

Clichés and Composition Theory

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A cliché is an over-used, worn-out expression. Many once clever phrases have grown trite: dead as a doornail, gentle as a lamb, straight as an arrow. If you have read such an expression over and over again, so has your reader. Rephrase a cliché, or delete it.

Lynn Quitman Troyka

The cliché is a seemingly natural villain in written discourse, but what is the rationale behind the cliché's devaluation? Many negative attitudes toward clichés stem from a Romantic idea of the writer as a genius marked by the production of ingenious images. The cliché clearly interrupts the Romantic aesthetic imperative to create surprising language, but the cliché's appearance also generates an anxiety of authorship. As an overly common expression, the cliché interferes with conceptions of the writer's originality, the writer's propriety in discourse, and the writer's ownership of meaning. The Romantic critic devalues the cliché in order to communicate a particular philosophy of writing. Sections on clichés in college writing handbooks wittingly or unwittingly continue to reinscribe Romantic notions of the writer and of discourse in general, but my intention is not to offer another critique of Romantic writing theory and pedagogy.¹ My purpose is to suggest a viewpoint capable of valuing the occasional cliché. In order to consider such a viewpoint, composition theorists need a different understanding of how clichés function.

Building upon Anton Zijderfeld's *On Clichés: The Supersedure of Meaning by Function in Modernity*, Gary Olson has published the most extensive research on the cliché in composition studies. Both Zijderfeld and Olson argue that as worn-out expressions, clichés are unreflective, purely functional places in discourse, not semantically meaningful places. Olson concludes that people treat the cliché "like a blank, a mere functional word" (114), and Zijderfeld argues that clichés "seem to carry truth—an old and obvious truth—not because of their semantic content but because of their repetitive use" (66). Clichés, for Zijderfeld, are "not heuristically convincing (that would require a reflective pon-

dering of their meaning, but they are magically convincing, i.e. produce a sort of enchantment which needs an emotional participation in the general cadence of the words and the sounds)" (66). Zijdeveld and Olson maintain that clichés are purely functionally convincing places in discourse, but clichés also might be identified as culturally convincing places in discourse. While Olson is right that more "cognitive research" needs to be conducted on how writers and readers interact with clichés (114), a broader range of theorizing needs to be accomplished simultaneously.

As a well-known expression, the cliché is a type of commonplace in a culture's discourse. Kurt Spellmeyer writes about "substratums" in discourse, places that "enable participants to recognize what they hold in common" (267). When the writer uses a cliché, the writer participates in a kind of recognizable cultural substratum. Admittedly, as a commonplace expression, the cliché does not create new epistemic insights, and it does not give rise to tremendous aesthetic pleasure. What the cliché does accomplish in discourse is a sometimes slight, sometimes powerful connective pathos, or what Kenneth Burke referred to similarly as identification with others. On a very basic level, the use of a cliché generates such connection with others through the reflective enactment of a shared discourse practice. This cultural and ethical dimension of the cliché complicates most, if not all, of the advice about clichés in college writing handbooks and rhetorics.

With an interest in how we understand the relationships between texts and cultural contexts, especially the dynamic between the writer and the culture at large, and with an interest in how discourse builds the sort of connective energy necessary for an ethical sensibility, composition theorists should reconsider the cliché's status in current theory and pedagogy.

The Anxiety of Authorship

Toby Fulwiler, Alan Hayakawa, and Cheryl Kupper's *The College Writer's Reference* contains a helpful historical and cultural note in its section on clichés: "Cliché is a French word for the sound a stamping press makes in a process of making multiple, identical images. In other words, something has become cliché if it is ordinary, run-of-the-mill" (124). The term's origin is tied to notions of industrialization, mass production, and by implication, mass literacy.² The "run-of-the-mill" cliché itself speaks to the relationship between recognizable activities in industry and recognizable expressions in a culture's discourse. From various Romantic perspectives, the idea of recognizable images stands in direct contrast to the notion of genius and the expression of that genius through ingenious images. We might already anticipate the Romantic's aversion to the cliché. A cliché is something that too many people say, or do, or know. Through the use of a cliché, the writer is

unable to assert the writer's genius, which manifests itself through an individualistic sense of style and voice. The appearance of a cliché immediately detracts from the writer's particular style. Such an antagonistic attitude toward commonplace expressions indicates the anxiety of authorship created by clichés.

