

Avoiding Clichés in Writing

Can you identify the trite, overused, and plain tired expressions in these two paragraphs?

John Doe had been sleeping like the dead when his alarm clock screamed like a Banshee at him. It was 1:36 p.m., and John had planned to be up bright and early that morning. His eyelids were as heavy as lead as he wracked his brain for excuses. It had been the mother of all lost weekends. Now he had to pay the piper--he'd missed English again, and the hand of doom was heavy upon his grade in the class.

In Friedrich Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morals, we see an epic battle being waged between systems of morality. Arrayed against him, like keepers of the flame, we have Nietzsche's mortal enemies, the guardians of Slave Morality. In the long run, these guardians of the tried-and-true morality have suppressed human instinct, Nietzsche trumpets to the reader.

How did you do? If you identified similes such as *like the dead*, metaphors such as *keepers of the flame*, and modifiers such as *bright and early*, then you have a good eye for worn-out language. Sadly, many great phrases, such as *mother of all battles*, are coined but quickly become overused.

How do you identify and avoid clichés? When writing, question any comparison or image you are about to use. Clichés often sneak in the barn door (that's a cliché, by the way) when we try to be descriptive. Is the phrase you're about to use one that you've heard frequently in casual conversation, newscasts, and advertising? If so, it is probably a cliché or on its way there. Instead of using stock phrases and images, be creative--but beware! Using the thesaurus has many dangers, such as misusing a synonym that doesn't quite fit the meaning you want. Also, inventing your own colorful descriptions can lead you as far astray as any worn-out phrase.

Finally, avoid "padding" your work with clichés. This is an effective way to increase the length of a paper but not to increase your grades. Most professors know clichés when they smell them.

Does this mean your writing must be boring? Academic prose doesn't have to be boring. Some of the phrases in the Nietzsche example could be revised:

In Friedrich Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morals, we see an epic battle being waged between systems of morality. Nietzsche, angered by those who hold what he labels a "Slave Morality," claims that some religions suppress human instinct.

Epic battle is a colorful phrase that one doesn't hear every day. Good, active verbs help too--*battle*. . . *waged* has much more impact than would *there is a struggle that is enacted between*. . . .

