

## CLICHÉS EXERCISE

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What is a cliché, and why is it bad? Clichés are the mummified remnants of a colorful phrase turned meaningless by excessive use. As Maxwell Nurberg says, clichés "are generally fixed idiomatic phrases, some of which may have originally been valid, fresh, and colorful but through constant use have become about as personal as a rubber stamp or a mimeographed love letter." A cliché is a phrase or metaphor that was once sparkling and original, but now it is dead through overuse. It is so often used that it merely annoys experienced readers due to its predictability and triteness.

For instance, the phrases *bite the dust*, *breath of fresh air*, *smooth as silk*, *a crying shame*, *after all is said and done*, *at the crack of dawn*, *bored to tears*, *drop a bombshell*, *flat as a pancake*, and *in this day and age* were once effective and striking phrases. No longer. Millions of writers have used them so much, they have worn out their originality. To illustrate how dull and predictable clichés are, see how easy it is to fill in the missing words in the last half of the examples below.

rear its <u>ugly head</u>	packed in as tight as _____
sadder but <u>wiser</u>	that captain runs a tight _____
I have a sneaking <u>suspicion</u>	believe it or _____
the <u>bottom</u> line	breathe a sigh of _____
in one fell <u>swoop</u>	better late _____
last but not <u>least</u>	like a bolt from the _____
life takes its <u>toll</u>	that was the _____ that broke the _____ 's _____
few and <u>far</u> between	perish the _____
crystal clear, clear as a <u>bell</u>	as alike as two _____ in a _____
for all intents and <u>purposes</u>	beyond the shadow of a _____
take the bull by _____	leave no stone _____
the thrill of _____, the agony of _____	Don't have a _____, _____!
swept it _____	

Unfortunately, many students are fond of clichés. They find comfort in the old and the familiar. It is too easy to sit back and let the trite phrase spill forth thoughtlessly from your pen. Don't give into that urge! Clichés have a funny way of forcing writers' thinking into old ways of thinking, rather than allowing them to refigure thoughts in a new way. Your job is to make language new. Clichés are insidious, and they creep up on you when you least expect them. Avoid them like the plague. (Oops! There's another one!)

**Special Note:** What is the worst cliché that appears in every freshman composition class? Students who begin their papers with phrases like, *since the dawn of time* or *throughout the history of mankind*. In a typical fall term, I would find at least six students who use this cliché in their first paper. Students who start their papers this way immediately sin against the holy spirits of creativity and originality.

## CURING CLICHÉS

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There are three cures to the cliché crisis.

**(1)** First, you can simplify the phrase. It's not colorful, but it is better than using a cliché and labeling yourself as an unoriginal writer who can't think of a better way to phrase a simple idea.

"A bolt from the blue" would then become "a shock"  
"beyond the shadow of a doubt" would then become "undoubtedly"  
"Swept under the rug" would then become "concealed"  
"As pure as the fresh driven snow" would then become "immaculate"

**(2)** A bit more advanced technique is to take the trite phrase and give it a slight twist, a minor tweak that radically changes the meaning of the phrase. Doing so breathes new life into dead language by making it de-familiarized; the reader encounters the words anew for the first time, and becomes pleasantly surprised.

For instance, G. K. Chesterton wrote, "If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly." Talulah Bankhead wrote, "I am as pure as the fresh driven slush." Another writer, Tom Bethel, avoided a Shakespearean cliché by writing, "Washington is Thunder City--full of sound and fury signifying power." Sometimes, the new phrase made by refashioning a cliché may make a good title. One James Bond film, far too action-packed to live and let live, decided to *Live and Let Die*.

Such verbal slight-of-hand is available to any student who takes the time. One student, writing about bombing technology, concluded, "That's the whole thing in a bombshell," cleverly twisting the cliché about *nutshell*. An old student of mine, one who was writing about animal research, realized that the phrase "on the other hand" was becoming repetitive in his paper. He stirred up the language pot and wrote "on the other paw" in reference to an animal. It was a bit too cute for my own writing, but all the other readers in class who encountered his twist on the cliché loved it.

**(3)** Finally, the best (and hardest) way to cure a cliché is to make up an entirely new image or phrase, one you have never heard before but which expresses the same idea. Either think of an image that startles the reader by its unexpectedness or one that connotes appropriate emotional resonances in the reader. The "schemes and tropes" section on *CN Online* may help. Try your hand at it. Take the clichés below and create a new original phrase to express the same idea.

rear its ugly head  
sadder but wiser  
I have a sneaking suspicion  
the bottom line  
in one fell swoop  
last but not least  
life takes its toll  
few and far between  
crystal clear, clear as a bell  
for all intents and purposes  
take the bull by the horns

the thrill of victory, the agony  
of defeat  
he swept the problem under  
the rug  
packed in as tight as sardines  
that captain runs a tight ship  
you mad, bro?  
believe it or not  
breathe a sigh of relief  
better late than never  
like a bolt from the blue  
that was the last straw

that was the straw that broke  
the camel's back  
I'm fed up with you!  
perish the thought!  
as alike as two peas in a pod  
beyond the shadow of a doubt  
leave no stone unturned  
Don't have a cow, man!  
Clear as glass!  
actions speak louder than  
words