Whether we consider the Romanticism in Byron's poetry and prose, or the early Peter Elbow's discussions about voice, the Romantic tends to have what appears to be an a priori apprehension about the relationship between the individual and commonplaces in a culture. This apprehension has one of its stronger roots in Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy. After declaring that "whatever is perfect suffers no witnesses," during a reflection upon his relationship to the theater audience, Nietzsche notes, "in the theater one becomes people, herd, female, pharisee, voting cattle, patron, idiot—Wagnerian: even the most personal conscience is vanquished by the leveling magic of the great number; the neighbor reigns; one becomes a mere neighbor" (665). The passage conveys a familiar Romantic anxiety about the writer's relationship to society. On this model, the individual must always be leery of relating to another person participating in an interest.³ As we are about to see, many sections on clichés in college writing handbooks contain this same type of anxiety that too many "witnesses," as Nietzsche puts it, automatically and necessarily ruin the once ingenious, once exclusive phrase and/or writer.

Advice Sections on Clichés in College Writing Handbooks

Like most other writing handbooks, Andrea Lunsford and Robert Connors's *The Everyday Writer* advises against using "ineffective figurative language," clichés and mixed metaphors (160). "If you use such paint-by-numbers language to excess in your writing," the handbook writers note, "readers are likely to conclude that what you are saying is not very new or interesting—or true" (161). Importantly, Lunsford and Connors qualify their advice by explaining that clichés should not be used to excess, suggesting that the occasional cliché is permissible, or at least unavoidable. The painting by numbers analogy, however, serves as evidence that at least the residue of a Romantic anxiety remains in the section. The appearance of a cliché, of a painted-by-numbers phrase, calls into question whether or not the writer has fully achieved a particular authorship. The image of painting by numbers indicates a kind of obvious artificiality in the writing. Additionally, a cliché may disqualify the writer from being an aesthete of sorts, another possible end goal invoked by the analogy.

I remain puzzled by Lunsford and Connors's suggestion that the reader will not find clichés to be true. I agree that readers may not find clichés to be new or interesting, but why not true? When my student

writes that finding her friend at the airport was like finding “a needle in a haystack,” I immediately understand the soundness of what she is saying. She offers a coherent image, and the image leaves little doubt as to whether or not she had a tough time finding her friend. What I think Lunsford and Connors are pointing out is that the cliché, by its very nature of being a commonplace image or expression, is not in and of itself establishing new epistemic grounds, so the reader does not gain a bundle of new truth when the reader encounters a cliché. The cliché does not initiate paradigm shifts; rather, the cliché verifies that one belongs to an existing paradigm, an operating discourse. As Troyka states, “if you have read such an expression over and over again, so has your reader.” Such recognition of a shared discourse practice is an interesting function of the cliché, not always, or necessarily, an obvious impediment to be revised immediately.

Diana Hacker’s *Rules for Writers* offers another version of a Romantic argument against clichés:

The frontiersman who first announced that he had “slept like a log” no doubt amused his companions with a fresh and unlikely comparison. Today, however, that comparison has lost its dazzle from overuse. No longer can it surprise. (145)

Hacker’s image of the frontiersman is a particularly apt one in this context. The image reminds us that the cliché is no longer on the frontier of the linguistic landscape. Because the cliché can no longer dazzle and surprise, the passage encourages a new search for fresh images, for novel experiences and expressions. Hacker’s passage reinforces a view of discourse in which the effectiveness of expressive language is measured against its ability to surprise, and her position calls to mind an underlying aesthetic imperative to create anew constantly.

In *The Little, Brown Compact Handbook*, Jane Aaron advises that “clichés may slide into your drafts while you are trying to find the words for your meaning. To edit clichés, listen to your writing for any expressions that you have heard or used before” and “substitute fresh words of your own” (79). The assumption in the passage is that the cliché cannot be the right words for “your [the writer’s] meaning.” If a writer says that the wind is howling, for example, Aaron’s implication is that the writer does not really mean that the wind is howling, a cliché, but maybe that the wind is making another kind of noise more specific to the writer’s own expression. The clichés’ meaning cannot be the meaning of the individual on this model, and Aaron challenges writers to find meaning in a place other than a commonplace expression.

