

CLICHÉ AND AMBIGUITY

Cliché Definition:

Cliché refers to an expression that has been overused to the extent that it loses its original meaning or novelty. A cliché may also refer to actions and events that are predictable because of some previous events.

All examples of cliché are expressions that were once new and fresh. They won popularity in the public and hence have been used so extensively that such expressions now sound boring and at times irritating, due to the fact that they have lost their original color. For instance, the phrase “as red as a rose” must have been a fresh and innovative expression at some point in time, but today it is considered universally as a cliché, and does not make such an impact when used in everyday or formal writing.

Common Cliché Examples:

Example #1

In describing time, the following expressions have turned into cliché:

- *in the nick of time* – to happen just in time
- *only time will tell* – to become clear over time
- *a matter of time* – to happen sooner or later
- *at the speed of light* – to do something very quickly
- *lasted an eternity* – to last for a very long time
- *lost track of time* – to stop paying attention to time

Example #2

In describing people, these expressions have turned into cliché:

- *as brave as a lion* – describes a very brave person
- *as clever as a fox* – describes a very clever person
- *as old as the hills* – describes an old person or idea
- *a diamond in the rough* – describes someone with a brilliant future
- *fit as a fiddle* – describes a person in a good shape
- *as meek as a lamb* – describes a person who is too weak and humble

Example #3

In describing various sentiments, a number of expressions have turned into cliché:

- *frightened to death* – to be too frightened
- *scared out of one's wits* – to be too frightened
- *all is fair in love and war* – to go to any extent to claim somebody's love
- *all is well that ends well* – a happy ending reduces the severity of problems that come in one's way
- *every cloud has a silver lining* – problems also have something good in them
- *the writing on the wall* – something clear and already understood
- *time heals all wounds* – pain and miseries get will heal, with the passage of time
- *haste makes waste* – people make mistakes when rushing

Example #4

Below is a list of some more common clichés:

- *They all lived happily ever after*
- *Read between the lines*
- *Fall head over heels*
- *Waking up on the wrong side of the bed*
- *The quiet before the storm*
- *Between the devil and the deep blue sea*

Function of Cliché:

Anton C. Zijderveld, a Dutch sociologist, throws light on the function of cliché in the following excerpt, taken from his treatise *On Clichés*:

“A cliché is a traditional form of human expression (in words, thoughts, emotions, gestures, acts) which – due to repetitive use in social life – has lost its original, often ingenious heuristic power. Although it thus fails positively to contribute meaning to social interactions and communication, it does function socially, since it manages to stimulate behaviour (cognition, emotion, volition, action), while it avoids reflection on meanings.”

Why Avoiding Clichés in Business Writing Is So Important?

The only time you should write “Let’s get all of our ducks in a row” is when you are literally putting your ducks in a row. (Photo: Kelly Nelson)

If you’ve been relying on the same overused phrases in your business reports, it’s time to start hitting the “Delete” key.

Clichés are rampant in the business world. We hear them, we speak them, and we write them.

Why? Because clichés make use of metaphors or images—often in a clever way—so that people quickly understand.

The truth is, clichés might have been fresh and meaningful once. However, they are not fresh now, and they can muddy your points. If you want to write business copy that is powerful and effective, the first rule is: Go simple.

When you proofread your work, look carefully for business jargon or clichés. See if your meaning is still clear if you delete those words. Clichés can be empty fillers that add nothing to your meaning. If you feel you do need the expression to make your point, think of a way to restate it. Use a thesaurus for ideas.

Top 10 Business Phrases to Avoid:

I’ve put together a short list of common business clichés along with suggestions for removing them from your writing.

1. **At the end of the day:** At the end of the day, it is the supervisor who must make the decision. (Try replacing the phrase with “ultimately” or “finally,” or simply leave it out: *It is the supervisor who must make the decision.*)
2. **It is what it is:** We can’t change what has happened with our sales slump month. It is what it is. (This phrase is redundant and cringe-worthy. Delete it.)
3. **Take it to the next level:** The company will take it to the next level with this product launch. (Rewrite the sentence with new language that tells the reader more: *With this new product, the company will meet and exceed its goals for the fiscal year.*)
4. **Win-win situation:** By purchasing an ad, you will help support a nonprofit and also gain new customers. It’s a win-win for everyone. (Your meaning stays exactly the same if you ditch this cliché.)

5. **Think outside the box:** We encourage everyone in this company to think outside the box. (Who in the business world hasn't heard this one? I'd argue that using this tired phrase shows you don't actually think outside the box. Try "creatively," "differently," or "unconventionally.")
6. **Touch base:** Let's touch base after you've had a chance to review the material. (Try one of these: *I'll call you next week* or *I'll follow up with you on Monday*. Yes, it's much simpler, but you're not a baseball player; there are no bases to touch.)
7. **Hit the ground running:** Her experience as vice president lets her hit the ground running as the company's new CEO. (Rephrase this sentence. *Her experience as vice president means she'll have a smooth transition as the company's new CEO.*)
8. **A no-brainer:** Our manual makes using this new software for the first time a no-brainer. (Try "easy" or "simple," or rewrite the sentence.)
9. **Reinvent the wheel:** We don't need to reinvent the wheel here; we can build on our past. (This one doesn't add anything fresh to your meaning. Don't use it.)
10. **24/7:** Our customer service centre is ready to meet your needs 24/7. (This phrase probably sounded clever long ago. Lose it. *Our 24-hour customer service centre is ready to meet your needs.*)

This list of business-writing clichés that should be banned is certainly not exhaustive. Leave a comment below and tell me which ones top your list.

