

'Beowulf is lit' – could ChatGPT really write good book blurbs?

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. Match each book with its description.

1. *Middlemarch* C
2. *Beowulf* F
3. the Bible A
4. *Ulysses* E
5. *Beloved* G
6. *It Ends With Us* A
7. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* D

- a the holy book of the Christian religion or the Jewish religion
- b a romance novel by Colleen Hoover, published in 2016, based on the relationship between her parents
- c a novel written by George Eliot (pseudonym of Mary Ann Evans), published in 1871–1872, about the realities of marriage and provincial life in 19th-century England
- d published in 1967, a magical realist novel by Colombian author Gabriel Garcia Márquez, the multi-generational story of the Buendía family
- e a modernist novel by Irish writer James Joyce, published in 1922
- f an Old English epic poem set in pagan Scandinavia in the 6th century about the adventures and battles of a hero
- g a novel written by Toni Morrison and published in 1987; set in Cincinnati just after the American Civil War, telling the story of a family of formerly enslaved people

b. Discuss the questions.

1. What else do you know about these books?
2. Have you read anything written by ChatGPT or a similar AI chatbot? What was your impression?
3. Do you think a chatbot could write good book blurbs? Should it? Why (not)?

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2 Key words

a. Read the definitions and find the missing words in the article. The paragraph numbers and an example sentence are given to help you. You may have to change the form of the word.

1. A _____ is a written statement in which a company or person says that they do not take responsibility for something, usually wrong. (paragraph 3)
The disclaimer reminded readers that all the characters in the book are fictional and not based on real people.
2. If you _____ someone, you make them extremely angry. (paragraph 4)
The latest film enraged fans because it deviated from the plot of the novel.
3. If an activity or situation is _____, it is one in which people behave in an unfair or immoral way to get an advantage over other people. (paragraph 7)
Parents have been known to break the law to gain an edge in the cutthroat university admissions process.
4. If you _____ someone, you secretly say or do things that harm their reputation while pretending to be their friend. (paragraph 7)
Friendships are precarious in Hollywood, and there is never a lack of drama or backstabbing.
5. To _____ is to breathe in suddenly, for example, because you are surprised, shocked, or in pain. (paragraph 11)
As he read the passage about the accident, he gasped and clutched the book more tightly.
6. _____ is a feeling of great respect and admiration, often combined with fear. (paragraph 11)
The audience was in awe of the singer during her magical performance.
7. If something is _____, it is extremely impressive, exciting, or shocking. (paragraph 13)
I find it mind-blowing that the human nose can detect more than 1 million smells.
8. If something is _____, it causes strong emotions. (paragraph 13)
This bestseller is a soul-stirring drama about great love and loss.

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9. If you are _____, you feel extremely impressed by something. (paragraph 16)
Users were awestruck by the dozens of new features added to the phone in the update.
10. If you are _____, you are enjoying something very much. (paragraph 16)
The congregation was enraptured, and everyone was singing, clapping, and dancing around.
11. If something is _____, it is satisfactory but not of high quality. (paragraph 21)
My literature teacher described my last essay as passable; it was different from the feedback I had hoped for.
12. If something is _____, it is not new, original, or interesting. (paragraph 21)
The remake was just another stale version of the same story we have all seen a hundred times.
13. Something that is _____ makes you feel embarrassed or ashamed. (paragraph 21)
His portrayal of Hamlet was cringeworthy; I couldn't bear to watch.

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Some in the book industry have already begun exploring automation of its pitches to readers. We took this functionality for a test drive

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- 1 "Blurb writing is a mini art form," Iris Murdoch once wrote in a letter to former Penguin blurb writer Elizabeth Buchan. And like many other art forms, companies have been experimenting with the idea that it could be created without an artist.
- 2 A German company that provides digital book distribution and marketing services to publishers has announced it will include ChatGPT, a chatbot that answers questions by drawing on publicly available internet data, in its software.
- 3 "During the beta phase, publishers can test the benefits of the artificial intelligence tool for their digital book marketing," states Bookwire, adding that it will only use ChatGPT if a publisher agrees and the disclaimer that the company "does not assume any responsibility for the content created by ChatGPT".
- 4 This raises plenty of ethical concerns, of course, which will no doubt enrage those in the book industry – Bradford Literature Festival recently came under fire on social media for its use of an AI-generated promotional image, and the Society of Authors published a paper at the beginning of May, 2023 warning the industry needs to "protect copyright and creative careers in the face of new technology". But there is also another question that needs to be asked.
- 5 I decided to test the limits of ChatGPT's "imagination" by asking it to write blurbs and endorsements for a range of well-known titles, from a heroic poem to a modern romance novel. After playing around with a variety of commands, here are some of the highlights.
- 6 A juicy blurb of a George Eliot classic:
- 7 *Middlemarch is the ultimate Real Housewives of 19th-century England. Follow the lives of wealthy aristocrats as they navigate love, lust and gossip in a cutthroat society. With scandalous affairs, juicy secrets and plenty of backstabbing, this book has more drama than*
a season of Keeping Up With the Kardashians. So grab your popcorn and get ready for a wild ride!
- 8 A blurb of an Old English epic poem that would appeal to Gen Z:
- 9 *Yo, have you checked out Beowulf? This dude's a total savage, taking down monsters left and right like it's NBD [no big deal]. His skills are on point, and he's got a fearless attitude that's straight-up inspiring. Plus, his adventures are full of epic battles and drama that'll have you shook. Beowulf's got plenty of admirers, so the romance is totally on point too. Trust me, you won't want to miss it.*
- 10 A blurb for the Bible for those looking for their next self-help read:
- 11 *The ultimate guide to life, love and eternal salvation! With enough drama and plot twists to rival Game of Thrones, it's sure to keep you entertained for thousands of years to come. Laugh, cry and gasp in awe at the epic stories of Adam and Eve, Noah, and Jesus and his miracles. Don't miss out on this divine masterpiece!*
- 12 A tweet promoting an Irish classic:
- 13 *OH MY GOSH, have you read Ulysses yet?! It's the most mind-blowing, soul-stirring literary masterpiece I've ever laid my eyes on! James Joyce is an absolute genius, and this book will take you on a journey that will leave you breathless! #Ulysses #JamesJoyce #MindBlowing #LiteraryGenius #LifeChanging*
- 14 Publishers love enthusiastic one-line endorsements to slap on the front of book jackets too. We asked ChatGPT to come up with some candidates.
- 15 *Beloved* by Toni Morrison in the style of Shakespeare:
- 16 *Oh, wondrous and magnificent Beloved, whose words doth pierce through the heart like a thousand arrows of truth, leaving one awestruck and enraptured in its devastatingly beautiful tale of love, loss and redemption.*
- 17 Colleen Hoover's *It Ends With Us* in the style of Stephen Fry:
- 18 *If you're looking for a book that will make you ugly-cry in public, It Ends With Us by Colleen Hoover is your golden ticket – just make sure to pack plenty of tissues and a disguise.*

