



Using Claude: A Hands-On Guide for City Staff and Officials

Claude is an AI assistant built by Anthropic. It can draft documents, summarize reports, answer policy questions, and handle a lot of the writing and research that city staff do every day. If your city has decided to try Claude, or you're exploring it on your own, this guide will help you get useful results faster. It covers:

- How to write prompts that produce useful content
- How to use Claude's main features
- Where Claude can be most helpful with municipal work

For general prompting best practices that apply across AI tools, see "Prompt Hygiene: Tips and Tricks for Getting Better Results from AI" on the FLC AI Hub. This guide focuses on features and workflows specific to Claude.

Claude's Models: Opus, Sonnet, and Haiku

Claude is offered in three tiers, each built for different kinds of work.

Opus is the most capable. It handles complex reasoning, long documents, and multi-step analysis better than the other two options. If you're working through a complicated policy question, comparing dozens of pages of vendor proposals, or doing anything that calls for careful judgment, Opus is the right pick. It's slower and costs more on usage-based plans, but the quality difference is most noticeable on complex tasks.

Sonnet is the everyday workhorse. For most writing and research, Sonnet produces results that are hard to tell apart from Opus, and it responds faster. Most people should default to Sonnet for daily work.

Haiku is the fastest and lightest option. It's good for quick tasks like rewriting a sentence, answering a factual question, or sorting a list. It won't match Opus on deep analysis, but for speed and volume, it's the right pick.

On the free plan, Anthropic decides which model you use. On Pro and higher plans, you choose the model for each conversation. A practical rule: start with Sonnet, then switch to Opus when you need Claude to do heavy lifting.

Writing Good Prompts

A prompt is what you type into Claude. What you get back depends almost entirely on how you write it. The habits below make the biggest difference.

Say who it's for and what you need. Claude responds better with a clear job. Instead of "Summarize this," try:

Write a 150-word summary of this ordinance for residents with no legal background. Use plain language.

Give Claude a role. Telling Claude who is writing shapes the tone and vocabulary. This matters most for public-facing work.

You are a city communications director. Draft a press release announcing the new recycling drop-off schedule. Keep it under 250 words.

Include your source material. Paste in the ordinance text, the resident's email, or the staff report. You can also upload files directly (more on that below).

Build up in steps. Don't ask for an entire communications plan in one prompt. Start with the audience, then the key messages, then the draft plan. You'll catch issues earlier and keep more control over the final product.

Tell Claude what to avoid. If you don't want jargon, say so. If you want it to skip the context and get to the point, say that too.

Rewrite this public notice in plain English. No legal jargon. No sentences longer than 20 words. Start with what residents need to do, not the legal authority for the rule.

Ask Claude to explain its reasoning. When you're using Claude to compare options or analyze a policy question, ask it to walk through its thinking step by step. You'll get more useful output, and it's easier to spot where the analysis might go wrong.

Compare the pros and cons of contracting out park maintenance versus keeping it in-house. Think through each option step by step before giving your recommendation.

Working with Files

You can upload documents directly into a Claude conversation. PDFs, Word files, spreadsheets, images, and plain text all work. This is useful when you need Claude to summarize a 40-page staff report, pull specific data from a spreadsheet, or compare language across two draft ordinances.

On paid plans, Claude can also create files for you. Ask it to write a memo, and it can hand you back an actual Word document. Ask it to build a budget comparison, and it can produce a formatted spreadsheet. This saves a copy-paste step and gives you something closer to a finished product.

A public records reminder: Anything you upload to Claude and anything it produces in response can become a public record under Florida's Public Records Law (Chapter 119). Treat AI inputs and outputs the same way you'd treat any other document tied to a city decision, including for retention and disclosure.

Markdown Files and Artifacts

When Claude creates a document or other standalone content within a conversation, it appears in a side panel called an Artifact. Artifacts can be markdown text, HTML pages, code files, or diagrams.

Markdown is a lightweight formatting language that uses simple characters for structure: # for headings, ** for bold, - for bullet points. Claude often uses markdown because it's portable and easy to convert into other formats. It also uses less compute power, which means lower costs and processing time. If you ask Claude to "write a report" or "draft a policy summary," it may produce a markdown artifact you can preview, copy, or download.