Yet, we have heard a howling wind, and unless the wind is playing some kind of major role in the essay in which the cliché is used, it seems odd to see such a cliché and conclude that the writer has not yet found

his or her meaning in the phrase. Returning for a moment to the *College Writer's Reference*, the handbook that offered the historical note about clichés, this very image of the howling wind is used as an example of a cliché that should be re-written, and the revision is that the wind did not howl but rather “keened as though it had lost a child” (124). In some cases, the idea of this kind of revision seems disruptive. Unless the revision of the howling wind reinforces a particular theme in a given essay, we might be better off at times to leave the howling wind alone, to appreciate the idea that the writer has heard the same kind of wind we have heard.

Another thought-provoking aspect of Aaron's treatment of clichés involves quotation marks: “Quotation marks will not excuse slang or a trite expression” (194). Like Aaron (I assume), I have received papers in which students have put quotation marks around things like “the domino effect” and “throwing stones while living in a glass house.” In the first example, I think my student imagined that the domino effect is a technical term, and maybe it is in some contexts, but the second example is a clear case of trying to cite common sense, “*sensus communis*” in Giambattista Vico's meaning of the phrase. Although Aaron is right to point out that quotation marks are unnecessary, I am less inclined to believe that the expression about throwing stones is automatically in need of revision, even though the expression is over-used and unoriginal. A student used a less than dazzling expression, but the tendency behind using clichés, in general, has less to do with surprising the audience with originality and more to do with seeking connection with that audience. The throwing stones expression is a clear example of seeking connection with an audience by appealing to a good maxim in common sense (recalling the distinction between good sense and common sense). Less instructive clichés such as “the book of nature” and “quiet as a mouse” also, and quite importantly, invite the audience to participate in and to be reminded of shared practices in a culture's discourse.

Like the other sections about clichés in handbooks, these sections in *The Everyday Writer*, *Rules for Writers*, and *The Little, Brown Compact Handbook* are philosophically based arguments involving how the audience ought to respond to clichés. Handbooks are sermonistic, and the values inscribed by viewing writing as the search for constantly new expressions, as an activity aimed at surprise and dazzle, and as an activity of a solitary mind looking for solitary meaning, solipsism, lead to an automatic devaluation of the cliché. Given the format of the writing handbook, our students are tempted to believe that the sections on clichés are simply descriptive. We need to encourage our students to understand that these advice sections are inventive, and this invention is often achieved under the design of neutral description. Lester Faigley examines the theoretical and pedagogical undercurrents of certain

composition textbooks that shape views of the writing subject through a seemingly natural conception of the self largely indebted to Cartesian rationalism (156-62). In the case of sections on clichés in writing handbooks, the conception of the Romantic genius producing ingenious images is the predominant model of the writer.

Clichés and Social Class

The Romantic genius, marked by the ingenious image, devalues the cliché in an effort to convey a particular philosophy of writing, which includes Romantic ideas regarding the ownership of discourse. As Martha Woodmansee and Peter Jaszi have described, the issue of property rights and composition took a dramatic turn in the latter half of eighteenth-century Germany, a time when a group of legalist, poets, scholars, and publishers set out to allocate ownership to original discourse. "Ownership" of a text was deemed "contingent upon a work's originality," and originality depended upon the genius of the originating source, the author (770). The author could attain "exclusive rights to a text," as Woodmansee establishes in an earlier article, if the work is "an intellectual creation which owes in its individuality solely and exclusively him [the author]" (445). From this standpoint of ascribing ownership to original discourse, the cliché poses a substantial problem. The writer's dependence upon a cliché, upon an over-determined phrase, calls into question whether or not the text "owes in its individuality solely and exclusively" the author, and so for powerful economic reasons involving claims to ownership of a text, Romantic writing philosophy, by design, devalues the cliché. Among others, William Wordsworth became an advocate in England of this philosophical and legal correlation between a Romantic notion of genius and the author's right to ownership of discourse.

Moreover, Romantic notions of genius are often linked to a distinctive understanding of class. Several of the models discussed by Woodmansee and Jaszi associate genius with social standing, or with pedigree, and this association reinforces the authority of a select group. In addition to creating an anxiety of authorship, the cliché's appearance in a text generates an anxiety of class for the Romantic writer. While the use of original, exclusive, and/or rarified expressions verifies a degree of cultivation, the use of a cliché signals the exact opposite, a lack of cultivation and exclusivity. As an over-determined expression, the cliché is a mark of commonplace, which in turn threatens the author's social status.

