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Ted Barnes

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WHEN FRESHMEN GIVE YOU LEMONS . . . :
HOW TO PUT YOUR STUDENTS’ CLICHÉS TO GOOD USE*

Ted Barnes

“Let’s have some new clichés.”
—Sam Goldwyn

It’s 3 a.m. You’re in the middle of grading your first stack of personal narratives, which you ignorantly promised to return to your Freshman Composition students by the next class period—six hours from now. As you sharpen your red pencil for the thirteenth time, you grumble to yourself that the next person who claims “the tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife” will get an automatic D.

Easy, trigger! Before you scribble “trite” or “stale” in the margin of another “hackneyed” paper, there’s something you should know about clichés. Even though it’s true that some phrases seem overused in student writing, overuse is ultimately relative; it hardly seems fair to expect students to recognize as cliché a phrase they might not have seen more than a few times—as worn-out as it may seem to us. Besides, as aggressive as we are about discouraging students from using these recycled phrases, clichés are not going away. They’re just too useful for even experienced writers to give up, and they actually have some surprising qualities that most of us encourage in writing. Of course, this doesn’t make clichés less banal, but there is a way to take advantage of their good qualities, and at the same time restore some of the most lifeless clichés to the vividness they had when they were first coined.

TOO CLICHÉ, OR NOT TOO CLICHÉ?

“The ‘cliché,’” says Gary A. Olson, “is not an absolute entity, and we should not be doctrinaire in our condemnation of cliché use” (Olson

*This paper was written for and presented to English 115 (College Writing and Reading) instructors.
I saw this for myself when I read my first heap of personal narratives. Jill, a shy freshman, wrote hers about a recent embarrassing experience. In a rough draft, she described her embarrassment by saying that her ears turned “beet-red.” I wrote “good image” in the margin, but a peer reviewer told Jill that “beet-red” is a cliche. Somehow, the peer was more persuasive, and the next draft I got said that Jill’s ears turned “as red as the apples I used to give my teacher.” In our conference, I begged Jill to go back to the beet metaphor.

Obviously, Jill’s peer and I disagree about the overuse of that phrase. According to Hugh Rank, herein lies the problem with criticizing cliche use in student writing. We—writing instructors, mostly—like to put the label “cliche” on phrases (usually figures of speech) that we don’t find novel and expressive anymore because we’ve seen or heard them too often (45). But if a cliche is a metaphor that is used “too much,” then who gets to decide how much is too much? The well-read instructor or the first-year writing student? Even the experienced graduate student would be surprised by some of the cliches listed in Eric Partridge’s Dictionary of Cliches (236). Would any of us write “bland” next to the phrase “like a red rag to a bull” (183), or “a Triton among minnows?” (Personally, I’d be too impressed that my students know that one.) True, Partridge’s dictionary is almost fifty years old, but that’s partly my point—cliches are not fixed and absolute. As E. W. Gilman, editor of Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage, warns, “you are likely to find, when you read anyone’s list of cliches, at least a few that you have never seen or heard before” (251).

Cliche ness can vary according to generation, genre, culture, and geographical region. Daven M. Kari notes, for example, that the phrase, “sober as a judge” belongs to a previous generation; “dog tired” is most familiar to cultures that use hunting dogs; and “awkward as a duck” is best known in parts of California and a few other U.S. regions (129). Or, on an even smaller scale, clichéness can vary based on how many papers an instructor has graded. The first time you see “like a tempest in a teacup” in a student paper, it might seem fresh enough. By the seventeenth time, it might seem “trite.” Has it become a cliche over the space of just a few hours?

Given all this, maybe we should be a little more patient with our students’ clichés. George Orwell’s famous advice, “Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print” (139) isn’t so helpful to freshmen who aren’t used to seeing much of anything in print. If this is all the advice we give them, Daven M. Kari warns
that we’re sending our students on a frustrating quest for freshness. “[S]tudents struggle to create an original style,” he says, “without knowing what the holy grail of originality looks like to the teacher. Students thus become knights-errant (more erring than knighthy), seeking out a legendary grail which is described simply as being unlike anything they have seen before” (128). As a result, they often come up with phrases like “as red as the apples I used to give my teacher.”

