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

Level 1: Elementary / Pre-Intermediate

1 Warmer

a. Match each book with its description.

1. *Middlemarch* _____

2. *Beowulf* _____

3. the Bible _____

4. *Ulysses* _____

A the holy book of the Christian or the Jewish religions

B a book by George Eliot, published in 1871–1872, about life in a small town in England

C a book by Irish writer James Joyce, published in 1922

D an Old English poem about a hero in Scandinavia in the 6th century

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? Was it good?

3. Do you think chatbots can write good book blurbs? Why (not)?

> *lit*: (slang) something 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 and make it attractive to buy

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2 Key words

a. **Complete the definitions with the words below.**

> experiment   industry   marketing   publisher   responsible

1. To _____ means to try new ideas, methods, or activities to find out what results they will have.

2. A _____ is a person or company that makes books, newspapers, magazines, etc.

3. _____ is how a company encourages people to buy its products.

4. Someone who is _____ for something deserves to be blamed for something that has happened.

5. An _____ is the particular people and organisations involved in making or selling something.

> cliché   creative   divine   gossip   impressive

6. _____ means *involving a lot of imagination and new ideas*.

7. _____ is a conversation about unimportant subjects, especially people's private lives.

8. If something is _____, it is related to a god.

9. If something is _____, you admire it, for example, because it is very good.

10. A _____ is a phrase or idea that is boring because people use it a lot and it is no longer original.

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b. **Now complete the sentences using the words in the box.**

cliché	creative	divine	experimented	gossip
impressive	industry	marketing	publishers	responsible

1. The new building is very _____; I've never seen so many windows in one building!

2. People go to church to hear _____ messages.

3. I don't like _____; I don't think we should talk about other people's lives.

4. Pierre and Marie Curie _____ with radioactive elements.

5. Cambridge University Press is one of the world's oldest _____, and it printed its first book in 1584.

6. No one is _____ for the crash; it was an accident.

7. "You are as beautiful as a rose" is a _____; there are too many poems about beautiful women and roses.

8. He writes incredible songs and poems; he is very _____.

9. There are a lot of new jobs in the medical _____.

10. She works in _____; she writes ads.

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1 "Blurb writing is a mini art form," Iris Murdoch once wrote. And like many other art forms, companies have been experimenting without artists.

2 A German company that sells digital book services to publishers has said it will use ChatGPT (a chatbot that uses internet data to answer questions) in its software.

3 Bookwire said publishers could try using ChatGPT for digital book marketing. This will only happen if a publisher agrees and the company is not responsible for the text created by ChatGPT.

4 This will probably make many people in the books industry angry. The Society of Authors warned in early 2023 that the industry needs to "protect copyright and creative careers from new technology".

5 I decided to test ChatGPT's "imagination" by asking it to write blurbs for some well-known titles. After experimenting with different instructions, here are some of the most exciting ones.

6 A blurb of a George Eliot classic:

7 Middlemarch *is the* Real Housewives *of 19th-century England. Follow the lives of the rich as they deal with love and gossip. This book has more drama than a season of* Keeping Up With the Kardashians*.*

8 A blurb of an Old English poem written for Gen Z:

9 *Yo, have you checked out* Beowulf*? This dude's a complete animal, killing monsters like it's NBD [no big deal]. His adventures are full of battles that shock you. 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 guide to life, love and being saved! It's got enough drama to compete with* Game of Thrones*. Laugh, cry and be amazed at the 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*?! It's the most impressive masterpiece I've ever read! You won't believe it! #Ulysses #JamesJoyce #MindBlowing #LiteraryGenius #LifeChanging*

14 ChatGPT writes blurbs that are almost good enough when you give it the right instructions. Book descriptions are generally correct. But there are problems: the blurbs are full of clichés – every book is a "masterpiece". So don't worry, blurbers and reviewers – we still need you (at least for now).

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classic: a classic song, book, play, television programme, etc., that is very good and has been popular and had much influence for a long time

masterpiece: an excellent painting, book, piece of music, etc., or the best work of art that a particular artist, writer, musician, etc., has ever produced

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3 Comprehension check

a. Are these statements True (T) or False (F)? Correct any that are false.

1. A German book company will use a chatbot in its software.

2. The company will not be responsible for what ChatGPT writes.

3. People in the book industry will probably like this new technology.

4. *Middlemarch* is less exciting than *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*, according to ChapGPT.

5. *Beowulf* is a new poem.

6. Beowulf is a monster.

7. The Bible is described as a divine masterpiece.

8. *Ulysses* is an Irish classic.

9. The blurbs that ChatGPT writes are usually incorrect.

4 Key language

a. Match the phrasal verbs with their definitions.

> check out   compete with   deal with   keep up with   look for   miss out on

1. be part of a particular situation _____

2. continue to find out about something so that you know the latest things that are happening _____

3. look at someone or something to see whether you like them _____

4. search for someone or something _____

5. try to be more successful than someone or something else _____

6. lose an opportunity to do or have something _____

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b. **Complete the questions with the correct phrasal verbs from task A. Then discuss the questions.**

1. What do you _____ _____ in a good book?

2. Do you think chatbots will _____ _____ humans?

3. How should publishers _____ _____ new technology?

4. Do you want to _____ _____ any of the books from the article?

5. What is something that no one should _____ _____ _____ when they travel to your city or country?

6. Do you _____ _____ _____ new technologies?

5 Discussion

a. **Discuss these statements.**

• "Publishers should let AI write their book blurbs."

• "Chatbots don't have feelings, so they can't make art."

6 In your own words

a. **Choose a book that you know well. Ask a chatbot to write a blurb for it. Give it different instructions and see what it does. Then select and edit your favourite parts into a blurb.**

b. **Share the original and edited version of the blurb and your instructions with the class.**