

Clichés and How to Avoid Them

Clichés—you should avoid them like the plague. They’re in our everyday speech, in our text messages, and sometimes they make it into our writing. But even if clichés give us a nice, readymade crutch to communicate our meaning, they actually make our writing worse and imprecise. This handout will tell you what clichés are and how to avoid them.

What are clichés?

Clichés are words or phrases that were original at one point but have now become overused and unoriginal. They can be found in newspapers, magazine articles, advertisements, and everyday speech. Clichés are culturally specific, and one cliché from one language will not translate well to another. For instance, the French phrase “J’ai d’autres chats à fouetter” literally means “I have other cats to whip,” akin to “I have other fish to fry” in English. There are larger writing clichés in creative writing called tropes that involve entire plotlines or the inclusion of certain stock characters. This handout focuses only on cliché phrases.

List of Common Clichés

You have probably encountered some of these clichés at one point. There are too many clichés in English to list here, but we have provided some common examples below.

- It’s a piece of cake
- A chip off the old block
- A mile a minute
- Raining cats and dogs
- An ax to grind
- Touch with a ten-foot pole
- Wrong side of the bed
- In the blink of an eye
- Set the record straight
- Throw in the towel
- Green with envy
- A perfect storm
- There’s plenty of fish in the sea
- Loose cannon
- Ignorance is bliss
- Bend over backwards
- Can’t judge a book by its cover
- Beating a dead horse
- Cut through red tape
- In a nutshell
- Words fail me
- Flat as a pancake
- Fit the bill
- Pass the buck
- Shoot for the moon
- Until the cows come home
- Water under the bridge
- Too hot to handle
- Blast from the past
- Even the playing field
- Let sleeping dogs lie
- Reinvent the wheel
- Not a minute’s peace
- A hit dog will holler

As you can see, clichés are extremely versatile. When you find the right cliché to capture your meaning, you may think that you’ve struck gold. Even so, don’t let these quick fixes lure you into peppering your papers with clichés.

How can I identify and eliminate clichés?

Clichés are so embedded within language that we often don't recognize when we use them. Despite this, identifying and eliminating clichés doesn't require you to think outside the box.

Clichés are often metaphorical. The literal meaning of the individual words does not add up the cliché's actual meaning. Take the phrase "hot potato," for instance, which means a controversial issue that no one—particularly politicians—wants to talk about. Hot potato also refers to a game wherein participants toss around a small ball or even a literal hot potato while music plays. When the music stops, the player holding the potato is eliminated. The original meaning of the term has nothing to do with politics, but the phrase has entered everyday speech so thoroughly that no one bats an eye when the phrase is used. If you notice these metaphoric terms throughout your writing, you may be using a cliché.

Also notice that most clichés are longer phrases. Often, they can be replaced by single terms.

Precise Language

Remember that every cliché can be swapped out for more precise language that will fit your writing like a glove. Once you've located a cliché, think of the situation, object, action, or person you're trying to describe. "Loose cannon," for example, describes someone's personality. Think of adjectives that you would use to describe this person. You might think of words like "unpredictable," "uncontrollable," or "reckless." Replacing "loose cannon" with any of these words will remove the cliché and make your writing more precise. Below are some other clichés that can be replaced with more precise language.

- *Tried and true* = *reliable* or *effective*
- *A piece of cake* = *easy, straightforward, effortless*
- *One for the books* = *memorable, extraordinary, legendary, amazing*
- *In a nutshell* = *in a word, to summarize, basically*
- *Throw in the towel* = *surrender, give up, admit defeat*
- *Until the cows come home* = *for a long time, excessively*
- *Too hot to handle* = *risky, dangerous, hazardous, difficult*
- *In the blink of an eye* = *suddenly, quickly, promptly, speedily*

Activity 1: Revising a Cliché-Ridden Passage

Read the following cliché-ridden passage carefully. In the space below, rewrite the passage, eliminating all of the clichés and substituting them with precise, clearer language.

"The Clubman has the ponies to gitty up and go, and its brakes allow you to stop on a dime. Get ready for whistles from people on the street, because this little spitfire is ready to turn heads and leave the competition in the dust." ~ Richard Johnson-Sheehan and Charles Paine, *Writing Today: Brief Edition*, 2010.

Possible Revision:

The Clubman’s engine and brakes work together well, giving the car excellent acceleration and the ability to stop quickly if needed. The Clubman is a car that people will notice on the street, and it has the power and agility to leave other cars behind.

Activity 2: Finding Clichés

As you may have noticed, this handout is filled with clichés. Find all the clichés in the handout that are not on the list of common clichés.

Answer Key for Activity 2

1. avoid like the plague
2. struck gold
3. think outside the box
4. fit like a glove
5. bats an eye

References

Johnson-Sheehan, Richard and Charles Paine. *Writing Today: Brief Edition*. Pearson Education, 2010.