Handout for Solving the Cliché Conundrum

Cliches communicate. Fresh words communicate better. Let’s be more interesting.

“Writing is way overrated. The truly creative writer gets the most mileage out of editing and revising.” *The Writer’s Little Helper* James V. Smith

Editing prevents verbal stumbling when your words are read aloud. One benefit of the WW process is hearing how easy or hard others find reading and following your thoughts.

General Tips:

*First be readers.*

• Read good writers

• Read some books outside your preferred genre

• Read about writing *(How many books on writing do you have? What’s your favorite? Why)*

*Then be writers.*

• Write words of encouragement to yourself: notes around the house, journal

• Give yourself assignments for improvement

• Create figures of speech to fix cliches

Ten Quick Tips to Polish Your Work

ONE Use all five senses—sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell. (*Get out of the fog*.)

TWO: Improve “it” by adding more information. Be sure not to use “that” unnecessarily.

THREE: Replace the passive verbs *is, are, was, were* and the word *as* when not used in comparison. Use active verbs.

FOUR: Avoid including an information dump with too many details. Fulfilled scripture shows you how. A small portion is quoted to show fulfilment and yet that nugget indicates the broader context. (*When including a long backstory passage like a journal entry, break it up with action.)*

Hardly did he find himself with the enclosure than there were pressed upon him copious handfuls of grapes comprising a dozen or so large bunches, whereof he could not in civility refuse to accept a part, although unable to prevail on those hospitable vintagers to receive any acknowledgement of their courteous bounty.

 -Algernon Taylor, *Guienne* (1879)

The revised 4-word version: He got free grapes.

*The Word Loss Diet* by Rayne Hall

FIVE: Pick your best descriptor or two. From *Wretched Writing* by Ross and Kathryn Petras. Page157

It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents—except at occasional intervals, when it was checked by a violent gust of wind which swept up the street (for it is in London that our scene lies), rattling along the housetops, and fiercely agitating the scanty flame of the lamps that struggled against the darkness.

 -Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *Paul Clifford (1803)*

This spawned the Bulwer-Lytton awards, given for the worst first sentence of a novel.

SIX: Clarify by using serial commas. (Read *Eats, Shoots, and Leaves* by Lynne Truss*)*

SEVEN: Make body parts behave in appropriate ways. *Wretched Writing*

Marjorie would often take her eyes from the deck and cast them far out to sea.

 -Ursula Bloom, *A Voyage of Discovery (1964)*

His eyes roamed around the workshop, knocking over tables and equipment, until they settled on my Master…

 -Matthew Skelton, *Endymion Spring* (2006)

EIGHT: Edit on the computer and on hard copies—more than one time.

NINE: Reduce word clutter and be sure you make sense. Be willing to *Kill your little darlings.*

It was one of those perfect June nights that so seldom occur except in August.

 -Frankfort Moore, “Reggie’s Rival” (1895)

The dull-red mists seemed to flow together, enclosing the three sides of a circle.

 -Murray Leinster, *The Forgotten Planet* (1954)

TEN: READ YOUR WORK OUT LOUD, or have your computer do it for you. You’ll hear your echoes, awkward phrasing, and too-long or confusing sentences. In addition, if your characters use dialect, you’ll be more able to discern where to add a little or cut a little.

The Cliché Conundrum

What’s a cliché? An overused phrase or saying that dulls the freshness of your writing.

WE ALL USE THEM IN EVERYDAY CONVERSATION.

They are shortcuts to longer statements and we understand them. “Have a nice day.” “How’re you doing?” “What’s new?” or “What’s up?” “Take care now.” They serve as verbal transitions opening or ending encounters and as conversation filler. “Ya know?”

What are some other common sayings that we use often to describe our moods, the reason we’re running late, a difficult or busy day at work, our opinion of those who don’t agree with our politics or religion?

Don’t worry if they appear in your first draft. You can occasionally use them in conversation to establish character. However, part of editing is replacing these with your own creative words.

Several years ago, I created a document of my own *Southern Sayings and Proverbs* to use in my writing. I prepared them in advance. You might want to craft sayings for specific characters. Non-fiction writers might craft their points or principles in a similar way.

* Advising a fool is like watering rocks.
* Dry as an August drought.
* There’s a beaten path for a reason.
* Every heart has a prodigal part.
* Regret stew makes a bad diet.

*Analogy*: Compare something complex with something simple to make it easier for the reader to grasp.

Life is like a box of chocolates. *(What does this mean to you?)*

*Hyperbole*: Use exaggeration for emphasis, humor, and contrast. Write your own.

I’ve been waiting for hours. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

I couldn’t eat another bite. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

I didn’t sleep a wink. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Imagery:

*Metaphor*: Cindy Rogers says in *Word Magic for Writers* that “metaphor is the most important figure of speech.” And one of our most powerful tools.

A metaphor reduces explanation through implied or indirect comparisons that refer to or describe one thing as if it were the other. Use your experience to create new metaphors and other figures of speech.

Men are from Mars; women are from Venus. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

This place is a dump. My car is a lemon. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

She’s like an energizer bunny. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

He has two left feet. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

“Metaphor compares two dissimilar objects or actions that share a quality that can be used to relate one to another.”

*Simile*: Shows how things are alike using “like” or “”as.”

* Like wild animals. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* As loud as thunder. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* Like a vacation. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* A bad writing day is like a garden of weeds. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Avoid “writing on the nose” which is like a grocery list of actions that fails to interest the reader. Figures of speech provide a way to enliven and deepen your story. Link the externals in your story to the internal journey by comparisons to weave a memorable whole.

Carl got up. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

He went to work. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

He came home at the end of the day. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Suggestion: Create your own list of metaphors, or sayings that fit the emotions, actions, and places in your story. Make time to brainstorm a list that you can then refer to and insert. Or, the act of creating this additional material may simply serve to better stimulate your words as you compose.

Novice notes:

* Overused words: Okay in the first draft but eliminate as many as possible for a fresher voice. If you have trouble finding yours, ask a writer friend.
* Consumption of food: We assume the characters eat and drink the food ordered. Pay attention when reading quality writers how rarely you see that consumption detailed. To be honest, I’m “sip and tired” of eliminating “He sipped” “She took another sip” and so on from manuscripts. And the reader is tired too.

Here are a few alternates:

* He finished his second cup of coffee and set the empty mug on the counter.
* The party of four filled a trash bag with empty beer cans.
* After the last of the wine was poured and consumed, he lugged the bottles to the recycle bin.

Rewrite a new saying from familiar words. Categories to experiment with:

*Emotions:*

* As clumsy as a bull in a China shop \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* As happy as a pig in mud. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* As mad as a hornet. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* As sober as a judge \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* He was sweating bullets \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

*Events/situations:*

* A dark and stormy night. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* A mob scene. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* A circus. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

*Physical appearance:*

* Big as a barn. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* Strong as an ox. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* Thin as a rail. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

*Three ways to improve:*

Write your own comparisons or sayings.

• Rewrite the original one you used.

• Come up with something different and new.

• Study the figures of speech in the Bible, especially in Psalms, Proverbs, and the prophetic books.

Final Suggestion: Always buy two books. One for you and one for a friend. Do reviews.

So, in closing, I hope this will help you

Think outside the box

Take your writing to the next level

And get a (writing) life!