

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*. Another student 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 some tastes, 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. Try your hand at it. Choose five of the fifteen items below as the basis for five original sentences.

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| 1. the look on his face | 6. the noise of the city | 11. the play's closing scene |
| 2. the air in the country | 7. the pressure to succeed | 12. the unopened present |
| 3. the way she talks | 8. the approaching storm | 13. the quiet of evening |
| 4. the view from upstairs | 9. the scene of the accident | 14. the faded clothing |
| 5. the condition in the streets | 10. the newborn child | 15. the broken toy |