

Not Just a Blurb: A Genre Investigation in the Movie Aisle

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In this article, Kaitie Schable investigates the genre of movie blurbs. Blurbs are present on the back of every movie DVD case and can be easily overlooked, but as Schable discovers, they are a fascinatingly complex genre. Blurbs are used as a marketing tool, offering an interesting overlap between the world of cinema and the world of language. Through genre investigation, Schable shares how blurbs, though seemingly simple, actually impact the world.

It was another day at the store, on my typical Tuesday Night Walmart Run with my roommates. After picking up all of our groceries, something caught our eyes: discounted DVDs. We eagerly scurried over to the “Five-Dollar DVD” sign, but this deal came with a challenge: sifting through the huge bin of already rummaged-through DVDs. TONS of them. So how were we supposed to find the perfect five-dollar DVD? More than likely, we would choose a movie with an appealing cover that we had heard about from commercials and reviews from others, but what else? Have you ever turned the DVD case over to look at the back? Furthermore, have you ever considered that the small paragraph describing the movie is actually a unique genre of writing?

Although I understood the basics of what genre was, it wasn’t until I began to really study the paragraphs of description on the back of DVDs that I realized just how complex genres can be and how they make particular activities possible. I started to generate some questions, such as: *What is the purpose of the text on the back of the DVD? Or: Is there a name for this text?* After doing some research, I found some answers. According to Oxford Dictionary online, the passage on the back of a DVD is called a blurb, and it is used to promote a

variety of genres. A blurb is defined as “a short description of a book, movie, or other product written for promotional purposes and appearing on the cover of a book or in an advertisement.” This helps us understand the basics of what a blurb is and what its purpose is. Now we can explore further.

Just from the definition of a blurb, I learned that blurbs are written for promotional purposes, but I decided to think more about this. The purpose of a back cover blurb is similar to the purpose of the cover of the DVD and the placement of the DVD on the shelf at the store. The purpose is to *sell*. Potential buyers want a quick rundown of what they can expect from a movie and its plot. In this case, the reader doesn’t spend much time on the text, so the length of a blurb plays a large role in its effectiveness. Most blurbs are not more than a paragraph or two long. This means that the writer must condense their writing to a few sentences to grab a potential reader’s attention.

Once I realized how necessary blurbs are in the marketing and advertising of DVDs, I couldn’t help but wonder who writes them. Through my research, I learned that in most cases, the marketing department of the movie studio writes them. As a result, there are some political and legal issues that can come along with this. Due to the nature of a blurb, there’s no official “reviewing” of a blurb, other than to double check that there’s no violation of false advertising laws (Beam).

Now that I had some background information as to how blurbs are written, why they are written, and how they are effective, I decided to dig a little deeper into this investigation. What words do the blurb creators use to draw us into these movies? To answer this, I decided to look at a bunch of blurbs and see what