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- 19 *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez in the style of Rishi Sunak:
- 20 *Reading One Hundred Years of Solitude is like investing in a cultural masterpiece that will appreciate in value with every page turned.*
- 21 In seriousness, ChatGPT produces almost **passable** blurbs when fed the right commands. Descriptions of books are generally accurate. Yet there are flaws, the biggest of which is that the blurbs are full of clichés – every book is a “masterpiece” or “tapestry”. It recalls George Orwell’s overworked book reviewer, who sits down to write and “All the **stale** old phrases [...] jump into their places like iron filings obeying the magnet.” With ChatGPT, that metaphor becomes literal, the **cringeworthy** phrases spat out one-by-one on the screen in real-time. So rest easy, blurbers and reviewers – you’re still needed (at least for now).

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Glossary

lit: (slang) something that is exciting and cool that you want to experience

blurb: information printed on the outside of something, especially something for sale such as a book, to describe it or make it attractive to buy

endorsement: an occasion when someone famous says in an advertisement that they like a product

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3 Comprehension check

a. Which of the following statements can be inferred from the article? Select all that apply.

1. Iris Murdoch would have supported chatbots writing book blurbs. **no**
2. Bookwire will not force its publishers to rely on content produced by chatbots on its platform. **no**
3. The book industry will welcome Bookwire's new ChatGPT feature. **no**
4. AI-generated graphics for a book festival were severely criticised online. **yes**
5. Set in 19th-century England, *Middlemarch* lacks emotional depth. **no**
6. *Beowulf* is a plot-driven poem filled with violence and adventure. **yes**
7. Gen Z readers would find *Beowulf* the most appealing of all the books mentioned. **yes**
8. ChatGPT captured the sacred nature of The Bible in the blurb. **no**
9. Colleen Hoover wrote a book that will move the reader to tears. **yes**
10. Stephen Fry's typical writing style is comedy. **no**
11. ChatGPT did not make too many factual errors when writing the blurbs. **yes**
12. Chatbots have one definite advantage over humans: they have a much more nuanced vocabulary. **yes**
13. The author thinks that chatbots' clichéd writing poses no imminent threat to blurbers and reviewers. **no**

4 Key language

a. Match these phrases from the article to their meanings.

- | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. take for a test drive | a. an exciting and unpredictable experience |
| 2. under fire | b. to try something to see how well it works |
| 3. in the face of | c. to put something like a label on a surface without much care |
| 4. play around with | d. to be the target of heavy criticism |
| 5. a wild ride | e. dealing with a difficult situation |
| 6. left and right | f. in all directions |
| 7. on point | g. to consider and try different methods or things before choosing one |
| 8. have (someone) shook | h. to shock someone |
| 9. slap on | i. perfect |

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b. Paraphrase the questions using phrases from the previous activity. Then discuss the questions.

1. Do you usually think of different ways to use new technology? **play around with**
2. When did you last hear news that shocked you? **shook you?**
3. Have you ever been criticised for saying or doing something controversial? **under fire**
4. You can try the phone out for a few days and return it if you are not happy. **take for a test drive**
5. Do you trust the endorsements that are put on products? **slap on**
6. Do you feel overwhelmed when you see people coming from multiple directions? **left and right**
7. This camping trip is going to be exciting! **wild ride**
8. Do you ever feel that your hair or your outfit are perfect? **on point**
9. What did you do to improve your well-being while the COVID pandemic was going on? **in the face of**

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- "Publishers should use AI to write their book blurbs."
- "Since AI doesn't have emotional experiences like humans, they should not be allowed to express them on our behalf."
- "AI is not a threat to real artists. Eventually, writers and other artists will use AI and integrate it into their art."

6 In your own words

- a. Choose a book that you know well. Ask a chatbot to write a blurb for it. Play around with different commands to have it written in different styles or with different ideas. Then select and edit the generated text into a blurb.
- b. Share the original and edited version of the blurb and your input commands with the class.