

# A fresh look at clichés

BY D'ANN RASMUSSEN

There are thousands for whom the only sound sleep is the *sleep of the just*, the light at dusk must always be *dim, religious*; all beliefs are *cherished*, all confidence is *implicit*, all ignorance *blissful*, all isolation *splendid*, all uncertainty *glorious*, all voids *aching*. It would not matter if these associated reflexes stopped at the mind, but they issue by way of tongue, which is bad, or of the pen, which is worse.

— H.W. Fowler<sup>1</sup>

It's almost a cliché to say that writers should "avoid clichés." They are usually tired and ineffective. But not always. Sometimes they may be justified on grounds of brevity. And sometimes, given a refreshing twist, a cliché may even brighten a line.

## THE DANGERS OF CLICHÉS: HOW THE TRIED AND TRUE CAN TURN ON A MOMENT'S NOTICE AND BITE THE HAND THAT FEEDS THEM

In their book on legal writing, Tom Goldstein and Jethro Lieberman say that a cliché "broadcasts the writer's laziness."<sup>2</sup> Bergen and Cornelia Evans say that a writer who uses clichés is a "mere parrot of musty echoes of long-dead wit. His very attempt to sound clever shows him to be dull."<sup>3</sup> The reader almost wants to groan to the writer, "Couldn't you come up with anything better to say?" The reader is at least bored and perhaps even insulted by the commonality of it all.

Following is a list of phrases — certainly not exhaustive — that are fairly classified as clichés. Note that their very pervasiveness can mask how trite they are.

Achilles' heel  
acid test  
a great deal  
agree to disagree  
all walks of life

at first blush  
auspicious occasion  
bitter end  
blessing in disguise  
can safely say

considered opinion  
conspicuous by its absence  
draw to a close  
end result  
every effort is being made  
explore every avenue  
few and far between  
step in the right direction  
for all intents and purposes  
force and effect  
force to be reckoned with  
foregone conclusion  
grievous error  
harsh reality  
height of absurdity  
incontrovertible fact  
inevitable conclusion  
in no uncertain terms  
not too distant future

null and void  
of that ilk  
of the first magnitude  
on the books  
own worst enemy  
path of least resistance  
pomp and circumstance  
powers that be  
pure and simple  
rack and ruin  
sour grapes  
spur of the moment  
stands to reason  
thing of the past  
time and time  
again to a fault  
turn the tables  
wreak havoc

Perhaps the most insidious clichés that have crept into contemporary writing are what Jacques Barzun calls "adverbial dressing gowns."<sup>4</sup> For instance: *seriously consider*, *utterly reject*, *thoroughly examine*, *be absolutely right*, *perfectly clear*, *definitely interested*. Apparently, says Barzun, "the writer thinks the verb or adjective would not seem decent if left bare."<sup>5</sup> So the writer feels a need to try to provide additional emphasis — a move that backfires and weakens the effect. Compare "I reject the accusation" with "I utterly reject the accusation"; Barzun disparages the latter as "spluttering."<sup>6</sup>

## SOMETIMES IT'S ALL RIGHT TO BE AS COMFORTABLE AS AN OLD PAIR OF SHOES

So when can we allow for clichés? Possibly when the cliché is unobtrusive and saves words. Sometimes a cliché's very familiarity can work to a writer's advantage.

Take, for example, *pride and joy*. Most of us can remember hearing it from grandparents; and the grandparents probably heard it from theirs. Standard criticism would suggest that this — one of the most trite clichés ever — must be struck. But what could go in its place? *Pride and joy* has come to express a combination of love, satisfaction, and delight. Trying to capture this in a few words would not be easy. So we can hardly criticize the lawyer who says of a client in final argument that the injured child was his *pride and joy*.

Likewise, we wouldn't object if a writer or speaker said that the apartment showed *excessive wear and tear*. Or that a deal *turned sour*. Or that someone *knuckled under*, instead of *gave in to pressure*.

Although writers must trust their good judgment, I offer these guidelines for the limited use of clichés.

First, ask yourself whether the cliché is really useful. Is it at least justified by its brevity? Most of the clichés listed earlier would flunk this test. *Blessing in disguise* is no improvement on *hidden blessing*. The *harsh* in *harsh reality* is an intensifier that doesn't intensify — like an adverbial dressing gown. *End result* and *few and far between* are redundant.

Second, in most cases, the less vivid the cliché, the better. Ironically, older clichés are less likely to draw attention to themselves by raising a picture in the reader's mind. We have become so used to some of them that we hardly notice. Hence the preference for *turned sour* over *went down the tubes*. Avoid above all the *current* clichés.

Third, generally do not try to create any effect or emphasis through a cliché. Its main virtue is brevity — not forcefulness. If you're trying to be clever, you probably aren't.

## TWISTING CLICHÉS TO YOUR BENEFIT: WHERE OLD DOGS REALLY CAN LEARN SOME NEW TRICKS

Even the most used-up cliché can gain new life at the hands of a skilled writer. Sheridan Baker, addressing what he terms “rhetorical clichés,” says they should be avoided unless the writer can find a twist.<sup>7</sup> Some of his examples:

### Old Dogs

tried and true  
sadder but wiser  
in the style to which she had become accustomed

### New Tricks

tried and untrue  
gladder but wiser  
in the style to which she wished to become accustomed

Not every writer can turn a phrase to this effect. But in the right context, the results can be potent:

- “The unwritten law” is not worth the paper it isn't written on.<sup>8</sup>
- I feel the spur of the moment thrust deep into my side.<sup>9</sup>
- Through thin and thin.<sup>10</sup>

With that, I rest my case. Better yet: I'm done.

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## ENDNOTES

1. Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (New York: Oxford University Press, Gowers ed, 2d ed 1965), p 234.
2. Goldstein & Lieberman, *The Lawyer's Guide to Writing Well* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 3d ed 2016), p 130.
3. Evans & Evans, *A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage* (New York: Random House, 1957), p 96.
4. Barzun, *Simple & Direct: A Rhetoric for Writers* (New York: Harper & Row, rev ed, 1985), p 100.
5. *Id.*
6. *Id.*
7. Baker, *The Practical Stylist* (New York: Harper & Row, 6th ed, 1985), pp 234–35.
8. Weihofen, *Legal Writing Style* (St Paul: West Publishing Company, 2d ed 1980), p 123.
9. *Lawyer's Guide to Writing Well*, p 130.
10. Rogers, *The Dictionary of Clichés*, introduction (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985).