Lingua Franca
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Clichés Are the Poster Child for Bad Writing

Which, of course, is itself a cliché. Clichés are bad because they're tired, overdone, unoriginal, dull, and mindless. They make you seem like everybody else, not like an individual with an interesting perspective and voice. But they're hard to avoid because they express a concept in a vivid and effective way (otherwise, they wouldn't have become so popular), and one that the reader is sure to understand. The combination of aptness and familiarity means that clichés are constantly occurring to a writer. Some of them get excised (or exorcised) by one's internal editor, but quite a few make it to the computer screen or legal pad, where they need to be vigilantly smoked out.

But you can never get rid of every single one—the best you can hope for is to manage them.

To that end, it's useful to take a look at the life cycle of clichés. They are born as fresh, vivid, figures of speech: often metaphors, other times words or phrases used in an unexpected context. That means someone invented them. That is, a particular individual once thought to note of a not-especially-difficult enterprise, "It's not brain surgery." That was clever! The inventor deserved garlands and hosannas. Inevitably, other people started saying it as well. Over time, George Orwell observed in his classic essay "Politics and the English Language," it and all such formulations lose "all evocative power and are merely used because they save people the trouble of inventing phrases for themselves." He dubbed them "dying metaphors," another way of saying clichés.

Orwell conceived of this as one stage, but I think there's a division within it that's worth

bearing in mind. Most tempting and insidious, and thus most important to guard against, are the clichés that seem to be in the very oxygen we breathe—dying metaphors like *it's not brain surgery* and *iconic* and *[anything] on steroids.* Less of a problem is a category that could be called FFBC—clichés that are Famous For Being Clichés. This would include such overworked expressions as *at the end of the day* and *it is what it is* and bromides like *it's not the heat, it's the humidity* and *a penny saved is a penny earned.* The world of sports is chock-full of FFBC's: for example, *he came to play* and *he gave 110 percent.* Any conscientious writer knows these are off limits; the vast majority of the time they come up in print is when they are mocked. (And rightfully so.)

Orwell observed that in the dying-metaphor stage, "incompatible metaphors are frequently mixed, a sure sign that the writer is not interested in what he is saying." Good point. *The New Yorker* sometimes prints especially egregious examples at the ends of articles, under the heading BLOCK THAT METAPHOR! Here is one published in 1989, from a letter to *The Boston Globe:*

"In the face of mounting pressure to gut or eliminate the IRS, it continues to shoot itself in the foot by biting the hand that feeds them."

Whew. The obvious and truly awful mixing is of hand-biting and foot-shooting, but note a phrase at the beginning of the sentence: "mounting pressure to gut." *Pressure* and *gut* are metaphors as well, but a reader isn't likely to notice them. That's because they have arrived at the next, and final, stage of metaphorical life. After a certain number of years or decades in critical condition, a metaphor kicks the bucket and comes to seem more literal than figurative. Orwell says such a "dead metaphor … has in effect reverted to being an ordinary word and can generally be used without loss of vividness." When we hear of a program being *gutted*, we don't think of this as a metaphor at all and probably don't perceive it as a cliché; it's just a way of saying that the most important aspects of something were rudely removed. The same goes for referring to someone's weakness as his *Achilles' heel,* or even using a word such as *astonished*, which originally was a metaphorical suggestion of a shock so great it turned one to stone.

It's not terrible—in fact it's unavoidable—to use these dead metaphors. If I don't seem enthusiastic, that's because, first, even a cliché which doesn't smell bad anymore smells worse than something fresh, and, second, in a particular case, some people might feel it's not dead yet (as Monty Python would put it): that it's still a cliché. The bottom line is the importance of at least developing an awareness of the sell-by date on words and expressions, weighing them in your mind, and acting judiciously. (In that sentence, I used

three metaphors: *bottom line*, *sell-by date* and *weighing*. I decided that they were dead, not dying. What do you think?)

I'd like to add one more stage Orwell didn't mention, perhaps because he didn't live in the Internet age, when everything, including clichés' lives, moves much faster than it ever did before. In today's highly interactive world, there is a period—between the invention of a metaphor and the point at which it lands on death row—in which it's not only usable but can be lively and fun.

Consider the expression *[to] throw [someone] under the bus*, meaning to publicly betray an erstwhile ally. The earliest use I have been able to find is a 1994 quote from a *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* article: "Bethel Park council is delaying action on a site plan for an ice arena because of legal action by a citizens group opposing the project. Council president Philip Ehrman said the group is 'trying to throw the community under the bus.'" It first showed up in *The New York Times* in 2000 but didn't really take off till a few years later, with seven uses in 2005 and 13 in 2006—including, crucially, a discussion in William Safire's "On Language" column in November. Up until that point, I would submit, *throw under the bus* was a still-new toy; writers could have fun using it, and pass some of that pleasure on to readers. This is a risky business, however. Different people have different notions on where a particular phrase lies at a particular point in time, and while you might think you're just having fun, your readers might not respect you in the morning.

Even after a cliché starts dying, there's a strategy for making it acceptable: the old switcheroo. In 1937, *Time* magazine observed, "To the people who voted for him last November, Franklin Roosevelt was Mr. Right." Since roughly that time, *Mr. Right*— meaning a male who is perfect husband material—has been a cliché. One strategy for making it (marginally) acceptable was *Time*'s: that is, using it in an other-than-romantic context. There matters stood until 1985, when a television movie called *Romance on the Orient Express* contained this piece of dialogue: "I'm not looking for Mr. Right, I'm looking for Mr. Right Now." Good show! The screenwriter tweaked the cliché and made it usable again. By now, of course, *Mr. Right Now* is as clichéd as it gets—and so is a recent (unisex) replacement, *the one*. Yet another variation would be needed to remove the stigma: *Mr. Write* for a dreamy literary guy, *Mr. Left* if the woman demanded a mate with progressive politics, *Mr. Far Right* for folks on the other end of the spectrum, or *Mr. Rite Aid* for a hypochondriac, *Mr. Wry* for an ironic sort, and so forth. You get the idea.

Now, as for the clichés I used in this post: Please spare me your e-mails and comments! I put them in on purpose, to see if you were paying attention.