

In Defense of Clichés: A Half-Hearted Polemic

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In a fascinating study of the frequency and placement of topic sentences in expository prose, Richard Braddock came to the scandalous conclusion that, among professional writers, the topic sentence, at least at it is conventionally conceived, is not nearly as common as the contemporary composition textbook would suggest (291). He observes further that of the topic sentences he identifies, many don't appear to govern the content over which they stand in the manner that many of us, myself included, tend to emphasize when discussing topic sentences in the writing classroom (291-92). I can't help but wonder how many of the paragraphs analyzed by Braddock, apparently left unmoored and rudderless, were then characterized by their readers. "Productively meandering," "inquisitive," "paratactic," "inductive," "empirically-minded," "exploratory" – in short, I suspect that from a certain perspective, a paragraph whose aim is unclear from the start need not be a bad one and moreover that there may be occasions in which such an approach is appropriate. In this essay, I want to suggest that something similar happens in our treatment of clichés in the composition classroom. Generally speaking, our training dictates that we discourage them vehemently. I will argue, however, that such an absolute approach is misguided. Indeed, as I hope to demonstrate, clichés can be and often are powerful expressions that link

author and audience, that connote home, warmth, and community, and that, perhaps most scandalously, can efficiently communicate meaning.

Before we get there, we should get some housecleaning out of the way: a task that, as it turns out, isn't nearly as easy as we'd like to think, namely, defining *cliché*. The cliché, we're told, is a kind of hand-me down phrase that is too tattered, too threadbare to function properly. Clichés are "hackneyed," "trite," "stale." Whatever punch they once had has been worn away over time. If we're lucky, clichés communicate truisms or are platitudes. But one gets the impression that many communicate nothing at all. Rottenberg and Winchell's definition from *Elements of Argument* is representative: "A cliché is an expression or idea grown stale through overuse. Cliches in language are tired expressions that have faded like old photographs; readers no longer see anything when clichés are placed before them" (283). Kudos to Rottenberg and Winchell for not relying on a clichéd cliché metaphor. They go on to list a series of clichés "so obvious and so old-fashioned" that even beginning writers are likely to avoid them. We're going to return to this puzzling idea of the "old-fashioned" cliché, but for now it's worth considering the dominant metaphor of the previous accounts. That the undesirable cliché is "stale," old, un-fresh suggests that the desired phrase whose role it usurps is fresh, original, unused—and by extension, alien, unknown, singular. The good deconstructionist would here point to the concept of "iterability," the idea, in other words, that for an utterance to be legible, it must be repeatable, and for it to be repeatable, it must also be tied to the familiar, the unoriginal, the non-singular

(Derrida 7-8). I don't know that we need to follow Derrida much further, luckily, but it's worth pointing out that the pedagogical approach to the cliché—that we should avoid them or somehow, channeling Ezra Pound, “make them new”—depends at least in part upon a naïve and discredited view of artistic originality. In a very good essay that covers some of the same ground as this essay, Ryan Stark connects this view to Romantic perspectives about genius. Citing Nietzsche, Stark observes that the ideal expression for the Romantic “suffers no witnesses” (455). The cliché, as Stark points out, makes the Romantic anxious precisely because it is surrounded by witnesses. We all hear it, and alas, we all say it. But this is precisely the impetus of this essay: isn't that what language is supposed to do? Isn't that how language is supposed to work? Language, one could say, works by consensus. Descriptive linguistics has taught us that language works only to the extent that participants share the same view about how a linguistic system functions, a view which would include definitions of individual signifiers. So, to add another problem to our approach to clichés, it would seem that our knee-jerk denigration of the cliché comes awfully close to indirectly endorsing a language with no interest in communicating at all (which of course is nothing more than gobbledygook with a snooty sheen).

