

Clichés

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 their pens. 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!)