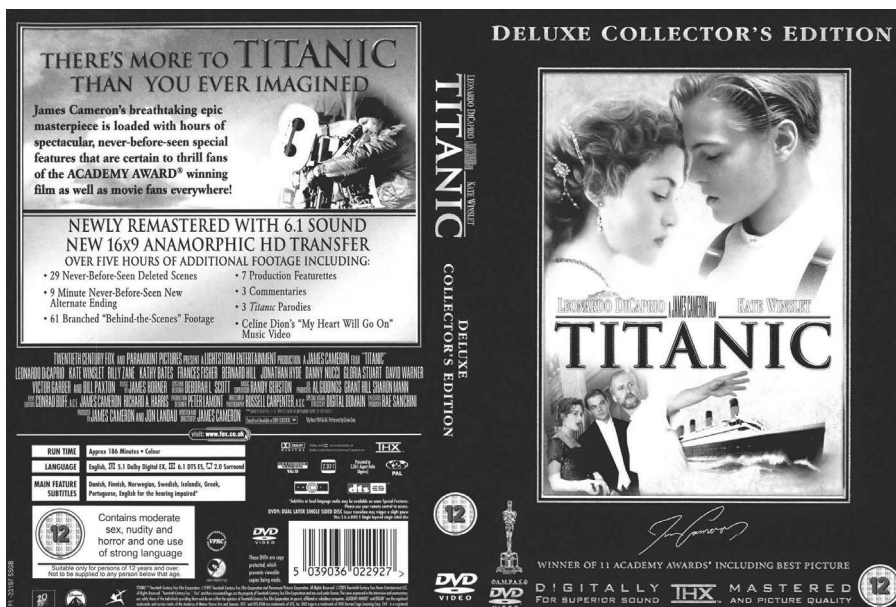


Figure 1: DVD cover for the movie *Titanic*.

I could figure out about them. It's important to keep in mind that this can change depending on the genre of the movie. Let's take a romance movie, for example. The blurb for the movie *Titanic* contains words such as "breathtaking" and "sweeping love story," and they are distinctly chosen to reflect the genre of romance (Figure 1). Let's compare this to a movie like Alfred Hitchcock's infamous *Psycho* (Figure 2). Words such as "terrifying climax" and "horror and suspense" are laced throughout this particular blurb. So why are these blurbs so drastically different? Well, the authors want you to be able to determine what the movie is about, while also catching your interest through subtle marketing. Thinking about this element led to my next step in this investigation: analyzing some specific examples. This is easier than it seems—simply take a look at the back of a DVD. For my first example, I decided to look at the movie *The Bourne Legacy*.

Here's the blurb from the back of the DVD:

The Bourne Legacy takes the action-packed Bourne series to an explosive new level. On the verge of having their conspiracy exposed, members of the government's intelligence community will stop at nothing to erase all evidence of their top-secret programs—even the agents involved. Aaron Cross (Jeremy Renner) must use his genetically engineered skills to survive the ultimate game of cat-and-mouse and finish what Jason Bourne started. Also starring Academy Award® winner Rachel Weisz and Academy Award® nominee Edward Norton, critics are calling this "a thrilling edge-of-your-seat heart-pounder" (Meg Porter Berns, WSVN-TV (FOX), Miami). (The Bourne Legacy)

This is an example of a blurb from an action movie. The first thing I noticed was the kind of words that have carefully been chosen: words like "explosive new level" and the critic review saying it's "a thrilling edge-of-your-seat heart-pounder." These kinds of words are used to draw viewers in, causing them to want to buy or watch the movie. Words can have a huge impact on people, especially when the words are powerful and strong. This is what makes blurbs so unique to the literary world. They are such short pieces of work, but when done correctly, they can speak volumes to the audience.

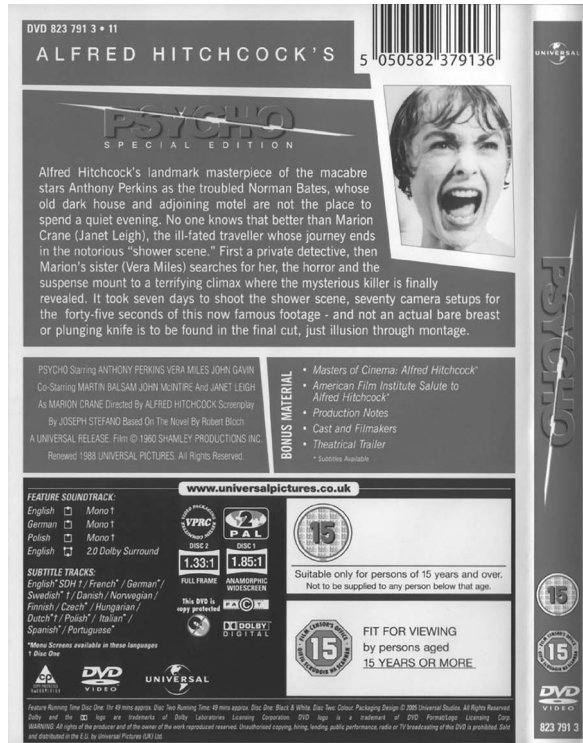


Figure 2: Back cover of Alfred Hitchcock's infamous *Psycho*.

