

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

Level 2: Intermediate / Upper-Intermediate

1 Warmer

a. Match each book with its description.

1. *Middlemarch* _____
2. *Beowulf* _____
3. the Bible _____
4. *Ulysses* _____
5. *Beloved* _____
6. *It Ends With Us* _____
7. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* _____

- a the holy book of the Christian or the Jewish religions
- b a romance novel by Colleen Hoover about her parents, published in 2016
- c a book by George Eliot (pseudonym of Mary Ann Evans), published in 1871–1872, about the realities of life in a small town in 19th-century England
- d Published in 1967, a magical realist novel by Colombian author Gabriel Garcia Márquez about 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 by this name
- g a novel written by Toni Morrison, published in 1987, 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 chatbots could write good book blurbs or endorsements? Should we ask them to? Why (not)?

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2 Key words

- a. Complete the definitions and example sentences with the words below. You may have to change the form of the word.

epic

masterpiece

mind-blowing

moral

navigate

plot

- _____ relates to the idea of right and wrong and the way that each person has.
I think most of my friends and I share the same _____ values.
- To _____ is to deal effectively with a complicated situation.
This coming-of-age novel follows Phoebe as she _____ her first love and disappointment.
- If something is _____, it is extraordinarily long and difficult.
The Lord of the Rings is an _____ fantasy novel set in Middle-earth.
- A _____ is an extremely good piece of art.
A woman donated a painting to her church, and they discovered it was a Velázquez _____.
- A _____ is a series of related events that make up the main story in a book, film, etc.
According to reviews, it's one of the best recent films with a great cast and a complex and engaging _____.
- If something is _____, it is extremely impressive, exciting, or shocking.
I love _____ sci-fi films that show us unimaginable worlds.

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appreciates

breathless

cliché

cringeworthy

stunned

passable

7. If you are _____, you are experiencing a powerful emotion, especially excitement.
The villa is on top of a mountain overlooking a valley with a view that will leave you _____.
8. If you are _____, you are very shocked or upset, mainly so that you are unable to act normally.
We were all _____ when they announced the Best Picture winner.
9. When something _____, its value increases gradually.
The value of gold _____ over time, so it is an excellent long-term investment.
10. If something is _____, it is satisfactory but not of high quality.
The actor's audition was _____ but not very impressive.
11. A _____ is a phrase or idea that is boring because people use it a lot, and it is no longer original.
It's a classic film, but its dialogue reinforces sexist _____ of a princess that needs rescuing.
12. Something that is _____ makes you feel embarrassed or ashamed.
Some thought his outfit was _____ and inappropriately 'young', but he received some positive comments from fans.

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

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

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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 integrate ChatGPT into its software. ChatGPT is a chatbot that uses publicly available internet data to answer questions.
- 3 Bookwire has said that, during the beta phase, publishers can test the benefits of ChatGPT for their digital book marketing. Bookwire added that it will only be used if a publisher agrees and that the company “does not assume any responsibility for the content created by ChatGPT”.
- 4 This raises moral concerns, which will no doubt anger those in the books industry – the Society of Authors warned in early 2023 that 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 ChatGPT’s “imagination” by asking it to write blurbs and endorsements for some well-known titles. After playing around with a variety of commands, here are some of the highlights.
- 6 A 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. This book has more drama than a season of Keeping Up With the Kardashians.*
- 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 wild, taking down monsters left and right like it’s NBD [no big deal]. Plus, his adventures are full of epic battles that’ll have you shook. 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! It’s got enough drama and plot twists to rival Game of Thrones. Laugh, cry and be amazed 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?! It’s the most mind-blowing, soul-stirring literary masterpiece I’ve ever read! This book 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 leave one stunned in its beautiful tale of love and loss.*
- 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 it – just make sure to pack plenty of tissues and a disguise.*
- 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.*
- 21 But seriously, ChatGPT produces almost passable blurbs when you give it the right commands. Descriptions of books are generally accurate. However, there are faults; the blurbs are full of clichés – every book is a “masterpiece” or “tapestry”. With ChatGPT, cringeworthy phrases are 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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3 Comprehension check

a. Complete the statements with names from the article.

1. A German digital book distribution and marketing company, _____, will integrate a chatbot into its software.
2. The company does not assume any liability for the content created by _____.
3. _____ warned that the industry needs to protect copyright and creative careers in dealing with new technology.
4. _____'s novel was compared to *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*.
5. The *Beowulf* blurb was written in a style that might appeal to a _____ audience.
6. _____ is full of violent adventures.
7. _____ is described as a divine masterpiece falling in the self-help category.
8. The author of _____ is called an absolute genius.
9. _____'s blurb was written in the style of Shakespeare, while the book itself was written by Toni Morrison.
10. _____ is said to make you cry in public.

4 Key language

a. Match the phrases with their definitions.

appeal to

assume responsibility for

come up with

experiment with

play around with

slap on

spit out

take down

1. try new ideas, methods, or activities to find out what results they will have _____
2. accept blame for something _____
3. think about all the different possible ways of doing something before you make a decision _____
4. when something is liked or wanted by someone _____

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- hit or shoot someone so that they fall _____
- put something on a surface quickly and without much attention _____
- think of something such as an idea or a plan _____
- produce something in large quantities quickly and often carelessly _____

b. Complete the questions with the phrases from task A. Then discuss the questions.

- Do any of the books mentioned in the article _____ you?
- How many words can a chatbot _____ per minute?
- Do you enjoy _____ different gadgets before choosing one to buy?
- Do you like books and films about superheroes who _____ villains?
- Do you believe the endorsements that are _____ product packages?
- Who should _____ the content generated by AI?
- Do you think writers should _____ AI?

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- "Publishers should allow AI to write their book blurbs."
- "Chatbots don't have feelings, so they can't make art."
- "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

- 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.
- Share the original and edited version of the blurb, as well as your input commands, with the class.