Expressions that are not Clichés:

It is important to keep in mind that constant reuse of expressions does not necessarily create a cliché. Typical expressions that are used almost at all times in formal ceremonies, festivals, courts, etc. are not considered cliché examples; rather they befit such occasions, and are regarded as more appropriate. Following are a few examples:

- "I second the motion" (Board or council meeting)
- "I now pronounce you man and wife" (Wedding Ceremony)
- "I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States." (Oath-taking ceremony)
- "Happy Birthday!"

Similarly, certain epithets like "reverend" and "father" are attached to the names of church officials. Besides, people of the royal family are addressed with epithets "Your Grace," "Your Highness," or "Your Royal Highness." Such expressions are part of proper etiquette, and do not fall under the category of cliché.

Ambiguous Communication:

As a Technical Writer, communication can be difficult if ambiguous responses are received. Such as is the case when trying to find out information. It can be difficult when someone has a new product, and cannot explain nor describe it. When encountering such a person, you will probably see that they are thinking of one thing, but their words do not describe the thought. They want to make a statement but the content is confusing or seems wrong.

Ambiguity is when the meaning of a word, phrase, or sentence is uncertain. There could be more than one meaning.

Typically, it is best to avoid ambiguity in your writing. When you make statements that are ambiguous, you confuse the reader and hinder the meaning of the text. However, sometimes ambiguity is used deliberately to add humour to a text.

Examples of Ambiguity:

Sarah gave a bath to her dog wearing a pink t-shirt.

Ambiguity: Is the dog wearing the pink t-shirt?

I have never tasted a cake quite like that one before!

Ambiguity: Was the cake good or bad?

Did you see her dress?

Ambiguity: Is she getting dressed or are they talking about her clothes?

Tips To Avoid Ambiguity:

Here is a list of best practices to create well-written requirements that avoid ambiguity, confusion, and misunderstandings.

1. Write Explicit Requirements:

To be explicit means more than mention the feature you want to implement on your website. You must be specific, detailed, and avoid assuming that the reader knows what you mean.

Even if you think that the reader must know what you are talking about, avoid assumption. Write down even what should be assumed and don't be afraid of being repetitive if this is needed.

To make your point explicit and super clear, it is a good idea to add examples of what you are looking for.

2. Would and Should Must Be Avoided:

Would and Should are two words prone to generate unclarity and do not define a specific task. They convey the idea of being optional, and you do not want to give options you want a specific requirement.

For instance, if you say “the field in the form should fill automatically”, the developer may decide to implement this functionality or not depending, for example, on how complicated the implementation is.

However, if you say that the form will or must fill automatically, it is readily understood that the feature must be implemented no matter what.

3. Be Careful With Adverbs:

Adverbs are great at causing ambiguity. Adverbs like generally, reasonably, usually, normally, and so on are not specific and are open to interpretation. If you say that a click-to-action button must be reasonably visible, the developer can place it wherever he feels the button is visible. His judgment on that may, of course, differ from yours.

If you write the same requirement saying that the click-to-action button must be cantered on the screen and above the folder, the developer will not doubt what to do and implement the feature in no time. As a result, you will be satisfied with the result.

4. Absolute Modifiers Add Clarity:

Absolute modifiers are words like only, always, unique and so on. They describe a quality that is either present in full or not present at all and that avoid ambiguity.

Here is an example. There is a difference in saying “the writer will be able to add pictures manually” and “the writer will only be able to add pictures manually.” The second phrase is more specific than the first one, and it excludes the possibility to have an automatic function to add pictures.

5. Use Pronouns Carefully:

If not used correctly, pronouns can create ambiguity in your requirements. You must always make sure to which noun, or antecedent, the pronoun is referring to. For instance, think about this phrase: “When the user clicks on the main menu a drop-down list will appear. This will allow the user to...” It is not clear if “this” refers to the main menu or the drop-down list. To add clarity, you can rephrase the same sentence as follow: “When the user clicks on the main menu, a drop-down list will appear which will allow the user to...”

6. Write Using Consistent Terms:

Writing a requirements list is different from writing a novel or an article to entertain an audience. Therefore, there is no need to be creative in your writing.

Consistently use terms, even if that may sound as repetition, to not confuse the reader. If in your requirements there are terms with similar meaning but not exactly the same, you may opt for adding a glossary to clearly explain to what each term refers.

7. Avoid Abbreviation Altogether:

Abbreviations are a useful shortcut to make your writing shorter and more comfortable for you. However, sometimes abbreviations may not be adequately understood by your reader.

To avoid any misunderstanding, always use full English words and do not include any abbreviation in your requirements.

8. Short Sentences and a Clear Layout:

Using short sentences is a good practice for most kind of writing. Short phrases that go straight to the point make texts very easy to read and, most importantly, easier to understand. If you see that one of your sentences is longer than two lines, break it down into multiple phrases.

Additionally, use some visual elements to facilitate the reading and memorizing of your text. For instance, proper use of list and bullet points helps a great deal in adding clarity to your writing.

9. Ask For Review:

Before you submit your requirements, ask somebody to review what you have written and ask for his comments. As we mentioned previously, it is incredibly challenging to evaluate our writing. Therefore, a second opinion can be entirely enlightening to expose possible faults and ambiguities.

Alternatively, you can refrain from submitting your requirements as soon as you have completed them. Let your document sit and come back to it after a few days. You may be amazed at how many ambiguities you can spot when you read it after a while.