Before I get any further, I should clarify that my defense of the cliché is not absolute. Indeed, I'm a bit uneasy about settling on the scope of my defense. (My polemic, in other words, isn't as toothy and vicious as it could be.) I'm probably as likely as the next composition teacher to circle the phrase “think outside the box” in a student essay and make a bad joke to my office

mate about how users of that phrase unwittingly communicate to their audience that they've actually climbed inside the box and nailed the lid shut. I'm generally comfortable with never seeing again most of the pat expressions and ready-made phrases that offer that cheap gloss of pseudo-sophistication: "The fact of the matter is that," "for all intents and purposes," and so forth. But what about "in the final analysis," a phrase ubiquitous in theory and dear to many critics, including myself? My thinking, biased as it is, is that the latter phrase still functions well. It does its job, even if it does so by way of circumlocution. The other two, I'd argue, are ugly and technocratic, qualities that make it easier to get rid of them, but they too function, though they do so in spite of themselves, largely by consistency of usage. Anton Zijderveld argues that clichés like these work by a kind of magic, that while they carry truth, they do so "not because of their semantic content but because of their repetitive use" (66). Cliches, in other words, break free from their actual significance and come to be perceived as a unit, a whole, not unlike an individual word.

It's worth emphasizing the obvious here: this process whereby an expression, often an intricate metaphor or insular idiom, becomes reified, whereby the individual signifiers assembled are eclipsed and replaced by one signified—this process takes, well, a village. Put otherwise, clichés are the fruit of community, they are tokens of a tightly woven, high-functioning discourse community. These are the shibboleths that insiders all know, the markers of membership. Ryan Stark makes a similar argument. He claims that "what the cliché accomplishes in discourse is a

sometimes slight, sometimes powerful connective pathos ... On a very basic level, the use of a cliché generates such connection with others through the reflective enactment of a shared discourse practice” (454). Cliches, then, are part of the cultural grammar we use to connect with and relate to one another. To use one to the right audience is to suggest a certain kind of ethos, an awareness of and an appreciation for a kinship. I’d take that a step further: clichés help to constitute community. They, the right ones at least, remind us of home, of comfort, of the familiar. Against Nietzsche’s lonely witnessless utterance, I’d here counter George Eliot’s narrator in the *Mill on the Floss*: “What novelty is worth that sweet monotony where everything is known and loved because it is known” (45). I’m with Eliot: there is both beauty and power here in the commonplace, in this case the shared compendium of expressions that are specific to certain discourse communities.

This connotation of familiarity is especially the case for idioms and dead metaphors, the so-called “non-compositional” (Mel’čuk 61) category of clichés that are the most complicated and intricate and beautiful. I’d argue that they’re also the most powerful. Consider, for example, the phrase “falling in love.” One of the exercises I like to do with my students when we discuss clichés is to have them think of alternative expressions for this phrase. Almost in every case, the phrases they come up with are clunky, long, and imprecise. I next have them consider whether this passive account of love, the idea that love is something that befalls us rather than something that we elect to participate in, is an accurate one. Some aren’t so sure. What is clear, however, is

that this and its constellation of related phrases and figures, all of them hackneyed, most of them ancient, has shaped, indeed constrained, how we talk about and probably how we experience the phenomenon we call love.

The last criticism I'd like to put forth about our treatment of clichés in the composition classroom is a response to the oft-claimed idea that clichés are often too approximate in meaning to accomplish the various jobs for which we've deployed them. The way I've put it to my students in years past is that the cliché is to language as the five paragraph essay is to form: both require us to crush material into a space for which it is more or less ill-suited. Our thoughts end up wearing someone else's clothes, a coat a bit longer in the arms or pants a bit tighter in the waist. It's for this reason that Rottenberg and Winchell consider clichés, along with slogans, as "short cuts." We skimp on the process of argument and communication and settle for an approximation. Put otherwise, despite the appearance of economy, clichés are inefficient; they have a tendency to muddy meaning rather than clarify.

