

Understanding & Avoiding Clichés

A cliché is a phrase that becomes stale due to overuse. While clichés are recognizable and easy to understand in everyday life, in academic writing they easily make a paper feel unrefined and lazy.

Clichés Hurt Your Paper Because They...

- Imply a lack of critical thinking and creativity.
- Are often too informal for serious academic writing.
- Oversimplify complex issues in ways that ignore nuance and valid criticism.
- Pad the wordcount when more efficient phrases are available.
- Often lead to teacher comments such as “Too general,” “Vague,” or “Be more specific.”

Types of Clichés and How to Revise Them

Folksy Sayings

Every cloud has a silver lining
A stitch in time saves nine
Opposites attract

The grass is always greener on the other side
The early bird gets the worm
YOLO - You Only Live Once

These phrases feel reassuring in a social media post or feel-good speech but signal a lack of critical thinking in a term paper. Academic writing often requires unearthing deeper meanings from a short poem or story, and these idioms are simple by necessity.

How to Revise: It is common to rely on clichés in the early stages of the writing process when you are just trying to get your ideas onto paper. When revising, ask yourself why you felt the cliché was appropriate and what details from the material could make your arguments better.

Original: After staying at the palace, the protagonist is happy to return to his farm. He learns the grass is always greener on the other side.

Revised: After staying at the palace, the protagonist realizes the benefits are not worth dealing with the elitism and politics of the court. He returns to his farm with a renewed appreciation of his family and independent lifestyle.

Turns of Phrase

Cool as a cucumber
Their own worst enemy
The list goes on and on
Meat-and-potatoes family

Ace up their sleeve
High-octane thrill ride
Play it by ear
Back to the drawing board

Even clever and unique phrases will turn into clichés if repeated enough, and many are too informal for use in an academic paper. In addition, the meanings of some of these phrases would be lost on readers with different cultural backgrounds. For example, an English idiom for doing something in the wrong order is “to put the cart before the horse.” In Spanish, the phrase is *empezar la casa por el tejado* or “to start the house by the roof.”

How to Revise: It is impossible to remove every common phrase from your writing, but you can take measures to minimize their presence. Read the sentence aloud and determine whether the cliché sounds flat or vague. If so, then remove it. Sometimes you can freshen up a cliché by adjusting the wording.

Original: The experiment blew up in her face, and the physicist went back to the drawing board.

Revised: The experiment failed, and the physicist went back to the spectrometer lab.

Weak Introductions

It is often said...

It's hard to believe...

Throughout history,

Since the beginning of time,

Everyone knows...

There are many reasons...

Webster's dictionary defines...

This paper will discuss...

These phrases attempt to demonstrate authority when they really signal a lack of focus. Even a paper on the Big Bang that could cover the entirety of time needs a definitive starting point. Likewise, academic writing assumes that the reader is familiar with the subject matter, so starting with a dictionary definition or general knowledge is unnecessary.

How to revise: Sometimes you can just delete the offending phrase, and the sentence will read fine without it. If you wrote the introduction before writing the rest of the essay, however, then wait until after finishing the first draft to tweak the introduction so that it suits the content ahead.

Original: Throughout history, people debated whether nature or nurture played a bigger role in child development. This essay will discuss how both inherent traits and proper teaching inform a living creature's life.

Revised: Nature and nurture are not competing forces in child development. Studies of both humans and other animals show that while some traits are inherited, their habits can change with proper teaching.

Reductive Arguments & Conclusions

Survival of the fittest

Passing the buck

An axe to grind

Grasping at straws

Both sides deserve equal blame

Future generations will have to solve this problem

The ends justify the means

Boys will be boys

Many academic papers will cover long-standing debates with no clear solution, and what may seem like one side of an argument usually contains a spectrum of individual beliefs. Some clichés that seemingly sum up an issue can instead dismiss valid criticism or justify bad behavior.

How to revise: Determine your viewpoint in the brainstorming phase and make sure that you use research from reliable resources to validate your stance. Take time to understand and include the other side's perspective, but stand by your perspective with counterarguments. If you must use a cliché, make sure you define your interpretation of it in this context.

Original: The company's strategy for success was one code: The ends justify the means.

Revised: The company's strategy for success was simple Machiavellianism: Defrauding customers and employees was acceptable so long as the ends justified the means.

Resume & Technical Jargon

Forward-thinking
People person
Jack of all trades
Perfectionist

Detail-orientated
Team player
Cross-functional synergies
Revolutionary

Describing engineering schematics and ancient philosophies can often be easier than describing yourself—a common issue when applying for jobs, internships, and degree programs. These phrases sound impressive but are often vague and lose their impact when you consider that countless candidates will repeat this same lingo. They can also imply negative traits: Being a perfectionist could mean missing deadlines and being inflexible when a project's needs change.

How to Revise: Check the application carefully for key phrases that the application screener is looking for, then match them with your background as much as possible. Use specific accomplishments to describe your performance.

Original: I am a forward-thinking and detailed-orientated team player who optimized complex financial databases.

Revised: I led a three-person accounting team in managing multi-billion dollar financial databases while adjusting business practices to match new regulations.

Staying mindful of clichés not only improves your writing, but also enhances your critical thinking and revising skills. Good luck!

Resources

Cliché List, <http://www.clichelist.net/>, Accessed 3 June 2019

Floca, Zach. *Resisting Clichés*, edited by Erin Clough, The University of Texas at Austin, 2009

“15 Common Spanish Idioms for Sounding Like a Native,” *FluentU*,
<https://www.fluentu.com/blog/spanish/spanish-idioms/>, Accessed 3 June 2019.