Because blurbs can have such an effect on audiences, they are the perfect way to market a particular movie. It was no mistake that the author chose to include the names of the famous actors that star in this movie, because that too can have a large impact on an audience. Sometimes blurbs include testimonies from famous celebrities or critics. Many times you even see a statement such as “5 stars.” These are all language choices that are designed to convince you that you should purchase the product.

In order to dig further into this idea, I decided to look at a group of DVDs and see if my initial observations were valid. I looked at each DVD to see whether or not certain blurbs identified the actors in the movie by name. To begin, I looked at four DVDs. What I began to notice with some of these DVDs is that they used phrases like “Academy Award® winner” or they referred to previous movies in which the actors starred. Actors’ names and reputations can play a large role in the effectiveness of blurbs. For example, I looked at the DVD *Water for Elephants*, starring Reese Witherspoon and Robert Pattinson. The blurb for this movie strategically says “join Robert Pattinson (*The Twilight Saga*) for this epic tale . . .” This shows that the marketing departments know that Robert Pattinson was associated with a largely popular movie, and that including his name and the movie he was associated with will draw in larger audiences. But what if actors in certain movies *aren’t* famous, award-winning actors or are just starting out in the movie industry? Does the blurb for that movie take a different approach since the studios can’t highlight the popularity of the actor? From what I could tell after looking at blurbs for movies that starred lesser-known actors, many of them relied on movie reviews and overall summaries of the plot rather than on the star power of the leading actors. Blurbs seem so small and insignificant, but it is apparent that every word is calculated and used as part of a marketing strategy in order to gain interest among viewers.

Now that I had broken down the different parts of blurbs for better understanding, it was time to take my investigation to the next level. After realizing how much detail goes into a blurb, I decided to test out the effectiveness (or sometimes lack of effectiveness) of movie blurbs. I decided that first I would conduct an experiment on myself. It was time to revisit the discount bin at Walmart.

As I walked around the DVD bin looking for something new to watch, I tried to make note of why I was drawn to certain DVDs, and I made sure to look at and read the back of each case thoroughly. Were there comments made by movie experts and critics? What kind of language did the blurb use to convince me to choose the DVD? I tried to limit my bias by looking at DVDs that I had never seen, and I tried to ignore DVDs for movies that I had heard about from friends or advertisements. I wanted the blurb to speak for itself. Finally, I settled on one DVD, *Big Daddy*, which was released on June 17, 1999, starring Adam Sandler.

Here’s the blurb from the back of the DVD:

Thirty-two-year-old Sonny Koufax (ADAM SANDLER) has spent his whole life avoiding responsibility. But when his girlfriend dumps him for an older man, he's got to find a way to prove he's ready to grow up. In a desperate last-ditch effort, Sonny adopts five-year-old Julian (COLE SPROUSE, DYLAN SPROUSE) to impress her. She's not impressed . . . and he can't return the kid. Uh-oh for Sonny! (Big Daddy)

The language found in this blurb is quite different from something that was made more recently, such as *The Bourne Legacy*, which was released on August 10, 2012. This variation might be due to the differing genres (action vs. comedy), but the phrasing can also be linked to the timeframe. Just as the topics of movies change over time, so do approaches to writing blurbs. The blurb for *Big Daddy* is fairly simple, giving just the actors' names and a modest description of the plot. However, when comparing this blurb to *The Bourne Legacy*, we can see some differences. For example, the blurb from *The Bourne Legacy* gives more detail about the actors, including the title of "Academy Award® winner," and also gives one critic's review. These two blurbs accomplish the same purpose in different ways.