Why this matters for city staff: Markdown files are plain text, so they're easy to share. You can paste markdown into most website editors, email tools, or content management systems and the formatting carries over. If your city's website runs on WordPress or a similar platform, markdown content drops in cleanly.

If you don't want a markdown file, you can customize your Claude desktop application to use the specific file types you prefer to work with, such as Microsoft Office file types. On a case-by-case basis, just ask Claude to convert markdown into other formats:

Take this markdown report and turn it into a Word document with a table of contents.

Convert this meeting summary into an HTML page I can post on our intranet.

Web Search

Claude can search the web during a conversation when you need current information. This helps for checking recent state legislation, looking up grant deadlines, or verifying a statistic before it goes into a report. Make sure to tell it that you need information as of your current date, so Claude doesn't include outdated information.

Web search is available on all plans, including free plans. When Claude uses it, it shows you where it found the information so you can verify the source yourself. You can turn it on or off in any conversation.

Projects

Projects let you create a workspace with its own standing instructions and reference documents. Think of a Project as a folder where Claude already knows the context before you ask anything.

Example: Create a Project called "Council Communications" and upload your city's style guide, a list of current council members, and a few recent press releases. Add instructions like:

You are a communications specialist for the City of [Name]. Write in a professional but approachable tone. Keep all public-facing documents under 300 words unless told otherwise.

Every conversation you start inside that Project follows those rules and pulls from those documents. You don't re-explain the context each time. This is where Claude starts saving real time for staff who do recurring updates, reports, or other repeat work.

Projects are available on Pro and higher plans.

Cowork Mode

Cowork is a feature in the Claude desktop app (available on macOS and Windows) that gives Claude direct access to files on your computer. Instead of copying and pasting text into a chat window, you can point Claude at a folder and let it read your files, edit them, or create new ones.

Here's what that looks like in practice:

- You select a folder on your computer (say, a folder of draft ordinances).
- Claude reads the files, follows your instructions, and writes changes directly into the documents.
- You can ask Claude to create new Word documents, spreadsheets, or presentations, and it saves them automatically to that folder.

Claude can connect to other tools your team uses through plugins, like email, calendars, or project management apps, and more.

Cowork also supports scheduled tasks. You can set Claude to pull a weekly summary of emails, compile meeting notes, or run a recurring report on a schedule you define.

Cowork has built-in safety controls, like pausing for your approval before taking certain actions, and you choose how much autonomy to give it. Cowork is available on Pro, Team, and Enterprise plans.

Skills

Skills are sets of instructions that teach Claude how to do a specific kind of task well. Think of them like training guides:

- A skill for creating Word documents tells Claude exactly how to format headings, set page margins, and build tables correctly.
- A skill for writing press releases might include your city's preferred tone and structure.

Claude comes with built-in skills for common file types (Word documents, spreadsheets, presentations, PDFs), and you can also create your own.

A custom skill could encode your city's style guide, your department's report template, or the format your council prefers for agenda packets.

In Cowork, skills turn on automatically when Claude recognizes a matching task. Ask Claude to make a PowerPoint, and the presentation skill kicks in. Ask it to build a spreadsheet, and the Excel skill handles the formatting. You don't need to activate them manually.

You can also build skills from scratch or install them from Anthropic's public skill directory, which covers common tasks like document processing, design, and content creation. Community marketplaces add many more.

Connectors and Plugins

Connectors let Claude pull information from outside tools: Google Drive, Outlook, Slack, project management apps, and others. If your city uses Google Workspace, for example, a connector lets Claude search your Google Drive, read shared documents, and reference calendar events without you having to download and re-upload anything.

You set up connectors through Claude's settings. Many common services (Google Drive, Microsoft 365, GitHub, Slack) have pre-built connectors that work without any code. Your IT team can review and approve which connectors are available to staff.

Plugins bundle multiple skills and connectors into a single installable package built for a particular job. Instead of configuring a writing skill and two separate connectors one by one, you could install a "communications" plugin that includes all of them, pre-configured to work together.

