

CLICHÉS EXERCISE

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. 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! One just snuck past me. . . .)

CURING CLICHÉS

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, concluding by writing, "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 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 in the Course Packet may help. Try your hand at it. Choose five of the fifteen items below as the basis for five original sentences.

1. the look on his face

2. the air in the country

3. the way she talks

4. the view from upstairs

5. the condition in the streets

6. the noise of the city

7. the pressure to succeed

8. the approaching storm

9. the scene of the accident

10. the newborn child

11. the closing scene of a play

12. the unopened present

13. the quiet of evening

14. the faded clothing

15. the broken toy