

What's really wrong with this story?

John Doe had been sleeping like a log when his alarm clock screamed like a Banshee. It was afternoon, and John had planned to be up and at 'em bright and early that morning. Now his eyelids were as heavy as lead as he wracked his brain for excuses for missing class. He had stayed at last night's mother of all parties until the crack of dawn, and now he had to pay the piper. He had missed his enrichment class and now the fickle finger of fate on the heavy hand of doom was pointing straight at him.

Cliches are phrases (often similes, metaphors, or idioms) that once made a striking impression, but have been overused until they have lost their effectiveness. Even though some phrases that have become cliches were invented by Shakespeare himself, they have become too comfortable and easy like worn out clothes, (After all, Shakespeare lived and wrote 500 years ago!) When our clothes begin to wear out, we know that sometimes a new wardrobe is just what's needed; so also, are new figures of speech.

To spot a cliché, read the first half of the phrase and ask yourself if you know how it ends. If you do, it is probably a cliché that you should avoid using in your writing.

Pretty as a _____

Beat around the _____

Selling like _____

Cool as a _____

Avoid like the _____

Calm before the _____

Chomping at the _____

Cry over _____

Hook, line, and _____

Lock, stock, and _____

Nipped in the _____

Sands of _____

Stick out like a sore _____

Behind the _____

Do these "ring a bell" too:

Black as night

The depths of despair

The crack of dawn

To the bitter end

Gone but not forgotten

Wouldn't be caught dead

Broad daylight

Crystal clear

Never a dull moment

handwriting on the wall

On a silver platter

Under the weather

All walks of life

Fall on deaf ears

In the same boat

By leaps and bounds

Leave no stone unturned

Whirlwind tour

Patience of Job

How do we repair clichés? Same way we shop for new clothes. Go for what fits, looks good, and won't go out of fashion too soon. Be creative and precise in your writing. Let the Thesaurus help you, but be careful about using synonyms as exact matches. Most words have connotations and shades of meaning that need to be considered as you work with your syntax and diction.

Log on to Becky Clark's cliché website http://www.beckyclark.net/wst_page2.html and work your way through it. She will tell you what to do. Omit the Shakespearian Insult kit part though; we'll do lots more with that later. Let me know which activities you would like for us to try in class, if any.

Carl Sandburg wrote a poem that took off from a cliché. It seems like a cool idea for us to try. Here is his poem:

"Thou art like a flower"
Ran an old song line
What flower did he mean?
She might have been a quiet blue flower
She wore crimson carnations perhaps
She may have planted tall sunflowers
Stooping with hollyhocks around a kitchen doorstep
They may have picked bluebells together
Or talked about wild arbutus they found.
Perhaps she knew what he meant by telling her:
Thou art like a flower."

This exercise reminds us of the importance of using specific and concrete details in our writing. Your assignment is to choose any cliché you wish and expand it into a poem that revives the cliché by using details to show the reader what is really being visualized. Here is one I tried and gave to my husband. I don't know how much he appreciated it, but I had fun choosing words to make the images I wanted to share.

Enlightened

"You are the light of my life"
So goes the old cliché
What light does that mean?
He might be a vermillion burst of sunrise
Welcoming even Monday mornings
Or the blue-white glare of computer screens long into the night
Perhaps he is an angry orange, unrelenting neon heat
Or the eye-sparkling, popping light bulbs of intelligent ideas
He might be a smoldering, violet tint of twilight
Or the storied, hope-providing glow at the end of the tunnel
Sometimes he is the seductive flicker and shimmer of candles
Especially in memories
Perhaps he knows what she means by telling him
"You are the light of my life."

~Carolyn Harrell
Modeled on "Thou Art Like a Flower" by Carl Sandburg

All right, now it's your turn...