**IF THE Cliché FITS . . .**

“It may be clumsy,” some instructors will say, “but at least Jill’s apple metaphor is her own. Amateur originality is always preferable to mindless image-borrowing.” That’s a fair argument, but I’d like to question it. First of all, we’ll assume that Jill understood “beet-red” to be a cliché, and we’ll take “cliché” to mean a metaphor that both the student and the teacher recognize as “oft-repeated.” Even then, is it certain that students use clichés mindlessly, in an attempt to avoid thinking creatively? Is originality always better than familiarity?

It wasn’t always. In his *A Defence of Clichés*, Nicholas Bagnall reminds us that before the 1900s, “writers with any pretensions to style, far from avoiding what we would now call clichés, actually studied them” (7). What Bagnall calls the “Cult of Originality” (27) appeared in the last century and dedicated itself to cliché-hunting. Bagnall includes Partridge and his *Dictionary of Clichés* in this cult; Partridge says that cliché “ubiquity is . . . rather frightening” (2) and claims that the uneducated person uses them in order to sound smart. His dictionary amounts to a list of phrases that “scrupulous writers shrink from . . . because they feel that [their] use is an insult to the intelligence of their audience” (2).

Recently, though, the anti-cliché crusade has slowed considerably. As early as 1971, rhetorician Walter Ong observed that although “clichés have for many years now been hunted down mercilessly with a view to total extermination, . . . of late the hunt has somewhat cooled, possibly because it itself has turned into a cliché” (qtd. in Goldfine and King 349). Today, scholars seem to be returning to the nineteenth-century practice of studying—rather than condemning—clichés, if not for the purpose of imitating them in writing, then out of curiosity.

Sociologist Anton C. Zijderveld did one of the first and most influential studies of clichés with a descriptive (not prescriptive) attitude. In his book *On Clichés: The Supersedure of Meaning by Function in Modernity*, Zijderveld admits that clichés have lost their original semantic power, but
he does not believe they should therefore be abolished from speech and writing. “Clichés are essential to communication,” he says (88). Besides that, they’re “wellnigh unavoidable” (18). He reminds us that the French word cliché is actually an apt metaphor (though, ironically, a worn-out one) to describe the function of clichés in communication. In French, it turns out, cliché is a metal stereotype for mass-printing artwork (Bagnall 8). In the early days of printing, they were very handy; they could rapidly produce illustrations that artists used to paint laboriously by hand. The reproductions, of course, would be less original than the hand-painted illustrations, but more practical and widely available. So it is with clichés. Like the old French printing templates, clichés have traded their vividness for functional practicality: instead of conjuring up unique images, clichés have become popular because they represent ease of both production and consumption. Zijderveld makes the argument that clichés are valuable to the language, not because they’re meaningful, but because they’re functional.

Other scholars have caught on to this idea. Rather than trying to exterminate clichés, writers like Ruth Rodak Goldfine and Gina Marie King marvel at their resilience: “despite many attempts to discredit and eliminate clichés, these tenacious little speech units still thrive today” (338). Instead of urging students to stop using clichés, it might be more valuable to find out why students won’t stop using them.

Paul Pickrel believes it has a lot to do with their aesthetic value. Not just any repeated phrase has what it takes to become a bona-fide cliché. For one thing, clichés are rhythmic: we say “death and taxes,” but not “taxes and death” because we like the trochaic beat of the former. Presumably, Benjamin Franklin knew this—maybe subconsciously—when he coined the phrase, and that’s why it’s still used today. Similarly, Jill’s “beet-red,” with its consecutive stressed syllables, is much more rhythmic than “as red as the apples I used to give my teacher.”

Clichés are remembered, according to Hugh Rank, because they are memorable. “People repeat certain phrasings because they ‘sound good’” (47). Walter Redfern agrees that we still use clichés, even when they’ve lost a lot of their original vividness, because in some cases we value rhythm and sound patterns more than meaning (105). That’s why we still say “fit as a fiddle,” with its repeated /fl/ sound, even though we have no idea what it means for a fiddle to be fit. It’s easy to forget, in the heat of grading, that these clichés were once brilliant and descriptive, and that they can still sound pleasant if we’ll let them.