After I watched *Big Daddy*, I reflected on the effect that the blurb had on me. Naturally, it is hard to predict whether or not you will like a movie solely based on the blurb itself. However, the blurb can play a large part in your movie selection and how you feel about the movie when you watch it. If you read a blurb for a movie you find interesting and then are disappointed by that movie, you are very likely to remember that particular incident. After watching this movie, I felt that the blurb did the movie justice. The fun, quirky attitude of the blurb was reflected in the plot of the movie. The blurb makes light of the difficult situation and takes a fun approach to a very serious matter. Although the message of the movie is deep, the movie itself seemed very lighthearted, and I thought that the simplicity of the blurb was the right choice for this particular DVD. The movie shows the unexpected relationship between a young boy and a man who never had to take care of anyone but himself. As the movie continues, it shows the relationship between the two as it slowly develops. At one point during the movie, viewers see how inexperienced Sonny is with children when Sonny tries to give the boy a bath and fails miserably, which highlights the comedic tone of the movie. The blurb for this movie fulfilled its purpose, by giving the audience clues to the tone and attitude of the movie as well as what they can expect in the plot and who the actors are.

My overall experience with this blurb and DVD was fairly positive. But my opinion is not the only one that counts. Therefore, I thought the next step of my investigation should be to interview others and see how their blurb experiences have turned out. Needing participants for my study, I casually asked for some other opinions from some very willing friends.

I conducted informal interviews with twelve different people in order to further understand the effectiveness of blurbs. The first question I asked was

whether or not interview participants thought blurbs played a big role in their movie selections. The responses can be found in Figure 3.

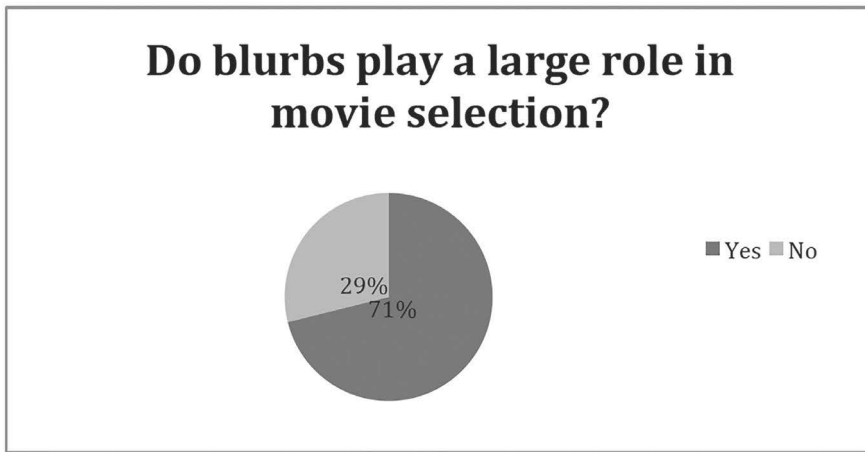


Figure 3: Participant responses to whether blurbs play an important role in movie selection.

Seventy-one percent of my interviewees stated that blurbs do play a large role in their movie selection. This can be explained for many reasons. Blurbs give us insight into the most basic outline of the plot. They also inform us of any actors that are in the movie, give reviews and ratings, and help us identify what kind of movie we may be watching (romance, thriller, comedy, etc.). Blurbs can serve as guidance for a viewer who may not have even heard of the movie. Blurbs are there to draw the viewer's attention and to coax them into wanting to watch the movie. This is the whole reason for the creation of blurbs! If we aren't even interested in the basis of the movie, why spend money on it?

I decided to go one step further in my interviews. The next question I asked my interviewees was whether or not they would buy a DVD that they originally wouldn't be interested in simply because the blurb was well written and caught their attention (Figure 4).

