

Cliches, Slang, Jargon,...

Avoid Clichés

A cliché is an expression that has been overused. As a result, it sounds stale and dull. In fact, as soon as you begin to hear or read a cliché, you can predict how it will end.

Read the following sentences and try to figure out how the clichés in them will end:

She baked a cake that was as light as a _____.
Jason's remark was right on _____.
Janice, you have hit the nail _____.
After being crushed, the can lay flat as a _____.

Watch for clichés as you rewrite the drafts of your papers. Make one last check for clichés as you edit your final draft. Trust your instincts to come up with alternatives that are clearer, more appealing, less wordy, and often more specific than clichés are.

Common and overused clichés include: acid test, as good as done, as the crow flies, at all costs, bit the dust, breaking my neck, broken record, clear as mud, cold, hard facts, cool as a cucumber, dark horse, dead as a doornail, drunk as a skunk, early bird, easy for you to say, edge of the seat, face the music, fly like an eagle, foaming at the mouth, going places, green with envy, grinning from ear to ear, healthy as a horse, hit the deck, hit the sack, hot potato, keep your shirt on, ladder of success, like the plague, little lady, old hat, on your own, paid your dues, passed away, picture perfect, pure as snow, rest assured, sacred cow, short and sweet, sick as a dog, sink or swim, stone cold sober, stone's throw, strong as an ox, tighten our belts, to the point, turn for the worse, and white as a ghost.

Create an Appropriate Tone

Tone is the style in which you express yourself. Your tone may vary depending upon purpose and audience. For example, if you are writing a letter to a friend, you might use an informal tone and include slang, jargon, colloquialisms, and contractions. If you are writing a college essay, on the other hand, you will want to use a formal tone.

To maintain a formal tone, avoid slang, jargon, and colloquialisms. Also, choose language carefully and include only idiomatic expressions.

Avoid Slang

Slang is language that has a private and often short-lived meaning. Slang can be very powerful, but it is often inexact and is usually understood by only a select group.

For example, teenagers often use words that their parents have never heard of and that are not found in contemporary newspapers, textbooks, and the like.

Slang: When the dude split, he left the chick with a kid and no bread.
Formal: When the man left, he abandoned the woman with a child and no money.

Avoiding Jargon Except with Special Audiences

Jargon is language used by experts in a particular field. It includes technical words, new compounds, and familiar words used in a unique way. Jargon is appropriate as long as your readers are familiar with the field from which it comes. But jargon can make your writing complicated and unclear to those who are unfamiliar with such language.

Jargon: After booting up the computer and activating the printer, Arnie made hard copies of his business correspondence.
Familiar: After turning on the computer and the printer, Arnie printed his business letters.

Avoid Colloquialisms

Colloquial expressions, while not always incorrect, are informal and more appropriate in spoken conversation among friends than in formal writing.

Colloquial: I found the puppy sleeping back of the couch.

Formal: I found the puppy sleeping behind the couch.

(Adapted from *Writing Intensive: Essentials for College Writers* (2007) by Elaine P. Maimon & Janice H. Peritz)