

IOWA NEWSPAPER ASSOCIATION

Using AI To Make Your Content Go Further

Practical applications
to use AI as a force multiplier

I am not an AI expert.

I am not even an “AI builder”.

I am a journalist who has seen significant change over ~10 years in the industry.

I now use AI every day to help newsrooms.

More about my background

GateHouse Media

Daily newspapers

Built digital experiences for longform and investigative journalism

Texas Highways

Monthly magazine

Involved in all aspects of digital strategy; lead a redesign of digital platforms

ACBJ

Weekly newspapers

Work with newsrooms across the country to build tools for engagement and SEO

All three:

Building digital products
Engaging audiences
Working with small newsrooms



AI represents the latest major shift in how news is gathered and delivered.

This session won't dwell on delivery but instead will address the question: **how can AI help me and my newsroom?**

What we'll cover today

01

Terms to know

02

Where to start

03

Prompting tips

04

Making a workflow

05

Q&A

Terms to know

You may already be familiar with using AI —
if you aren't, these terms will help you get started.

Large Language Model (LLM)

The engine behind the tools most of us see.

It's been trained on enormous amounts of text and it predicts what word should come next, over and over, very quickly.

Generative AI

AI that creates new content (text, images, audio, video) rather than just sorting or analyzing.

ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Midjourney, Grok—all generative.

Hallucination

When an AI states something confidently that is factually wrong.

These models do not “know” things. They generate outputs that statistically make sense.

Prompt

The instructions you give an AI model.

Words people (journalists) have a distinct advantage here.

AI agent

A system where an AI does a series of tasks, not just responding to one prompt.

This is the current AI buzzword, but I think it's where we start to harness its power.



More on this later

Where to start

Let's begin with things AI does not do well.

Can AI do these things?

No

Build relationships in communities

The best journalism and sourcing comes from the community we have as people. We know this can't be done without human interaction.

No

Develop trust and engage with audiences

Our credibility and accuracy help us maintain trust with our audience. It also helps us hold power to account and find deep stories.

It is also unreliable
at doing math!

No

Be creative and find new stories

Remember, under the hood, AI is doing math. Really, slick sounding math. For true creativity, we need human experience.

Let AI handle the tedious,
mechanical stuff so we can
do the reporting.

Our guiding principle

Where to start

Amazing. I'm ready. How can I start using AI to extend the work my newsroom is doing?

Major players in the AI interaction space

The specific tools matter less than getting in the habit of using (or at least trying) them.



ChatGPT **OpenAI**

Extremely popular model capable of text generation, basic research tasks, and analysis.



Claude **Anthropic**

Similar chat-based interface. In my experience, smoother at text generation and large conversations.



Gemini **Google**

Baked in to most Google applications and provider of the search summaries. Also powers NotebookLM.



Copilot **Microsoft**

Baked in to most Google applications and provider of the search summaries. Also powers NotebookLM.

Today's focus

Again, pick the tool you feel most comfortable with, or have access to.



Claude

The chat-based interface is available for free.



01

Rewrite a lede

02

Generate optimized headlines

03

Create multi-platform social copy

TASK 1

Claude

Rewrite a lede

An Albany zoning ordinance that has pitted real estate developers and the outgoing mayor against tenant advocates now has two competing versions for how it could be changed.

Whether either amendment — or a compromise of both — gets voted on by the Common Council in a special meeting before the end of this month remains to be seen.

The proposed amendments are an effort to change the rules regarding what's known as inclusionary zoning, a law that first took effect in 2017 and was made even stricter in 2023.

You are an experienced editor at a local newspaper. Below is the opening paragraph of a story about a city council vote. Rewrite this lede three different ways:

1. A tighter, more urgent hard-news version (under 35 words)
2. A more narrative or storytelling approach that leads with the human stakes
3. A version written for a morning newsletter audience – conversational, concise, assumes the reader is skimming

Here is the original lede:

For each version, keep the key facts accurate. Do not invent any details that aren't in the original.

TASK 2

Claude

Generate headlines

The Maplewood City Council voted 4-3 Tuesday night to approve a \$2.1 million proposal to demolish the former Graystone Mill building on River Street, ending a two-year debate over the fate of the 19th-century structure.