Ultimately, people like clichés not just because they’re well phrased, but also because they’re easy. They require minimal effort, both from the
writer and from the reader. For one thing, clichés don’t ask us to think about what they’re saying literally—when we read “barking up the wrong tree,” it’s not necessary to visualize either a dog or a tree in order to get the intended meaning. Also, because clichés are used so often, they are familiar to most readers, making them valuable communication tools. As Rank explains, when we use more familiar metaphors, we communicate with a wider audience and “bond more people together” (47). And the concepts of audience and community-building are principles that we stress in English 115.

Could it be, then, that our students have a good reason to use clichés? We bemoan their unoriginality, but maybe they didn’t want to be original. Don L. F. Nilsen suggests that students write “light as a feather,” not because they can’t think of any “fresh” metaphor for lightness, but because they want to communicate—in the most accessible, concise way—that something is light (278).

Being accessible and concise isn’t such a bad thing. In fact, those are virtues most of us would like to see more often in our students’ writing. Clichés can have these virtues in abundance. Goldfine and King ask us to consider, for example, “the thought, effort, and number of words required to convey the ideas implied by such expressions as wolf in sheep’s clothing, wash one’s hands of a matter, or killed with kindness” (349). According to Wilson Follett, whose comment appears in Modern American Usage, to try to replace such efficient clichés in the name of freshness would be “to affect originality where it is not wanted” (qtd. in Olson 194).

Nicholas Bagnall takes the argument even further by claiming that clichés are often more expressive than their non-cliche alternatives. He compares the cliché “Henry is tying the knot” to the more simple “Henry is getting married” and argues that the first phrase is more descriptive because it suggests the writer’s casual or even cynical opinion of the wedding, and the second phrase tells us nothing about the tone of the ceremony (130–31). And there are dozens of other marriage clichés, each with its own subtle connotations (131). If we are too strict about disallowing legitimate linguistic creations like clichés, we are limiting our students’ options.

When we consider the usefulness of clichés, their euphony, their economy, their expressiveness, hopefully we can be more forgiving when we see them in our students’ papers. “Dead as a doornail,” for example, should look different to us now: we notice the alliterated voiced stop /d/, which is fitting for a phrase about death, and acknowledge a degree of harmoniousness; we realize that few other phrases communicate quite the
same thing—death, with some detachment or indifference by the writer—and even just replacing it with “dead” sacrifices many implied meanings.

“The mark of a good contemporary prose stylist,” asserts Charles Suhor, “is not that he avoids clichés altogether but that he is confident enough to use them when doing so doesn’t violate the overall texture of the work” (160).

Now, does that mean I encourage my students to use clichés in their writing? Of course not. I don’t want to read 20-plus papers about people who “look like they’d just seen a ghost” and who consistently have “chills go up their spine.” Even with all of the good things about clichés, which, as Kari notes, prevent us from simply dismissing them as “bad” or “useless,” readers can still legitimately voice the complaint: “This phrase is very familiar to me and therefore does not impress or inspire me” (130). Insofar as the writer is trying to impress or inspire me, I admit this is a concern. And I agree with Orwell’s opinion that clichés which don’t fit their context (“The Fascist octopus has sung its swan song” [134]) reveal a lack of careful thought and sometimes sound ridiculous. Suhor’s assessment, cited above, underscores the fact that sometimes the very problem with freshman clichés is that they often do “violate the overall texture of the work” (160). On the other hand, I can see that these clichés are a functional, permanent part of our language, and I know how hard it is to replace clichés without missing out on all of their advantages. In the spirit of negotiation, I’m suggesting something in between—something to harness the familiarity and euphony of clichés and yoke them to the creativity we’d like to see in student writing.

