

JOHNSON COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Clichés

Too often we act as if we were put on this earth to die. In conversation we paralyze each other with interminable repetitions, clichés, tedious details. Then we write down our dullness so it will live beyond the moment.

Ken MacCrorie

A cliché is a trite phrase, one which everyone has heard many times, originally perhaps fresh and interesting, but now dull, able to slide through the reader's awareness without provoking insight or interest. And because the purpose of writing is to communicate unique ways of viewing and interpreting experience, clichés are useless in truly communicative writing. Their use limits the reader--and writer--to stale observations and conclusions. When I read a cliché, I learn nothing new. When I write a cliché, I say nothing new.

But several problems inevitably arise. First, clichés are often true, which explains their endurance. Sugar does taste sweet, and it is no coincidence that the phrase "sweet as sugar" has sapped its way into our thinking. However, some are, if not lies, at least meaningless contentions. "Picture-perfect" implies that all pictures are perfect, a ridiculous claim, and "pretty as a picture" implies that all pictures are pretty, again untrue; but even if it were, it bears little on the real and unique nature of the scene being described.

Second, clichés are easy to write and their use is therefore tempting. (In fact, a good test of a cliché is that if a phrase seems to fall effortlessly from your brain, it is probably trite.) But nobody said that writing fascinating, provocative prose would be a simple task.

Third, phrases which English teachers howlingly mark "CLICHE" often go unrecognized by student writers, primarily because English teachers have read a lot more prose (and therefore a lot more clichés) than student writers and are consequently more impressed (or un-) by stale expressions. But keep reading, and you too will quickly become aware of the triteness of majestic mountains and lush green carpets of grass.

Finally, remember that not only phrases but also subjects can be clichéd. Some "old favorites"* are overworked in themselves and require brilliant treatment to become interesting, for example spring days, fall days, winter days, summer days, woodland ponds, mountains, children, dogs, children and dogs, motorcycles, cars, freaks' bedrooms, and God's love.

*Don't think that you can always safely use clichés by putting them in quotation marks.

When you are tempted to use a cliché, try one of the following techniques:

1. Replace it with your own unique and profound observation.
2. Rework the tempting cliché to add your own wit.
3. Say what you need to say as simply as possible and use your expertise elsewhere. For instance, take the cliché “Life is just a bowl of cherries.”
 - a. Living is the process whereby you discover that what you learn in school rarely applies to anything.
 - b. Life is just a bowl of pits.
 - c. Life is delightful.

Some Common Clichés:

sharp as a tack	strong as an ox	big as a barn
free as a bird	clean as a whistle	sky-blue, blood-red
to toe the line	peaches-and-cream	mother nature
rosy dawn	black as night	dew glistening like diamonds
every inch a gentleman	to the bitter end	rosy fingers of dawn
rack his brain	stretches the truth	sticks out like a sore thumb
as plain as day	it goes without saying	something out of the past
in this day and age	from the frying pan into the fire	do his own thing
white as a sheet	a crying shame	busy as a bee
too cute for words	really down to earth	clear as crystal
over and done with	at the crack of dawn	few and far between
follow in the footsteps of	ripe old age	sank to the depths of despair

Writing Center