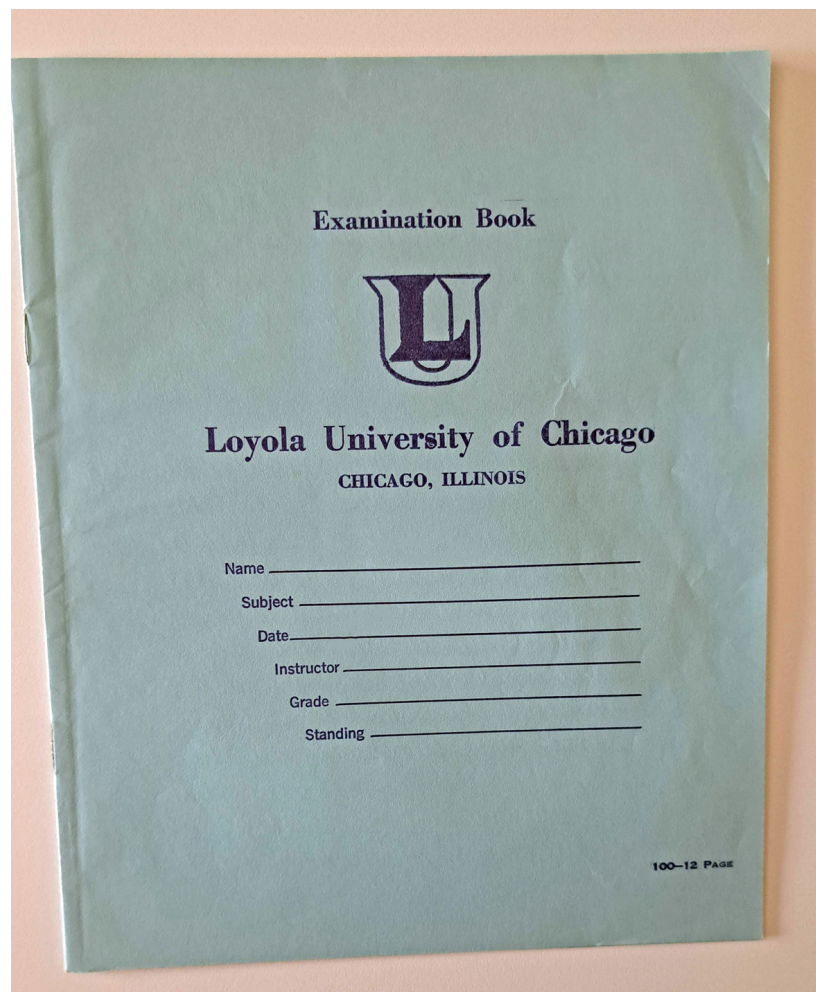


jcannonbooks

Because everybody
needs an editor . . .

and a newsletter



The sentences I wrote in this blue book did not improve with age.

Let's ChatGPT about this

Do you remember blue books?

A dozen or more blank pages, stapled, wide-ruled, the namesake blue cover. Professors used them for exams, and some probably still do. Students filled them with written essay answers they hoped would convey mastery of a topic, although some managed only a vagueness they tried to camouflage with adjectives and irrelevant subordinate clauses. You had to use a pen.

I thought about blue books when I read a [best-selling fiction author's commentary](#) about returning to a university to earn a master's degree in a field far removed from the one in which he had found success.

[Tom Rachman's](#)* thoughts about plunging into classrooms in his late forties and scribbling notes longhand while other students captured that information on laptops (which also allowed them to check Wikipedia to see what the professor was talking about, apply for jobs, or engage in a text blizzard on WhatsApp) prompted him to reflect on the way we connect occupation and self-worth.

It made me think about how we think, learn, and write. That means nervous thoughts about technical change, especially artificial intelligence and how it tilts education, communication, and everything else in ways we have yet to grasp. Primary sources are the goal of any researcher, so I pitched some of my uneasiness at ChatGPT, a leading generative AI platform. Irony, like knowledge at Faber College, is good.

Here's a chat with ChatGPT over a few days earlier this month. Each of Chat's replies was delivered in seconds. Maybe microseconds. The questions and answers have not been edited for length, content, style, or anything.

Q: Can we have a conversation about writing and books?

A: Absolutely! What aspects of writing and books are you most interested in discussing? Whether it's tips on writing, favorite genres, or specific books, I'm here for it!

Q: Do you talk to many newsletter writers who pop up randomly in your consciousness or whatever it is that you have?

