

Campus Academic Resource Program

Clichés, Idioms, and Formalizing Writing in Academic Papers

This handout will:

- Define clichés and idioms.
- Address the problematic issue of clichés and idioms in an academic setting.
- Provide methods to identify clichés and idioms through activities.
- Offer suggestions to avoid using clichés and idioms in academic writing.

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 struggle with finding the right words to express those concepts.

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

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

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How do you identify clichés and idioms?

1. You can complete the phrase before you finish reading it.

Exercise:

- a. Every cloud has a _____.
- b. Better late than _____.
- c. Breathe a sigh of _____.

2. The sentence is too general and/or vague. Clichés and idioms often mask your actual thoughts.

Exercise: Circle the sentence that uses clichéd wording. Underline the clichéd phrasing.

- a. Angelo in Shakespeare’s “Measure for Measure” realized that he had been found out and would have to face the music.
- b. 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. Your writing style or voice is somebody else’s voice. Using clichés and idioms causes you to rely on somebody else’s form of expression.

Exercise: Can you recognize original writing? Which paragraph is stronger in content, clarity, and voice? Why?

a. In Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters*, Usbek is a man full of himself and believes that women should be as pure as snow. He despairs 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.

b. 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. Look for wording with vague meaning. Ask yourself: Do you understand the metaphors/wording you have chosen? Would your reader understand them?

Exercise: Explain the following idioms in your own words. Then, rewrite the sentence so a wider audience would understand it.

- a. He came back *in the nick of time*.

Explain: _____

Rewrite: _____

- b. He is *fit as a fiddle*.

Explain: _____

Rewrite: _____

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- Answer Key
1. Exercise:
 - a. Every cloud has a silver lining.
 - b. Better late than never.
 - c. Breathe a sigh of relief.
 2. Exercise:
 - a. Angelo in Shakespeare's "Measure for Measure" realized that he had been found out and would have to face the music.
 - i. The second sentence clarifies what "face the music" means. The second sentence offers the reader more clarity and specificity for what the writer is trying to convey.
 3. Exercise:
 - b. This paragraph has stronger content, clarity, and voice than the other one because it offers specificities for the reader. Rather than relying on clichéd wording, this paragraph details what the writer actually means.
 - i. For example:
 - i. "full of himself" → "arrogant"
 - ii. "pure as snow" → "modest and chaste"
 4. Exercise:
 - a. He came back in the nick of time.
 - i. This idiom describes how the subject ("he") came back as soon as was necessary. Depending on the situation, you can make this sentence more specific for the reader.
 - b. He is fit as a fiddle.
 - i. This idiom describes the subject's ("he") physical fitness. Depending on the situation, you can go into more detail about his physical condition and why it is necessary information for the reader.

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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.

Informal: The business proposal fell on deaf ears.

Formal: The investors objected to the sustainability aspect of the business proposal.

Which one would you use in a business setting and why? _____

2. Simplify 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 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: Compare the following two sentences.

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.

Which sentence is more concisely written? How can you tell? _____

3. Add 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: Compare the following two sentences.

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

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

Which sentence gives you information that might prove useful to your understanding of a paper? Why? _____

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 your actual argument. However, if you feel that your writing can benefit from it, creating your own imagery/metaphor will convey your thoughts more successfully than relying on a cliché or overused phrase.

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