

TREATISE IN DEFENSE OF THE MALIGNED CLICHE
(Well, maybe it should be entitled)
A PERSONAL OPINION REGARDING THE USE OF CLICHES -- AND OTHER STUFF
by
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THERE ARE NO RULES, BUT --

We hear over and over again at writing conferences -- from people who are editors, agents and successful authors -- that there are NO rules. You have to do what is right for you. Whatever works. BUT, if there is ONE rule, it is “Don’t Use Cliches!” -- or exclamation points -- if you want to get published.

So let’s examine the cliché, which happens to be one of my best and favorite languages. The Random House Webster’s College Dictionary published in 2000 defines a cliché (with or without the accent, by the way) as “a trite stereotyped expression” or “anything that has become commonplace through overuse.” Okay, we’ve got that. (“Oh, sorry,” she apologized.)

Even recognizing that writing is not real life and is not supposed to reflect real life (since many readers, and particularly readers of genre romances, read to get away from real life), and dialogue in books is not “just conversation,” clichés are a legitimate part of the English language. All you have to do is listen to the people around you and how they speak. Listen to the television or the radio. Go to movies.

We all use clichés in our speech at some time or another. And the reason we use them is because the expressions are trite and commonplace from overuse -- and, therefore, most people know what they mean. The listener has had the same experience or heard the manner of speech so often there is no question what it is intended to mean. They work! (“Oh, sorry!” she apologized emphatically.)

Notice the operative words are intended to mean. Many people who recognize the intent may have no idea what the original and/or real meaning is, only the situation or action the words represent at this point in time. Unless you are a gardener, you may not know that “nipping (something) in the bud” actually means pinching off the bud or growth of a plant so that new growth will emerge on either side and make the plant fuller, or have more blooms.

That’s right. You’d better nip in bud your sixteen-year-old daughter’s infatuation for your husband’s best friend before things get out of hand. (Or don’t you know what I mean by “get out of hand”?)

WHEN IS A CLICHE NOT A CLICHE?

Human beings -- and apparently the writers of dictionaries fall into this category -- are perverse animals

rife with the tendency to be inconsistent (in my not-so-humble opinion). While my same handy dandy Random House Webster's College Dictionary defines a cliche as a word or expression that is overused and trite, those are precisely the requirements for adding certain new words to the dictionary. Go figure.

Although words are the tools of craft for a writer, few of us study Etymology, the origins and development of words. (No, NOT Entomology -- that's bugs.) We don't bother with these tools of the trade that slip into the English language (or out of it, sometimes, by redefinition or disuse). As you can imagine (cliche, cliche but you can imagine, can't you?), how new words occur.

Science, technology, and new products account for a large number of new words each year. Foreign words, combinations of existing words to form new ideas, slang, idioms, common expressions, redefinitions, and offensive words by the thousands find their way into the English language each year. They have MADE IT when they are used frequently and consistently enough throughout English speaking countries that NCD (New College Dictionary) adds them to the next edition of their publication. WOW! To give you the flavor, take a look at very short list of words, by decade, added to the English dictionary (and NO, I didn't bother to alphabetize them):

1940's : A-bomb, aromatherapy, baby-sit, barf, bikini, eager beaver, carhop, gobbledygook, goof ball, name dropping, quisling, yada-yada-yada, zonk.

1950's: acrylic fiber, aerospace, beatnik, biathlon, discotheque, do-it-yourself, hang-up, pay television, karate, Rastafarian, real-time, TV dinner, UFO, theme park, zinger, weirdo.

1960's: aerobics, database, pantyhose, nose job, soft lens, gentrify, third world, Op-Ed, space shuttle, time frame, security blanket, zilch, zit, love-in, jet lag, quark, quick fix.

1970's: acquaintance rape, CAT scan, 800 number, gridlock, gigabyte, gazillion, diskette, downsize, double-dipping, pig-out, reality check, VCR, wish list, wacko, jump-start, housesit, pooper-scooper

1980s: abs, designer drug, ozone hole, dis, slippery slope, snowboard, telemarketing, rollerblade, skank, wuss, yuppie, CD-ROM, buffalo wing, cyberpunk, gelati, safe-sex.

1990's: anatomically-correct, arm candy, McJob, senior moment, phone tag, Web site, strip mall, fashionista, lapdancer, bad hair day, call waiting. scrunchy, take-no-prisoners, PCS, soccer mom.

I would be surprised if there isn't at least one of the words on the list that you consider a cliché. While I could not locate it in the abbreviated list of "new words by decade," the dictionary does contain the

word “postal” defined as: “1) of or pertaining to the post office or mail service; 2) to lose control or go crazy.” That blew me away! (“I am really so sorry,” she apologized for the third time in the same article.)

MAKE THE MOST OF THE LANGUAGE

I would never presume to put my opinions above the advice from the likes of Catherine Coulter, Jennifer Cruise, and the other published, and unpublished, authors you’ve heard speak on writing. They know -- I don’t. But I do know that English is a very rich language.

In 1947 American College Dictionary, one of first to include new words, boasted 132,000 words, one of the largest of its time. Today, it includes over three times that many and grows every year. The average person’s speaking vocabulary is only 15,000 to 30,000 words; the average passive or written vocabulary can exceed 100,000 words.

We are writers, my friends. People learn from us. We learn from each other. We should be skilled enough at our craft to command the use of as many of those three hundred thousand plus English words as possible. I can assure you that every book I read by one of the authors I’ve heard speak to our chapter or at a conference, includes at least one new word I have to look up and uses at least one cliché. Don’t let them fool you. They don’t want any competition.

Okay, okay. You have my permission to combine words in new and fresh ways -- I can live with that. And you have my encouragement to use clichés sparingly or not at all, as you see fit (Oups!) You can drop all the -ly words, all the adjectives, and all the euphemisms. You can abound in body parts if that is your choice. You can rewrite and rewrite and rewrite like Julia Quinn until you have fifteen drafts. But know your language. Know the words, what they mean, and how to use them -- THEN, make the choice of which ones best suit the story you are telling and the way and to whom you are telling it.

Weild the words of your language with skill and assurance, and make every one of them count. (And never, but never, trust your computer’s spell check.)