

# TAKE THE BULL BY THE HORNS AND CONFRONT THE DREADED CLICHÉS —



## WHAT THEY ARE, WHY YOU MUST AVOID THEM, AND HOW YOU CAN DO IT

BY

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## WHAT IS A CLICHÉ?

One of the most common problems I see in my students' and coaching clients' writing is the use of clichés. The dreaded clichés—they're the death knell of good writing.

What is a cliché?

A cliché is an expression, often a comparison but not always, that at one time was clever and original but has become overused. The phrase, "cool as a cucumber," for example, is a cliché.

I'm sure whoever said "cool as a cucumber" the very first time was considered quite clever and brilliant. People obviously thought the phrase was clever because they began using it. Thousands and eventually millions of people used it. I bet the originators of some of the most common clichés wish they could get paid every time someone uses their clever little phrase.

Not all clichés are comparisons. Some are simply combinations of words that are used so often, they've become old to the point of being grating—sort of like the verbal equivalent of tapping the same spot on your hand over and over. Have you ever done that? It's quite annoying.

"Last but not least," "tried and true," and "trial and error" are examples of these overused phrases. They add nothing to a sentence, and yet people use them constantly.

## WHAT'S SO BAD ABOUT CLICHÉS?

So why are clichés so dreaded in writing? Why do you want to avoid them? Here are the six ways clichés can diminish the quality of your work:



Clichés make your work less original. Good writing is original and fresh. If you fill your writing with clichés, it's going to sound old and worn out.



Writing filled with clichés isn't compelling. Compelling writing is writing that grips the reader and compels him or her to keep reading. Why would a reader be gripped by writing filled with phrases the reader has heard a hundred times before?



Clichés distance the reader. Good writing is engaging. It pulls the reader into the subject. When writing is filled with clichés, the reader will start to skim because, again, he or she has seen this stuff before. A skimming reader is not engaged.



Clichés are the mark of an amateur writer. They scream "Beginner!" Professional writers know they need to fill their writing with sparkle and freshness. Beginners have a tendency to regurgitate what they've heard or read before.



Clichés dilute the impact of your expertise and credibility. If you have cliché-filled work, people will assume you don't know what you're doing. If you can't come up with something better than an overused phrase, how can your information be worthwhile?



Clichés are a giveaway of laziness. When writing is filled with clichés, it's obvious the writer has grabbed whatever phrase has popped into his head the first time around. Cliché-filled writing will never come across as accomplished and polished.

Rich, unique writing that has its own original style is not filled with clichés or overused expressions. Don't brand your writing with as "old and tired." Keep it fresh by keeping out the clichés.