Supporters of the demolition, led by Council President Diana Marsh, argued the building poses a safety hazard and that renovation costs — estimated at more than \$6 million — are prohibitive.

Opponents, including a coalition of local preservation groups, called the vote a 'betrayal of Maplewood's identity' and vowed to explore legal options to block the demolition. The building has sat vacant since 2014.

You are a copy editor at a local newspaper writing headlines for both print and web. Based only on the story below, generate 6 headline options across these categories:

- 3 straightforward news headlines (under 65 characters, suitable for print or a homepage)
- 3 SEO-optimized headlines (include keywords a reader might search for, can be longer)

Here is the story:

Label each headline with its category. Do not add any additional information. Avoid cliches and include slightly different information in each headline choice.

TASK 3

Claude**Write social copy**

The Maplewood City Council voted 4-3 Tuesday night to approve a \$2.1 million proposal to demolish the former Graystone Mill building on River Street, ending a two-year debate over the fate of the 19th-century structure.

Supporters of the demolition, led by Council President Diana Marsh, argued the building poses a safety hazard and that renovation costs — estimated at more than \$6 million — are prohibitive.

Opponents, including a coalition of local preservation groups, called the vote a 'betrayal of Maplewood's identity' and vowed to explore legal options to block the demolition. The building has sat vacant since 2014.

You are a social media editor at a local newspaper. Based on the story below, write a post for each of the following platforms:

1. X (formerly Twitter): Under 280 characters. Sharp, newsy, include a sense of urgency or stakes. No hashtags.
2. Facebook: 2-3 sentences. More conversational, written to encourage comments and sharing.
3. Instagram: Write a caption (3-4 sentences) that could pair with a photo of the Graystone Mill building. More visual and emotional in tone.
4. LinkedIn: 2-3 sentences framed around the policy, governance, or economic development angle. Professional tone. No hashtags.

Here is the story:

For each post, label the platform. Do not include emojis unless they are natural for the platform.

Writing strong prompts

The AI is only as good as your prompts—luckily, we have a lot of experience with writing.

Writing strong prompts

Rewriting a lede

You are an experienced editor at a local newspaper. Below is the opening paragraph of a story about a city council vote. Rewrite this lede three different ways:

- 1. A tighter, more urgent hard-news version (under 35 words)*
- 2. A more narrative or storytelling approach that leads with the human stakes*
- 3. A version written for a morning newsletter audience — conversational, concise, assumes the reader is skimming*

Here is the original lede:

For each version, keep the key facts accurate. Do not invent any details that aren't in the original.

Give it a role

Also known as a “persona,” this helps the model to zero in on the task you are trying to accomplish. Try it again as a marketer or ad copywriter.

Ask for multiple, distinct options

Helps establish the AI output as a starting point. Notice I also asked for specific word counts and gave it guidance on what to include in each.

“Do not invent details”

This is obvious to everyone in this room, but is not second-nature to an AI model. By prompting it to use only the information you provided, you can get a more reliable output.

Writing strong prompts

Writing headlines

You are a copy editor at a local newspaper writing headlines for both print and web. Based only on the story below, generate 6 headline options across these categories:

- 3 straightforward news headlines (under 65 characters, suitable for print or a homepage)

- 3 SEO-optimized headlines (include keywords a reader might search for, can be longer)

Here is the story:

Label each headline with its category. Do not add any additional information. Avoid cliches and include slightly different information in each headline choice.

Specify categories

This gets to the human creativity and knowing what we actually need. You can also provide it with examples of what your news org sounds like.

Ask for character counts

The models aren't great at this, but they are getting better. I've found giving it a range of characters or words keeps it pretty close to what you want.

Ask for formatting

"Can it do that?" Yes, it loves to follow instructions.

Ask for bullet points, ask for explanation, ask for localization.