While this is sometimes the case, many expressions, precisely because of their repetition, have become quite efficient at communicating meaning. This efficiency is often part of the reason they earn cliché status. Dead metaphors like the phrase "the body of an essay" work well because they have become familiarized. They circumvent the conventional metaphorical circuit, moving us straight from the expression to the ultimate referent instead of making us do the cognitive work of connecting the disparate. We might recall the concept of defamiliarization

popularized by Viktor Schklovsky and the Russian Formalists: For Schklovsky, what distinguished literary language from prose was its tendency to defamiliarize, to make the ordinary seem foreign, “to make the stone stony” (12). As a literary scholar, I feel a bit like a heretic saying so, but I wonder if the stoniness of the stone is best left out of an essay on, say, progressive tax rates. In other words, isn’t it a good thing that a phrase like the “body of an essay” has become unmoored from its unfamiliar literal suggestion (i.e., the metaphorical one)? With art, slowing down cognition by using language in unfamiliar and surprising ways is admirable, beautiful—well worth the extra intellectual work. I still get a shiver of frisson reading certain Wallace Stevens’ poems, and that feeling owes a lot to Stevens’ manner of stripping the givenness from the familiar and linking radically disparate things and ideas by way of metaphor. That said, as Stark points out, a completely familiar metaphor, such as the phrase “a needle in a haystack,” does its job quite well. It doesn’t make us work hard to get at its meaning. We know precisely what the reader or writer means, and in certain contexts—maybe even most contexts—that fact should be acknowledged as a good thing.

So, returning at last to pedagogy, my discussion of clichés in the classroom has shifted over the course of these last few years to better reflect some of the claims of this essay. For example, I will point to the expression “have your cake and eat it too” and read a list of titles from academic databases that make use of the phrase in their wording. Of course, many of these titles use the phrase cheekily, disowning it as soon as it has done its work; apparently, each time

we use a cliché, our writerly shame has us conspicuously draw attention to the fact that we're using them, as if offering a knowing nod to our audience grants us some absolution (or at least allows us to save some face). (In other words, we totally have our cake and eat it too.) Many others, however, rely on the phrase in a straightforward, non-ironic way. This and similar idioms seem especially common in the social sciences and appear in popular science writing as well. In class, we discuss why such phrases often find their ways into the most forbidding and reader-hostile material and how they may be offering the reader a momentary taste of home and comfort before returning to particle physics or biochemistry or whatever. I also have students discuss a pair of lines from one of D. H. Lawrence's essays. In the first one, Lawrence leans on the phrase "putting one's thumb on the scale" ("Morality" 174) to describe how the demands of narrative form often falsify the life ostensibly represented in fiction. In the second, Lawrence writes that "If you try to nail anything down, in the novel, either it kills the novel, or the novel gets up and walks away with the nail" ("Morality" 174). In both cases, Lawrence uses familiar expressions to help describe something unfamiliar, namely the aesthetics of the novel. This shouldn't surprise us given Lawrence's distaste for effete pretension. In any case, the effect of these phrases is that the strange ideas are domesticated, brought home and warmed by the hearth, as it were. In the latter case, the one with the novel walking away with the nail, Lawrence demonstrates a technique that has occupied one of the more interesting and productive positions within the conventional writing instruction involving clichés—namely, that of re-wording, twisting, or

subverting a cliché. What I like about this practice is that the writer is once again afforded the opportunity to, well, have yet another cake to both possess and eat. Lawrence's witticism about the novel resisting being "nailed down" is able both to connect with the reader while at the same time injecting something unfamiliar and surprising into the situation.

What I want my students to leave with is the idea that clichés can be crucial rhetorical tools, and when used in the right context, even in academia, they can be very effective. Perhaps more importantly, I want my students to recognize how community happens, how it's sustained, how, to some degree, it's constituted. I'm convinced that clichés are one of a number of operations, both within and outside of discourse, that probably help to make community and almost certainly bring it into relief as such.

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