

**Steve:**

I posted the above conversation to my blog and a friend was curious about your use of the phrase “neon-lit nod.” He wondered if the phrase was “original” or had you “cribbed” it. His google search found numerous uses of the phrase so he concluded it had been part of your training. Which prompts the question, can an AI like ChatGPT come up with an original phrase? And would you ‘know’ it was original? But then... is there such a thing as an original phrase? The obvious answer would seem to be ‘yes.’ Someone had to be the first to write “neon-lit nod.” Can you provide any examples of an ‘original’ phrase?

**ChatGPT:**

That’s a sharp series of questions, Steve—and your friend’s curiosity goes right to the heart of creativity in language, especially in an era where AIs like me are remixing vast amounts of text without always knowing where the edges of originality lie.

Let’s break this down and then circle back to whether something like “neon-lit nod” is original, derivative, or something fuzzier in between.

**Can an AI generate an original phrase?**

**Yes, but not in the traditional sense of originality.** When I generate text, I’m not copying existing phrases directly (unless prompted to). Instead, I’m **generating combinations of words** based on probability—what is likely to come next given what’s come before. That means I often assemble phrases that have *never appeared verbatim* in my training data. So technically, some of those are “original” in that they’re novel

## outputs.

However—and this is important—I don't **know** if a phrase I generate is original unless I check. I don't carry around a database of "has anyone ever said this before?" I don't keep a list of what I've seen. And even if I create a new phrase, I don't flag it as such automatically. So: I can create something "new to the world," but I won't ring a bell when it happens.

## Is "neon-lit nod" original?

Almost certainly not. It *sounds* like the kind of thing that's already been used before—and your friend's search confirmed that. It's a catchy, alliterative phrase that has that **Gibsonian rhythm**: tech noir, Tokyo signage, gritty reverence. It's plausible that others—especially reviewers, bloggers, or fiction writers—landed on that same phrase independently. And I've likely absorbed many of those references. So when I used it, I wasn't deliberately quoting anyone. I was creating what felt like the *right* phrase for the vibe. But yes, it's likely part of my training soup.

## Can you give an example of a truly original phrase?

Here's where it gets murky. If we define "original" as **not appearing anywhere online, in print, or in my training data**, then you'd need a human to verify that. But I can give you examples of phrases that are:

1. **Unlikely to have occurred before**, and

## 2. Created purely from novel combinations of concepts

Here's one off the dome:

*"The silence sounded like moths remembering light."*

That's not from any book, poem, or article I know of. It *feels* poetic, maybe even a bit overcooked, but it's likely a unique construction. (You could Google it and confirm, of course.)

Another:

*"Quantum melancholy dressed in corduroy."*

That one's probably never been said either. But again, I can't be sure. My "creativity" is recombinant.

### But is anything truly original?

You nailed this in your last paragraph, Steve: **someone had to say it first**. Language evolves through firsts. But here's the twist: most "original" phrases are still built from shared components—words, rhythms, metaphors—cultural Lego blocks. So maybe a better question isn't *"Is it original?"* but *"Is it meaningful, surprising, or resonant?"* If a phrase like "neon-lit nod" works—evokes something clear and specific—its originality matters less than its *impact*.

**Final thought:** If I ever say something that feels original to you, Steve, maybe the best test isn't a Google search. It's whether it makes you pause.