# Resisting Clichés

[M]odern writing at its very worst does not consist in picking out words for the sake of their meaning and inventing images in order to make the meaning clearer. It consists in gumming together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else, and making the results presentable by sheer humbug.

—George Orwell

A cliché is “an expression made stale and boring by overuse” (*Rinehart Handbook for Writers* 702).

Nothing is wrong with using a figure of speech, an expression that employs words in imaginative (or “figurative”) ways. But it’s an irony of human communication that the more beautiful or lively or effective the figure of speech, the more likely it will be loved, remembered, repeated, worn out, and finally worked to death. Every profession or field has its own stock of clichés, so keep in mind what expressions your audience will be tired of. Also, be careful not to mix your metaphors in an attempt to avoid a cliché (for example, *he got off his high horse and went back to the drawing board*). That’s like a double cliché and is twice as bad as either of its two parts.

There’s no way to eliminate all clichés. It would take a roomful of Shakespeares to replace them with fresh figures of speech, and before long those would become clichés too. Vivid language is recycled precisely because it’s vivid. If a phrase sounds expressive and lively and nothing else will do, fine. But if it sounds flat, revise without mercy. Try to think of a way to express your idea in a clear, simple, direct manner. You don’t have to be poetic or flowery or fanciful to write well. Think of clichés as condiments, the familiar ketchup, mustard, and relish of language. Use when appropriate, and don’t use too much. When you’re dressing up a hamburger, you don’t use béarnaise sauce. You use ketchup, and that’s as it should be. But you don’t put ketchup on everything; some dishes, after all, call for something special. Some of today’s more overworked “condiments” might include expressions commonly used in class assignments, such as “since the dawn of time,” “in today’s society,” or “food for thought.” If you catch yourself using these expressions or others like them, you’ll want to edit them out in favor of fresher wordings.

Clichés lure us into their grasp because they are such familiar friends; politicians invoke them like mantras and some high-school football coaches would never know what to say without them. Their euphony appeals to us. They sound wonderful, or at least tolerable, to us, especially when we’re tired and trying desperately to write anything. Besides, you don’t really know where those clichés have been but you know they get around. Resist, friend, resist! You can write better, more vigorous sentences if you listen for the sweet rhythm of your own voice rather than settling for the accustomed whine of the usual cliché.

Instead of trying to sound wonderful, just be clear and direct. Instead of speaking in vague generalities, use specific, detailed language to be descriptive. Using your own words is probably better than reproducing the tired words of a hundred other people.

For a listing of common clichés, consult this handout’s referenced source: O’Conner, Patricia. *Woe is I: The Grammarphobe’s Guide to Better English in Plain English*. 3rd ed., Riverhead, 2010.