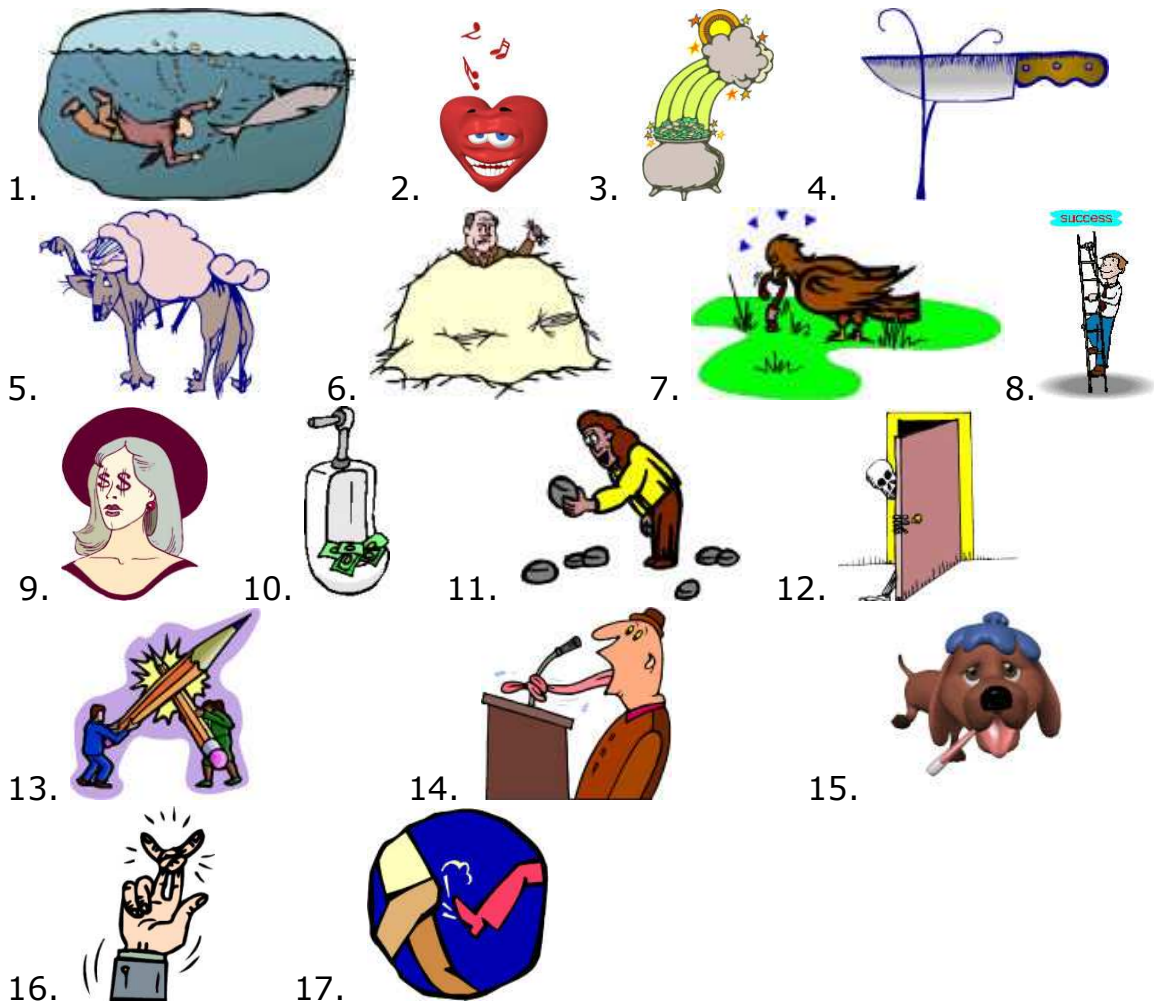
## How Do You Keep Clichés Out Of Your Writing?

Keeping clichés out of your writing is a two step process.

1. The first thing you need to do to rid your writing of clichés is to recognize a cliché when you see one.

Here's a little quiz to see if you can recognize common clichés.

What cliché does each of the following pictures represent? (Answers are on page 13).



2. How did you do on the quiz? The seventeen clichés above are just a few of the many expressions that are overused. Here are some more for you to look for in your writing:



A dime a dozen



Acid test



Artistic license



At loose ends



Babe in the woods



Better late than never



Brought back to reality



Black as pitch



Blind as a bat



Bolt from the blue



Bright idea



Busy as a bee



Busy as a beaver



Cat's meow



Climb the ladder to success



Cloud nine



Cool as a cucumber



Cool, calm, and collected



Crack of dawn



Cross your fingers



Crushing blow



Cry over spilt milk



Dead as a doornail



Dog-eat-dog world



Don't count your chickens



Don't put all your eggs in one basket



Dyed in a wool



Easier said than done



Easy as pie



Feathered friends



Face the music



Flash in the pan



Flat as a pancake



Flushing money down the drain



Gentle as a lamb



Go at it tooth and nail



Good time was had by all



Greased lightning



Happy as a lark



Head over heels



Heart sings



Heavy as lead



Home is where the heart is



Horns of a dilemma



Hour of need



Keep a stiff upper lip



Ladder of success



Last but not least



Leave no stone unturned



Looking a gift horse in the mouth



Meaningful dialogue



Money doesn't grow on trees



Moving experience



Needle in a haystack



Open-and-shut case



Pain in the \_\_\_\_\_



Pencil pushers



Penny for your thoughts



Point with pride



Pot of gold at the end of the rainbow



Pretty as a picture



Put it in a nutshell



Quick as a flash/wink



Rat race



Ripe old age



Ruled the roast



Sad but true



Sadder but wiser



Seeing dollar signs



Set the world on fire



Sick as a dog



Sigh of relief



Skeletons in the closet



Slow as molasses



Smart as a whip



Sneaking suspicion



Splitting hairs



Spread like wildfire



Straight as an arrow



Straw that broke



Swift kick in the pants



Swimming with the sharks



The camel's back



Strong as an ox



Take the bull by the horns



The early bird gets the worm



Thin as a rail



Through thick and thin



Time is money



Tired but happy



To coin a phrase



To make a long story short



Tongue tied



Trial and error



Tried and true



Turn back time



Under the weather



Wear your heart on your sleeve



White as a sheet



Wise as an owl



Wolf in sheep's clothing



Work like a dog



Worth its weight in gold

You can identify many more clichés if you pay attention to what you hear people saying and what you hear on radio and TV. Start keeping a little cliché book. Jot down the phrases that you hear often. These are phrases that either are clichés or will soon be clichés. You want to avoid them.

2. The second part of getting clichés out of your writing is knowing what to do when you spot a cliché in your work.

When you realize you've used a cliché, circle it and then ask yourself what word or phrase you could use to instead. What is a more original way of saying what you're trying to say?

For example, look at the cliché, "worked like a dog."

Wouldn't it be better to simply replace the phrase with a more appropriate verb, a more specific verb like labored or toiled? If you want to use a comparison, brainstorm a few that might work for what you're trying to say.

For example, to replace "worked like a dog, you could try

"worked like a man promised a million dollar bonus for extra hours"

or

"worked like a lion wanting to avoid the whip"

These aren't great, but at least they're different. Replace your clichés with something different, then go back and make sure that something different makes sense and fits the piece you're writing.

For instance, you wouldn't want to use my second example in a sweet, romantic story. Fit your comparison to what's around it.

If you can keep your writing free of clichés, you'll have better quality writing. Better quality writing sells. Get rid of those dreaded clichés!

## QUIZ ANSWERS



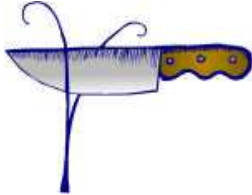
1. Swimming with the sharks



2. Heart sings



3. Pot of gold at the end of the rainbow



4. Splitting hairs



5. Wolf in sheep's clothing



6. Searching for a needle in a haystack



7. The early bird gets the worm



8. Climbing the ladder to success



9. Seeing dollar signs



10. Flushing money down the drain



11. Leave no stone unturned



12. Skeletons in the closet



13. Pencil pushers



14. Tongue tied



15. Sick as a dog



16. Cross your fingers



17. Swift kick in the pants

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrea Rains Waggener is the author of both fiction and nonfiction.

Andrea's writing how to e-books are:

[How to Become A Writer Extraordinaire—The Beginning Writer's Roadmap to Writing Success and How to Become A Writer Extraordinaire—The Beginning Writer's Roadmap to Writing Success—THE TASKBOOK](#)

[Novel Writing Made Easy—How To Plan A Novel So It Practically Writes Itself and Novel Writing Made Easy—How To Plan A Novel So It Practically Writes Itself—THE TASKBOOK](#)

Her other books include *Healthy, Wealthy, & Wise—52 Life-changing Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Hazelden 2005), a self help book that teaches people how to develop inner qualities that pave the way for a quality life; *Alternate Beauty* (Bantam 2005), a novel about an obese woman who wakes up in a universe where fat is considered beautiful; and *Dog Parenting—How to Have an Outrageously Happy, Well-adjusted Canine* (Adams Media Corp. 2006), a lighthearted look at how to give a dog great dog care.

A former attorney and legal writing professor, now author, writing coach, upbeat life advisor and dog care advisor, Andrea has given workshops and personal instruction to both beginning and advanced writing students. Andrea has been a guest on numerous radio programs. Her books have been featured in newspapers such as the *Seattle Post Intelligencer* and in national magazines like *Shape Magazine*. She's been a guest on FOX News Network's, *Fox and Friends*, as well as on the Pacific Northwest, ABC TV's *Northwest Afternoon*.

Andrea lives in Washington State, on the coast, with her husband Tim and her dog, Muggins.

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