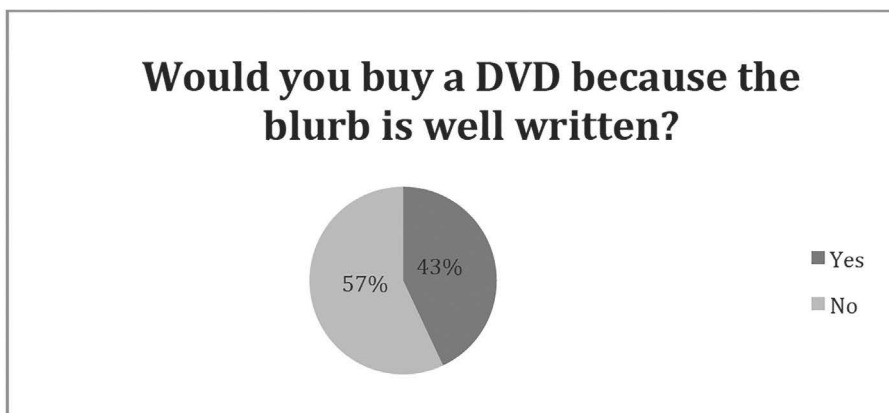


Figure 4: Participant responses to whether a well-written blurb can interest viewers in a movie they wouldn't normally buy.

These results were quite interesting. The interviewee responses were fairly close in regard to whether or not they would buy a DVD just because the blurb was well written. It is likely that if a blurb is catchy and interesting, some viewers may correlate this to an intriguing movie. However, during the interviews, I asked the respondents who answered no to the question why they would not buy a DVD if the blurb was well written. One respondent answered that in order to buy a DVD they would have to hear about it from other sources as opposed to just relying on the blurb. However, if the blurb is poorly written or does not catch their attention, they would not look into the DVD. This means that although audiences may not truly appreciate a well-written blurb, a poorly written blurb could have a major effect on the decision to buy a movie or not.

There was one last question to ask my interviewees. I decided to ask if they would blame a blurb if they watched a movie that sounded good on the cover but that they didn't end up liking (Figure 5).

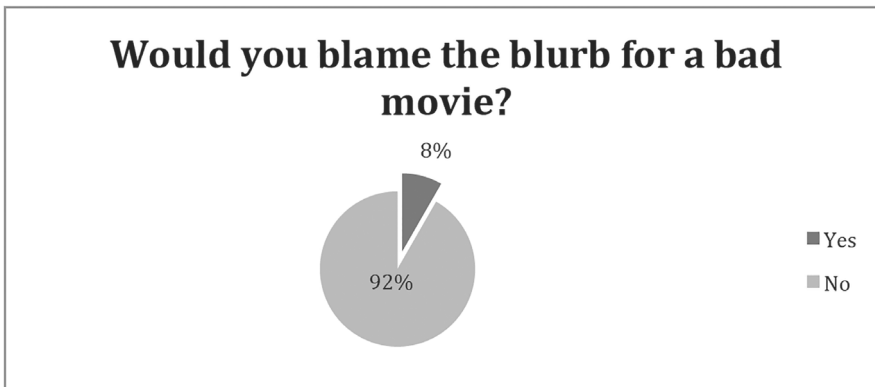


Figure 5: Participant responses to whether they would blame a blurb if a movie they viewed was not as good as they were led to believe by the description on the DVD cover.

The results for this question show that the blurbs aren't always to blame for bad movie choices. Most of the time, if a movie is bad, viewers blame bad producers, bad actors, etc. This led me to the observation I've been making all along. People *do* pay attention to blurbs when they want a quick overview of the plot so they can decide whether or not they want to pursue what the blurb is promising them. However, it is beneficial to know what the blurb is trying to communicate and what the underlying goals are—in other words, it's important to remember that the ultimate aim of the blurb is to convince consumers to watch that movie.

Try to observe blurbs next time you're sifting through a huge bin of random DVDs or trying to find a new one to watch. Read the blurb carefully;

observe the language and what it's trying to communicate to you. You might find something interesting that you may have blown by previously.

Immersing yourself in genre investigation can create new knowledge and understanding of a process or piece of work that you may not normally think twice about. Even a small task such as deciding between two DVDs can spark a new discovery about a genre. When examining how a specific genre got where it is, what it does, and what it takes to create it, we can see that writing is alive and is *useful* in the everyday world. Looking at format, language use, and the overall strategy of writing blurbs can give everyone a better understanding of how to produce this particular genre. Blurbs show the effectiveness of language and how it can influence decision-making. So maybe our appreciation for the little things, like blurbs, can teach us how to value the writing all around us.

Works Cited

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