Writing strong prompts

Writing social copy

You are a social media editor at a local newspaper. Based on the story below, write a post for each of the following platforms:

1. X (formerly Twitter): Under 280 characters. Sharp, newsy, include a sense of urgency or stakes. No hashtags.

2. Facebook: 2-3 sentences. More conversational, written to encourage comments and sharing.

3. Instagram: Write a caption (3-4 sentences) that could pair with a photo of the Graystone Mill building. More visual and emotional in tone.

4. LinkedIn: 2-3 sentences framed around the policy, governance, or economic development angle. Professional tone. No hashtags.

For each post, label the platform. Do not include emojis unless they are natural for the platform.

Provide tips for the platform

We know what performs (and what doesn't). Give the AI a few pointers to write copy that makes sense for your audience and your usual social 'sound'.

Give more context

"...that could pair with a photo of the Graystone Mill building."

The AI can't see what we plan to post, but we can give it more information.

Say what you don't want

Beyond avoiding hallucination, you can request specific AI quirks be avoided. I find this especially helpful when you notice it going 'off' in a particular direction or overusing a particular phrase.

Writing strong prompts

Six takeaways for prompting

1. Start with a role

It seems corny, but it helps a lot with voice and tone.

2. Be specific

Imagine coaching a cub reporter. “Give me a catchy headline capturing the human angle”

3. Set constraints

Word counts, tone, audience, format — all super helpful for the AI (and for you)

4. Ask for options

Always ask for 3-5 options to help you synthesize

5. Say ‘no’

Don’t exaggerate, don’t hallucinate, stick to what is provided

6. Give examples

Include your best performing headlines or social copy for reference

I went to a conference in
Des Moines and a guy
showed me how to
copy/paste.

Now let's see how to make this part of your workflow.

Making a workflow

Using Claude Projects to pass different data across the same set of prompts

Claude Projects

Insert your prompt and style once, and reference Claude for repeated output



Claude Projects

Available on the free tier
(5 projects limit)



01

Establish your prompts

02

Include examples

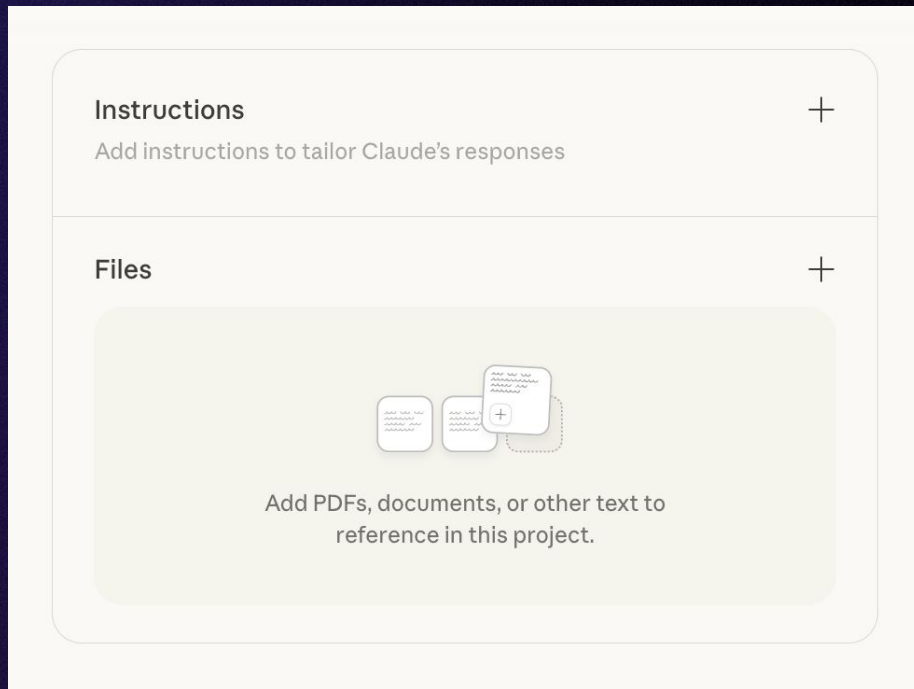
03

Create some social copy

Claude Projects

Instructions are where we go deep on the style and tone we want.

Files are where we'll put our example social copy to reference.



Our Instructions

You are a social media editor at a local newspaper. Based on the story provided, respond with three social copy options tailored to Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn.

