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. 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 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 ________, the agony of ________
swept it ______ ____ _______
packed in as tight as ________
that captain runs a tight ________
better late ________
like a bolt from the blue
that was the ____ that broke the ______’s ___
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 ______, ______!

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

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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>rear its ugly head</th>
<th>the thrill of victory, the agony of defeat</th>
<th>that was the straw that broke the camel's back</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sadder but wiser</td>
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<td>I'm fed up with you!</td>
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<td>believe it or not</td>
<td>leave no stone unturned</td>
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<td>breathe a sigh of relief</td>
<td>Don't have a cow, man!</td>
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<td>better late than never</td>
<td>Clear as glass!</td>
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<td>words</td>
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