will be treated as plagiarism and reported to the Office of Academic Integrity. Please review the instructions in each assignment for more details on how and when to use AI Generators for your submissions.

Sample Option C—encouraged use

I expect you to use AI (e.g., ChatGPT and image generation tools) in this class. Learning to use AI is an emerging skill, and I welcome the opportunity to meet with you to provide guidance with these tools during office hours or after class. Keep in mind the following:

- A. AI tools are permitted to help you brainstorm topics or revise work you have already written.
- B. If you provide minimum-effort prompts, you will get low-quality results. You will need to refine your prompts to get good outcomes. This will take work.
- C. Proceed with caution when using AI tools and do not assume the information provided is accurate or trustworthy. If it gives you a number or fact, assume it is incorrect unless you either know the correct answer or can verify its accuracy with another source. You will be

responsible for any errors or omissions provided by the tool. It works best for topics you understand.

D. AI is a tool, but one that you need to acknowledge using. Please include a paragraph at the end of any assignment that uses AI explaining how (and why) you used AI and indicate/specify the prompts you used to obtain the results and what prompts you used to get the results. Failure to do so is a violation of academic integrity policies.

E. Be thoughtful about when AI is useful. Consider its appropriateness for each assignment or circumstance. The use of AI tools requires attribution. You are expected to clearly attribute any material generated by the tool used.]

[Note to Faculty: Include common examples of activities and assignments that might occur in your class. See the following example.

[Please ask me if you are unsure about what constitutes unauthorized assistance on an exam or assignment, or what information requires citation and/or attribution.

Collaboration. In this class, you are expected to submit work that demonstrates your individual mastery of the course concepts.

Group work. Unless specifically designated as a 'group project,' all assignments are expected to be completed individually.

Computer programs. Plagiarism includes the submission of code written by, or otherwise obtained from someone else.]

[Note to Faculty: Include information regarding grade outcomes a student may expect if found in violation. See the following example.

If found responsible for an academic violation, students may be assigned university outcomes, such as suspension or expulsion from the university, and grade penalties, such as an "F" grade on the assignment, exam, or in the course.]

Students and Disability Accommodations:

USC welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. The Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) is responsible for the determination of appropriate accommodations for students who encounter disability-related barriers. Once a student has completed the OSAS process (registration, initial appointment, and submitted documentation) and accommodations are determined to be reasonable and appropriate, a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) will be available to generate for each course. The LOA must be given to each course instructor by the student and followed up with a discussion. This should be done as early in the semester as possible as accommodations are not retroactive. More information can be found at osas.usc.edu. You may contact OSAS at (213) 740-0776 or via email at osasfrontdesk@usc.edu.

Student Financial Aid and Satisfactory Academic Progress:

To be eligible for certain kinds of financial aid, students are required to maintain Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) toward their degree objectives. Visit the Financial Aid Office webpage for undergraduate- and graduate-level SAP eligibility requirements and the appeals process.

Support Systems:

Counseling and Mental Health - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline - 988 for both calls and text messages – 24/7 on call

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline) provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the United States. The Lifeline consists of a national network of over 200 local crisis centers, combining custom local care and resources with national standards and best practices. The new, shorter phone number makes it easier for people to remember and access mental health crisis services (though the previous 1 (800) 273-8255 number will continue to function indefinitely) and represents a continued commitment to those in crisis.

CARE-SC: Confidential Advocacy, Resources, and Education Support Center - (213) 740-9355(WELL) – 24/7/365 on call.

Confidential advocates, prevention educators, and professional counseling teams work to promote a universal culture of consent, as well as prevent and respond to sexual assault, intimate partner violence, stalking, or other relationship harm. Services available to all USC students at no cost.

Office of Civil Rights Compliance - (213) 740-5086

Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment, discrimination, retaliation on the basis of a protected characteristic, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants.

USC Report & Response - (213) 740-2500

The USC Report & Response website is the university's central reporting portal for concerns arising in the academic space or workplace. All concerns will be assessed and referred to the appropriate university office for resolution. Any questions about USC Report & Response or reporting, in general, can be referred to the Office of Professionalism and Ethics at ope@usc.edu.

USC Campus Support and Intervention - (213) 740-0411

Focuses on student success by assisting students in navigating and resolving complex issues through problem solving, presenting options, and connecting to resources.

USC Emergency Information

Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

USC Department of Public Safety

For 24 hour emergency assistance or to report a crime: UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323)-442-1000.

For 24 hour non-emergency assistance or information: UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: 323-442-1200.

Office of the Ombuds - (213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC)

A safe and confidential place to share your USC-related issues with a University Ombuds who will work with you to explore options or paths to manage your concern.

Occupational Therapy Faculty Practice - (323) 442-2850 or otfp@med.usc.edu

Confidential Lifestyle Redesign services for USC students to support health promoting habits and routines that enhance quality of life and academic performance.

Annenberg Student Success Fund

<https://annenberg.usc.edu/current-students/resources/annenberg-scholarships-and-awards>

The Annenberg Student Success Fund is a donor-funded financial aid account available to USC Annenberg undergraduate and graduate students for non-tuition expenses related to extra- and co-curricular programs and opportunities.

Annenberg Student Emergency Aid Fund

<https://annenberg.usc.edu/current-students/resources/annenberg-scholarships-and-awards>

Awards are distributed to students experiencing unforeseen circumstances and emergencies impacting their ability to pay tuition or cover everyday living expenses. These awards are not intended to cover full-tuition expenses, but rather serve as bridge funding to guarantee students' continued enrollment at USC until other resources, such as scholarships or loans, become available. Students are encouraged to provide as much information in their application, as well as contact their academic advisor directly with questions about additional resources available to them.

About Your Instructors

Charles Zukoski

Charles Zukoski, the Vivian Professor of Chemical Engineering and Materials Science in the Viterbi College of Engineering at the University of Southern California, is an academic leader with more than 25 years of experience as Department Head, Vice Chancellor for Research, and Provost at three universities—one public (University at Buffalo), one private (USC), and one newly established (NEOM U in Saudi Arabia). Earlier in his 40-year academic career, he built a research and teaching program in Chemical Engineering at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His contributions were recognized by the American Institute of Chemical Engineers, which named him one of the “One Hundred Chemical Engineers of the Modern Era,” and he was elected to the National Academy of Engineering. Zukoski is a strong advocate for the transformative power of education and has emphasized cross-disciplinary learning, societal

engagement, and innovative pedagogy. Recently, he launched *Electric Futures*, a podcast created with the USC Annenberg's Center of Climate Journalism and Communication.

Allison Agsten

Allison Agsten is the inaugural director of USC Annenberg's Center for Climate Journalism and Communication where she develops initiatives to bolster public understanding of – and response to – climate change. She is also executive producer of the USC energy transition podcast series, *Electric Futures*, and the author of a range of reports addressing climate change and the media, corporate sustainability practices, and policy-related issues.

In addition to her appointment at the Annenberg School, Agsten provides support to faculty, staff, and students in her work as an eco-chaplain within the university's Office of Religious Life. At USC, she is also a fellow of the Los Angeles Institute of Humanities and an affiliate with the Schaeffer Behavioral Science and Policy Initiative. Beyond Los Angeles, she is an affiliate of the University of Alaska Anchorage Department of Biological Sciences and the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Harvard Kennedy School.