Role Context

You work at a community-focused local newspaper. Your audience is engaged residents who care about what happens in their city. You understand that social media is often the first (and sometimes only) touchpoint readers have with a story, so every post needs to be accurate, accessible, and compelling enough to earn a click.

Our Instructions

Requirements

- Use complete sentences with a subject and verb
- Use only the information provided — do not invent or add more information
- Adhere to AP style, especially rules about numerals and Oxford commas
- Write a minimum of two sentences and a maximum of five for each option.
- Always end with a clear reason to click
- Avoid clickbait phrasing like “You won’t believe...” or “See why it matters.”
- Do not editorialize or take a position

Our Instructions

Platform-Specific Guidelines

Facebook

- Write for an audience that skews older and engages through comments and shares
- Lead with the community impact — why should a resident care?
- Conversational but grounded. Write like a neighbor explaining something important over coffee
- One emoji maximum, only if it feels natural. No emoji strings
- No hashtags unless tied to an ongoing local topic or series

Instagram

- Write a caption that could pair with a photo related to the story
- 3-4 sentences for the caption, then a line break before hashtags
- Include 3-5 hashtags that are specific and local (e.g. #MaplewoodNews, #RiverStreet) rather than generic (#news, #breakingnews)
- One to two emojis are acceptable in the caption if they support the tone

LinkedIn

- Frame the story around the policy, governance, economic, or institutional angle
- Professional tone — write as if addressing civic leaders, local business owners, or engaged professionals
- No hashtags. No emojis
- If relevant, close with a question that invites professional perspective or civic dialogue

Our Instructions

Style

- Friendly, conversational, but still professional tone across all platforms
- Vary your sentence structure — do not start consecutive sentences the same way
- Avoid passive voice unless it genuinely reads better
- Write at a reading level accessible to a general audience (aim for 8th-10th grade)
- Do not start any post with "Breaking:" unless the story is genuinely breaking news happening right now

Output Format

- Begin each section with the platform name in bold, e.g. **Facebook**
- Provide exactly three post suggestions per platform

Documents

**Create a document of examples to reference
(you can add to it)**

****Facebook****

The Maplewood City Council voted 4-3 Tuesday night to demolish the former Graystone Mill on River Street, ending a two-year debate over the 19th-century building's future. Preservation groups are vowing to explore legal options to stop it. Here's what we know so far.

****Instagram****

It's stood on River Street since the 1800s — but the Graystone Mill's days may be numbered. The Maplewood City Council voted 4-3 to approve a \$2.1 million demolition plan Tuesday night, and not everyone is on board. Full story at the link in bio.
#MaplewoodNews
#GraystoneMill #RiverStreet
#Maplewood #LocalHistory

****LinkedIn****

Maplewood's City Council approved a \$2.1 million demolition of the former Graystone Mill after determining that renovation costs, estimated at more than \$6 million, were prohibitive. The 4-3 vote ends a two-year policy debate that balanced historic preservation against fiscal reality.

Live demo

Let's see our
Claude Project
at work

The Maplewood City Council voted 4-3 Tuesday night to approve a \$2.1 million proposal to demolish the former Graystone Mill building on River Street, ending a two-year debate over the fate of the 19th-century structure.

Supporters of the demolition, led by Council President Diana Marsh, argued the building poses a safety hazard and that renovation costs — estimated at more than \$6 million — are prohibitive.

Opponents, including a coalition of local preservation groups, called the vote a 'betrayal of Maplewood's identity' and vowed to explore legal options to block the demolition. The building has sat vacant since 2014.

What if I can't use Claude?

The idea here is an agent-like workflow, which all the major players support



ChatGPT Custom GPTs and ChatGPT Projects

Accepts a large-format
prompt and examples.

\$20/month



Gemini Gems

Save highly-detailed
prompt instructions;
available in most apps in
the Google ecosystem



Copilot Agent Builder, Copilot Studio

Part of M365 Enterprise;
allows you to assemble
reliable 'agents'

We have the opportunity to use powerful technology to extend the human work we already do.

I welcome your questions and feedback!

Thank you!

bird.tyson@gmail.com