Anthropic launched a plugin marketplace in early 2026. Some plugins come from Anthropic, some from third-party developers, and organizations can build private plugins for internal use.

For cities, this means your IT department could package your branding rules, approved templates, and connected systems into one plugin that any staff member can install.

Claude for Government

Cities handling regulated data (law enforcement records, health information, certain personnel files) need a Claude environment that meets federal compliance standards. Anthropic offers Claude for Government, along with two additional paths that hold FedRAMP High authorization:

- **Amazon Bedrock in AWS GovCloud (US):** FedRAMP High and DoD Impact Level 4/5 authorization. Claude Sonnet 4.5 is the latest available model.
- **Google Vertex AI with Assured Workloads:** FedRAMP High authorization.

All three paths support Controlled Unclassified Information (CUI) and FIPS 199 High Impact data, and they include the controls cities need for CJIS-regulated law enforcement data and other sensitive workloads.

For most general writing and research, the standard Pro, Team, or Enterprise tiers are enough. For workloads that touch regulated data, your IT and legal teams should evaluate whether one of the government-authorized paths is required. The FLC AI Hub's [Buyer's Guide: General-Purpose LLMs](#) covers procurement in more detail.

Sample Prompts for Municipal Work

Public communications:

Draft a 200-word notice to residents about the upcoming water main replacement on Oak Street. Include the dates, what residents should expect, and who to contact with questions.

Meeting preparation:

I'm uploading the agenda and staff reports for Tuesday's council meeting. Write a one-page briefing for the mayor that summarizes each agenda item in two to three sentences. Flag anything likely to draw public comment.

Policy research:

Search for three Florida cities with populations under 50,000 that have adopted AI use policies for city staff. Summarize what each policy covers and link to the source.

Document review:

Review this vendor proposal for grammar, clarity, and consistency with our city's style guide (uploaded in this Project). Flag anything that's unclear or uses jargon that residents wouldn't understand.

Internal operations:

Write a job description for a part-time Parks and Recreation program coordinator. The position pays \$18–\$22/hour, requires a high school diploma, and reports to the Parks Director. Use plain language.

Know the Limits

Claude can get information wrong.

It can misstate facts, invent citations, or produce text that sounds confident but is off-base. *Treat every output as a first draft.* Staff should verify facts, check figures against source documents, and review for tone and accuracy before publishing or distributing anything Claude produced. That's especially true for legal requirements, budget numbers, and official city policy.

Claude does not have access to your city's email, financial software, permitting system, or any other internal platform unless your IT team has specifically connected it (through Cowork plugins or an enterprise integration). It cannot send emails or take actions in other systems on its own without your approval.

A Note for Elected Officials

If you're a municipal official exploring Claude on your own, keep these points in mind:

On a personal account: Use it for general research. Do not enter anything related to matters that may come before your board. Florida's Sunshine Law (§286.011) requires that any discussion among board members about official business happen in public. Using an AI tool does not change that.

On a city-provided workspace: Make sure your city attorney has reviewed the setup. Treat Claude the way you'd treat a capable new staff assistant in your city. Give clear instructions, provide context, and always review the work before it goes anywhere.

Before You Start

- Do you know which version of Claude your city has access to?
- Has your IT or legal team reviewed the data handling terms for the plan you're using?
- Do you have a clear understanding of what information should not be entered into the tool?
- Have you set up a Project with your city's style guide and key reference documents?
- Do staff know to verify every AI-generated output before using it in official communications or decisions?

The clearer you are about what you need, the less time you'll spend fixing what you get back. Start with one task, get comfortable, and build from there.

Sources: Anthropic documentation: [Models Overview](#), [Prompting Best Practices](#), [Choosing the Right Claude Model](#), [Claude in Amazon Bedrock — FedRAMP High and DoD IL4/5](#); Claude Help Center: [Get Started with Cowork](#), [Plugins](#), [Connectors](#), [Artifacts](#), [File Creation](#), [Public Sector FAQs](#); Florida Sunshine Law, §286.011; Florida Public Records Law, Chapter 119.