“PUNS DON’T KILL PEOPLE; PEOPLE KILL PEOPLE”

I’m suggesting what Kari calls “spin[ning] new phrases on old bear­ings” (129); or what Zijderveld calls “playing” with clichés (102); or what Redfern calls “twisting clichés by the tail” (166). It involves letting your students keep the clichés they have already written, but teaching them to alter the old phrases, giving the students a chance to make them more vivid and expressive. Kari’s article “A Cliche a Day Keeps the Gray Away” offers a long list of examples of “revitalized” clichés; my favorite is his conversion of the cliche “caught between a rock and a hard place” to “the Chinese cook . . . had to close his restaurant because he was caught between a wok and a hard place” (131). Although there are many ways to do this, all resurrected clichés share a few common features.

First of all, students should try to modify their clichés to fit the situa­tion of the paper. Since one of the common complaints against clichés is
that the image they would invoke if taken literally doesn’t fit the context, students should contextualize them. Sometimes, all you need to change is one word. “A rock and a hard place” is generic; “a wok and a hard place” may fit the context. If your students write “the tension in the room was so thick, you could cut it with a knife,” encourage them to look for something in the story to custom-fit the cliché—like, “the tension in the operating room was so thick, you could cut it with a scalpel.” If it’s a textual analysis about an Al Gore campaign speech, it would be very easy to change “he beat around the bush” to “he beat around George Bush.”

As these examples show, the altered cliché should keep the same basic pattern of the original. If the old cliché was particularly rhythmic and alliterative, then the new phrase should be too, if possible. The most important thing is that it still sounds enough like the original cliché to be recognized as such. That way, it retains the virtues of euphony and familiarity that make clichés valuable. Meanwhile, the alteration makes the cliché more descriptive because it encourages both the writer and the reader to look at its literal meaning.

At first this may sound like a kind of stepping stone for the novice writer who isn’t quite ready to part with his or her favorite clichés and graduate to true originality. Actually, this is more than just a temporary compromise between the student who wants to use clichés and the teacher who wants fresh language. Cliché-tinkering is, in fact, a characteristic of good writing. Mark Twain made a living using this technique. Lines like “Familiarity breeds contempt—and children” (qtd. in Redfern 165) helped make Twain the memorable writer he is today. Winston Churchill was another cliché-twister; for example, he used to call one of his opponents “a sheep in sheep’s clothing” (qtd. in Redfern 167). It’s not necessary to run from clichés; instead, teach your students to use them to their advantage. In the words of Daven M. Kari:

All writers, including neophites and professionals, constantly work with or around clichés. The only issue is how to use familiar phrases—as chaff for the wind or as grist for the mill of meaningful prose. . . . Good writers use fresh language to convey new insights, and the best writers revitalize the language itself. (132–33)

The advantage of this approach to clichés, besides being great fun, is that it capitalizes on the accessibility of recognized phrases, while still giving students the chance to think and be creative. It revives the students’
imagination, and it gives dying phrases CPR. As Deborah Cameron puts it, “Cut up and reassembled, the metaphors come alive again and dance on their own graves” (108). More important, it teaches students that playing with language can be enjoyable. It gives them control over their language again—control which they may partially forfeit when they succumb to cliché use. According to Zijderveld, when we recast clichés, we make them ours—we “subdue clichés to our ingenuity and wit” (102).

We all want our students to be original in their writing—both for their sake and for ours. We know from experience that much of their thinking comes in ready-made phrases. Our first reaction when we see these stock phrases is to draw a red circle around them and write “cliché” off to the side. I hope this essay has convinced you to think twice before circling that cliché. For one thing, the student who wrote it may not think it’s a cliché. For another, the student may have had very legitimate reasons for using it. You can still help improve the cliché, though, maximizing its efficiency and accessibility as you teach your student how to make it more interesting.

George Orwell, in his influential essay “Politics and the English Language,” mourns the “decay of language” (139), which he blames partly on stock phrases and dying metaphors. His advice that we should “send some worn-out and useless phrase . . . into the dustbin where it belongs” (140) seems rather wasteful. Of course, he was writing in 1946—perhaps the idea of recycling wasn’t yet familiar to him—but it seems to me that instead of simply throwing away those clichés, it would be better to put them to use. After all, as Laurence Lerner notes in so many words, clichés aren’t biodegradable: “A cliché is not a half-dead metaphor, it is one that refuses to die” (qtd. in Redfern 102).
Bibliography