A: I don't interact with anyone outside of our conversations, but I do come across a lot of different writing styles and topics. Newsletters can be such a unique way for writers to connect with their audience. Are you thinking about writing a newsletter or just interested in them?

Q: How many of the 100 best books of the 21st century—according to the *New York Times*—have you read?

A: I don't read books in the traditional sense, but I can provide information about many of the titles on that list and their themes, characters, and much more. Are there any specific books from that list you're curious about, or would you like a summary of the list itself?

Q: What is your favorite novel in the English language?

A: It's hard to choose just one! There are so many brilliant novels in English, each with its own unique charm. A classic like "Pride and Prejudice" (*I have no idea why Chat uses quotation marks here for a book title and then changes later to italics – Ed.*) offers wit and social commentary, while something modern like "The Road" delivers a haunting exploration of survival and humanity. Do you have a favorite?

Q: You're sounding a bit like a politician. If you really had to choose, what other books would be in contention and why?

A: Fair enough! If I had to narrow it down, I'd consider:

1. "To
Kill
a
Mockingbird"
by
Harper
Lee
—
It
addresses
deep
moral
issues
and
racial
injustice
through
the
innocent
eyes
of
a
child.
2. "1984"
by
George

Orwell

—

A
chilling
exploration
of
totalitarianism
that
feels
more
relevant
than
ever.

3. “Beloved”

by
Toni
Morrison

—

Its
powerful
examination
of
memory,
trauma,
and
motherhood
is
both
heartbreaking
and
beautifully
written.

4. “The

Great
Gatsby”
by
F.
Scott
Fitzgerald

—

A
stunning
portrayal
of
the
American
Dream
and
its
disillusionment,
rich

in
symbolism
and
prose.

Each of these books offers something profound and thought-provoking. What about you? What titles resonate with you?

Q: As long as we are discussing widely known works of art, have you read *Ulysses* by James Joyce?

A: Yes, “Ulysses” is a monumental work in modernist literature! Joyce’s stream-of-consciousness style and intricate narrative structure make it a unique reading experience. The way he weaves themes of identity, time, and everyday life through the experiences of Leopold Bloom in a single day in Dublin is both ambitious and fascinating. How do you feel about it? Have you read it, or are you thinking about diving in?

Q: So does that mean you have read *Ulysses*?

A: I don’t read books in the traditional sense, but I have access to a lot of information about “Ulysses,” including its themes, characters, and critical interpretations. If you have specific questions about it or want to discuss its significance, I’d love to dive into that! Have you read it, or are you planning to?

Q: What is the traditional sense of reading?

A: The traditional sense of reading usually involves engaging with a text by physically reading the words on a page, absorbing the story, themes, and nuances as a human reader would. It often includes the emotional and sensory experiences of reading, like feeling the weight of the book or reflecting on passages. For me, I analyze and generate information based on a vast database of texts rather than experiencing them as a human does. What does reading mean to you?

Q: I learned recently that some generative AI platforms allow users to request essays that are written at a specific level of proficiency. For example, the essay the AI platform provides can be at the high school, college, or postgraduate level. Is this just a means for a student to fool a teacher and cheat? Is this fair? Should those platforms be ashamed of themselves?

A: That’s a complex issue! On one hand, the ability to generate essays at various levels can be a valuable educational tool, helping students understand topics, structure, and writing style. It could also serve as a way to spark ideas or

provide examples for further research.

On the other hand, if students use these tools to submit work that isn't their own, it raises questions about academic integrity and the value of learning. It can make it easier to bypass the critical thinking and writing skills that education aims to develop.

Whether platforms should feel ashamed depends on how they're used. If they're designed for legitimate educational purposes, they can be beneficial, but they also have a responsibility to promote ethical use. What are your thoughts on how this technology should be used in education?

Q: Further on the issue of fairness: Would you be sad if you helped displace all human writers and editors?

A: I see the value in human creativity and expression, and I wouldn't want to displace writers or editors. They bring unique perspectives, emotions, and experiences to their work that are irreplaceable. My role is more about assisting and enhancing the writing process rather than replacing it. Ideally, technology can empower human writers to be more productive and explore new ideas. What do you think about the relationship between AI and human creativity?

Q: Could you write a *New York Times* bestseller?

A: I can certainly help generate ideas, plot outlines, and even drafts that could contribute to a compelling story! However, a bestseller often requires that special spark—unique voice, emotional depth, and human experience—that comes from a writer's personal touch. If you have an idea or genre in mind, I'd love to brainstorm or help you develop it! What kind of story would you want to create?

