This handout will address the problematic issue of clichés and idioms in an academic setting and the ways you can identify and avoid them in order to produce a clearer and more concise paper.

**What are clichés and idioms?**

**Clichés** are popular expressions that have lost their impact through their excessive use. There are three types of clichés:

- **Common phrases**: Overused and predictable phrases.
  Example: *crystal clear, depths of despair, tried and true*

- **Dead metaphors**: Metaphors that have lost their original figurative meaning.
  Example: *dead as a doornail* – What is the goal of conveying that the doornail is dead?

- **Inflated phrases**: Phrases that can be expressed more concisely without losing meaning.
  Example: *as a matter of fact → in fact*

**Idioms** are expressions with unusual wording and figurative meanings.

Examples:
- He found himself in a *pickle* when he realized that his phone had stopped working.
- It was *raining cats and dogs* today.
- *Avoid clichés like the plague.*

**Why should we avoid clichés and idioms in academic papers?**

We use clichés and idioms so often in daily conversation that we sometimes unconsciously incorporate them into our writing. These overused phrases feel familiar, and it is easy to rely on them to convey difficult ideas rather than to struggle with finding the right words to express those concepts.

However, clichés and idioms can negatively impact your writing for the following reasons:

- Predictable phrases can be vague, or they can have empty meaning.
- Using them can result in a dull and unoriginal paper.
- Clichés and idioms create an informal and unprofessional tone.
- You lose your voice as a writer,
- and your writing becomes generic.

**How do you identify clichés and idioms?**

1. Can you complete the phrase before you even finish reading it? If so, the phrase is probably a cliché.

   Example:
   a. Every cloud has a ________.  Answer: *silver lining*
   b. Better late than ________.  Answer: *never*
   c. Breathe a sigh of _________.  Answer: *relief*
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2. **Is the sentence too general /vague?** Clichés and idioms often mask your actual thoughts.
   
   **Example:** Which sentence conveys the idea more clearly?
   
   **Cliché wording:** Angelo in Shakespeare’s “Measure for Measure” realized that he had been found out and would have to face the music.
   
   **Alternative wording:** Angelo in Shakespeare’s “Measure for Measure” realized that the Duke had known about his hypocritical behavior towards Isabella and that he would have to accept a death sentence.

3. **Is this your writing style/voice or somebody else's voice?** By using clichés and idioms, you are relying on somebody else’s form of expression.
   
   **Example:** Can you recognize your own writing? Which paragraph is stronger in content, clarity, and voice? Which paragraph is more nuanced?
   
   **Cliché wording:** In Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters*, Usbek is a man full of himself and believes that women should be as pure as snow. He despair at the dark and dismal world that is Paris. To make matters worse, his life begins to come apart when his wives stop caring about their modesty now that he is away.
   
   **Alternative wording:** In Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters*, Usbek arrogantly believes that women should be modest and chaste. Through his letters, he reveals his disgust at the “lack” of decorum Parisian women exhibit. He eventually falls ill due to his feelings of alienation in Paris and his loss of control over his harem in Persia.

4. **Do you understand the metaphors/wording you have chosen?** Would your reader understand them?
   
   **Examples:** Can you explain the following idioms?
   
   - He came back in the nick of time.
   - He is fit as a fiddle.

   **How do you fix clichés and idioms?**

   1. **Analyze your audience.**
      
      Who are you writing for? What kind of language do readers expect from you? What should your tone and level of formality be for the paper? Is there a specific set of vocabulary that is expected from you? These are important questions to ask yourself whenever you begin writing a paper.
      
      **Example:** Compare the following two sentences. Which one would you use in a business setting and why?
      
      **Informal:** The business proposal fell on deaf ears.
      
      **Formal:** The investors objected to the sustainability aspect of the business proposal.

   2. **Simplifying the language.**
      
      Clichés and idioms may appear to make a paper more interesting, but they are so overused that they stop adding new meaning to your thoughts and arguments. Rather than relying on phrases
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that result in a predictable paper, simplify the wording. A simple sentence that is clear and concise can have the same impact as one that has a metaphor.

**Example:** Which sentence is more concisely written?

**Cliché:** Argan breathed a sigh of relief when he realized his daughter truly loved him.

**Simplified:** Argan felt relieved when he realized his daughter truly loved him.

3. **Adding specificity.**
The more specific your arguments are, the stronger your paper becomes. Clichés and idioms merely skim the surface of complex ideas, and they often distract the reader from what you truly want to express. Rather than using a cliché or an idiom, further explore the message you wish your readers to take from your paper.

**Example:** Which sentence gives you information that might prove useful to your understanding of a paper?

**Cliché:** Prospero and Duke Vincentio are two peas in a pod.

**Specific:** Prospero and Duke Vincentio both share the need to redeem their past.

4. **Create your own imagery or metaphor.**
Relying on excessive imagery or metaphors can affect the tone and formality of a paper. They can also distract the reader from the actual argument you wish to express. However, if you feel that your writing can benefit from it, creating your own imagery/metaphor will convey your thoughts more successfully than simply relying on a cliché or overused phrase.
Works Referenced


