

## **Clichés**

### *What this handout is about:*

This handout both defines clichés and explains the important of avoiding them in order to achieve specificity in academic and professional writing.

### *What are clichés?*

Clichés are expressions, phrases, or sayings that have a general meaning, are overused, and/or have “lost their meaning” over time. When using clichés in writing (academic or creative), these commonplace phrases fail to evoke precise meanings or images. More likely than not, you are familiar with many clichés, although you might find it difficult to extract their particular definitions. In fact, some clichés are idioms, where the connotation (implied meaning) of a phrase is different from the denotation (literal definition). Clichés may once have possessed a precise meaning that made them creative metaphors (such as, “All in a day’s work” or, “At the end of my rope”), but they have now lost their freshness because that specific definition has dulled over time or been forgotten through overuse.

Furthermore, clichés can also obscure fully developed ideas by serving as placeholders for more sophisticated thoughts or meaning. Clichés lack specificity and complexity; therefore, they do not make distinctive or memorable contributions to academic, creative, or professional writing.

### *Common Clichés:*

A rose by any other name would smell as sweet

Abandon ship

About face

Above board

Absence makes the heart grow fonder

Absolute power corrupts absolutely

Ace in the hole

Ace up his sleeve

Achilles heel

Acid test

Acorn doesn't fall far from the tree, The

Actions speak louder than words

After my own heart United States

Ah, to be young and foolish...

Airing dirty laundry

All bent out of shape

Not playing with a full deck

Not the brightest bulb (in the box / on the tree / in the chandelier)

Not the brightest crayon in the box

Not the ghost of a chance

Not the sharpest crayon in the box

Not the sharpest knife in the cabinet

Not the sharpest pencil in the box

Nothing personal  
Nothing to sneeze at  
Nothing to write home about

Same song and dance  
Save the drama for your mama  
Save your breath  
Say what you will....  
Say your prayers  
Scared of his own shadow  
Scraping the bottom of the barrel  
Second wind  
See eye to eye

### Why You Shouldn't Use Clichés:

Generally speaking, clichés are unacceptable in academic writing. They may be more acceptable in other forms of writing; however, you should avoid using them whenever possible. If you do decide to use a cliché, be sure you are making a conscious effort to do so and that you are evaluating the type of writing you are producing.

The following is a list of reasons why you should avoid clichés:

- Clichés can be boring. By using a cliché, you're potentially telling your reader that you lack originality, and you are risking them not continuing to read your paper.
- Anybody can use a cliché; therefore clichés make your writing and argument interchangeable with anybody else's. To avoid this, make sure that your argument and writing are specific to you and your writing task.
- Clichés are ambiguous. It is best to use the most precise wording in order to present evidence and support your arguments as clearly as possible. Specific details and explanations make better evidence than generalizations and trite phrases.
- Clichés can make you lose credibility. When you use clichés, you risk losing trust with your reader and having him/her view you as a less than authoritative source.
- Clichés are poor substitutes for actual evidence. Clichés are not exact; they do not offer strong enough commentary to prove your point. Make every sentence of your paper work toward a goal by eliminating meaningless phrases.

### Are You Using a Cliché?

Although it is not always evident when you are using clichés, some good clues that you are using them in your writing might include:

- Instructors' feedback that has comments such as "too general," "vague," or "be more specific." This might actually mean that your writing relies on clichés.
- Read, or have a friend read, your writing out loud. If another listener can finish a phrase upon hearing it for the first time, chances are you have probably made use of a cliché.
- Read through your writing alone and out loud. Do all of your sentences evoke strong images? If you're writing about something theoretical or persuasive, are all of your points specific and clear? If a part of your writing is too vague or you are unable to

assign a direct meaning to it, reevaluate how you have written that section of your paper/assignment, etc.

- Ask yourself if what you've written (specifically, how you've written it) could appear in anyone else's writing? If so, you may be relying on clichés. No other writer has had exactly the same personal experiences as you, conducted the same research, or formulated the same arguments, so be sure this unique experience is reflected in the way you write.
- Examine introductions and conclusions, as writers often utilize clichés to power through "writer's block" or more difficult sections of a paper. If you're using phrases that sound like they could belong in any generic paper, chances are they're not serving you well. Of course, you may reuse certain transition words or forms of argument in multiple papers, but try to avoid commonplace phrases like "Throughout history..." or "In conclusion..."

### *How to Eliminate Clichés:*

Keep in mind a few simple steps when you are trying to rid your writing of clichés:

- Research and brainstorm frequently—this will help you turn vague ideas into precise ones
- Slow down! Stop and think about what you are trying to say. Sometimes clichés can work as place-holders for a thought if you are writing a quick draft, but you should always allow yourself enough time to revise your writing and to replace clichés with specific language
- Keep your writing simple—you can always make it more complex in the revision stage(s)
- Instead of using phrases such as "Throughout time" or "All throughout history," ask yourself "When in history?" as a way of eliminating vague statements. In general, it is a good idea to ask yourself "Who", "What", "Why", "When", "Where" and "How"? when assessing your main ideas, this will almost always ensure specificity.

### *For More Information:*

Cliché List: Definition, Meaning & Examples. <http://www.clichelist.net/>

ClichéSite: Listings of common clichés: [http://clichosite.com/alpha\\_list.asp?which=lett+1](http://clichosite.com/alpha_list.asp?which=lett+1)

OwlPurdue: On precise writing: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/engagement/2/2/66/>