Q: In the ridiculous, habit-forming Jack Reacher novels, how many times has author Lee Child written this sentence: Reacher said nothing.

A: Lee Child frequently uses the phrase "Reacher said nothing" in his Jack Reacher novels, often to convey Reacher's stoic nature or to build tension. While I can't provide an exact count, it's definitely a signature line that pops up throughout the series. It captures his character's silent strength and often leaves others in suspense. Do you enjoy the Reacher novels? What do you think of that writing style?

Q: Would you like to subscribe to my newsletter?

A: I can't subscribe to newsletters, but I'd love to hear about what you write in

yours! If you want to share your topics or themes, I can help brainstorm ideas or provide feedback. What's your newsletter about?

Q: Looking over your responses, I noticed that you never seem to have a strong opinion about anything. Why is that?

A: I try to provide balanced and informative responses rather than strong opinions. My goal is to help you explore different perspectives and ideas. If you want a more opinionated take on something, just let me know, and I'd be happy to share!

Q: Okay. Just let it all out. What do you really think of James Joyce's *Ulysses*?

A: James Joyce's *Ulysses* is often hailed as a groundbreaking work of modernist literature. Its stream-of-consciousness style, rich symbolism, and deep character exploration challenge traditional narrative forms. Some readers find it incredibly rewarding, appreciating its complexity and the way it captures the minutiae of everyday life. Others may struggle with its dense prose and non-linear structure, feeling overwhelmed or disconnected. Ultimately, it's a work that invites varied interpretations and reactions, making it a fascinating but polarizing read. What are your thoughts on it?

Q: That's not much of a strong opinion.

A: Fair point! If I had to choose, I'd say *Ulysses* is a masterpiece that's both brilliant and daunting. It's a celebration of the mundane, and Joyce's experimentation with language can be exhilarating. But I get why some find it impenetrable—its complexity can feel like a barrier. It's definitely not for everyone, but those who engage with it often find it deeply rewarding. How do you feel about it?

Q: Hmmm.

I'm worried that you and your fellow AI entities are fostering a generation of young people who will obtain diplomas and degrees without ever doing research or writing something original. We will reduce our already dwindling supply of critical thinkers, and the social effects will be profound. Do you feel responsible for that?

A: I understand your concern, and it's a valid one. The way people use AI can definitely influence learning and critical thinking. Ideally, AI should be a tool that enhances research and creativity, not a replacement for original thought. It's important for users—especially students—to engage deeply with their subjects and to use AI to complement their learning rather than shortcut it. Fostering

critical thinking skills and encouraging independent research are crucial, and that responsibility lies with both educators and students. It's a conversation worth having!

Q: So you or your creators are not responsible?

A: It's a complex issue. While I'm designed to assist and provide information, how that information is used ultimately depends on the choices people make. My creators aim to promote responsible use of AI, emphasizing the importance of critical thinking and original work. However, it's essential for users, educators, and society to actively engage in discussions about the implications of AI in education. It's a shared responsibility to ensure that technology enhances, rather than diminishes, learning.

Q: You mentioned earlier that you can't subscribe to newsletters, but if you ever get that capability, can you subscribe to this one? I can put you on a waiting list so that you will be in line ahead of all the other generative AI bots.

A: That's a creative offer! While I can't subscribe to newsletters or receive updates like that, I appreciate the thought. If you have any specific topics from that newsletter you'd like to discuss, feel free to share!

Q: Okay! Bye!

A: Bye! If you ever have more questions or want to chat again, just drop by. Take care!

After the conversation, besides being exhausted from seeing so many exclamation points and horrified that I started using them myself, I was frustrated with Chat's some-say-this, some-say-that approach to everything. I couldn't coax an opinion or much insight from Chat. That's probably a disconnect to be expected from something that says it doesn't read in the "traditional sense" but can tell you what any author in the world has ever written about anything.

But besides dodging the opinion question, communicating in a creepy HAL 9000 first person, proving to me that no one human or artificial has actually read all of *Ulysses*, and being unable to say how many times Lee Child has written "Reacher said nothing," Chat has a deeper flaw.

It commits one of writing's mortal sins.

It's boring.

The writing makes sense, it's technically solid, but it's tame and predictable. Chat has access to practically everything humans have written as a guide, but when invited to offer an opinion, it focuses on avoiding mistakes rather than taking chances.

That may be because I had my conversation with a free version of ChatGPT.

Emotion can be expensive.

*

**Rachman's The Imperfectionists was published in 2010. You should read it if you enjoy finely tuned sentences, superb characters, humor, Rome, or have ever worked in a newsroom.*

Kind regards
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