The connection between clichés and class anxiety is not a new one in composition theory. Charles Suhor points out that clichés are regarded as "linguistic gaucherie, used mainly by the subarticulate" and "other patrons of or participants in middle- and low-brow culture" (159). Suhor does not discuss in detail the imperative devaluing the

cliché through an association with “middle and low-brow culture,” and although he calls for a re-assessment of clichés, his re-assessment focuses upon a stratified understanding of clichés involving the specialized commonplace phrases of academic discourses, among other professional discourses. We should distinguish between a specialized cliché that requires study in economics to appreciate and a more general understanding of the cliché as an over-determined expression in the context of ordinary discourse; the latter is the sort of cliché addressed by this essay and by college writing handbooks such as Hacker’s, or Lunsford and Connors’.

In Stephen Reid’s *The Prentice Hall Guide for College Writers*, third edition, we see another warning about clichés, but more explicitly than other writing guides, Reid’s text confirms that the anxiety toward clichés continues to be, in part, an anxiety about class. Like most guides, this one offers a list of clichés such as “hit the nail on the head,” “dead of night,” and “needle in a haystack” (627). Commenting upon the list, Reid indicates that “the phrases in the left-hand column” were “fresh and original once, but now they are as stale as dirty dishwater and about as exciting as a secondhand sock” (627). By analogy, the cliché is to language as the second hand sock is to fashion, or as the secondhand sock is to the marketplace broadly defined. The analogy is obviously intended to be unflattering, but more specifically, it is unflattering for economic reasons. The second hand sock reminds us that the cliché is not a mark of cultivation in discourse.

Regarding the other analogy in Reid’s passage, the analogy between clichés and dirty dishwater, we can imagine everyday labor in the marketplace as cliché. When the authors of *The College Writer’s Reference* remind us that the cliché is “something ordinary, run-of-the-mill,” they call to mind everyday labor, activities of mill workers, just as directly as Reid’s analogy involving doing the dishes. Given that Reid associates the cliché with commonplace commodities and everyday labor, avoiding the cliché becomes a part of a larger etiquette of differentiating the valuable author, marked by the valuable image, from the less than valuable apparel of everyday life. Avoiding the cliché becomes a part of the writer’s propriety. The serious implication is that the same philosophical and pedagogical imperative that devalues a cliché in discourse for being ordinary and unoriginal also devalues the importance of everyday practice in a very broad sense, including everyday work in the marketplace.

The teaching tip in the margins of the annotated teacher’s edition of Reid’s text further clarifies and advances the advice about clichés:

Novice writers often think that their clichés are vivid and expressive, while readers find them childish and insulting. Avoiding clichés is a matter not of error but of etiquette. Teaching writers about clichés helps them learn about audience analysis and audience expectations. (627)

As a teacher and a reader, I do not find the clichés in my students' essays to be childish and insulting breaches of etiquette, an especially strong complaint against the cliché. What, specifically, bothers the audience in question? The audience, expecting surprising language, hears something ordinary. The audience's aesthetic passions are offended. When we keep in mind the earlier images of dirty dishwater and the second-hand sock, it seems that the audience's economic sensibilities are also insulted by the cliché. Additionally, what makes the audience think of childish behavior? The image of the child indicates that the writer using a cliché appears undisciplined in proper writing etiquette, which is another way of saying that the writer using a cliché, in this case, transgresses a particular writing philosophy.

The issue of etiquette, in general, should prompt discussion about who controls and normalizes the rules of proper etiquette. Thomas Sheridan taught British *belles lettres* to his Irish students so that they would develop a more refined sense of etiquette in discourse, which meant, among other things, that they would be able to appropriate the language habits of the British upper-classes. Reid's writing guide is an especially clear example of an appeal to a kind of social cultivation as a rational behind avoiding clichés. When Reid says that avoiding clichés is not a "matter not of error but of etiquette," the etiquette in question has to do with marking the author's social claims to be a Romantic genius. From an economic standpoint, this mark is especially important, as has already been established, because the ingenious image distinguishes the writer's claims of self-originating meaning and ownership of that meaning.

The provocative intersection between Romanticism and the invisible hand of market capitalism makes the Romantic attitude toward the cliché a noticeable departure from earlier notions of common expressions. The cliché directly threatens the economic idea of sole authorship and ownership of meaning in a way that was not possible prior to the legal, economic, and aesthetic cooperations that lead to Romantic laws of texts. I do not want to imply, however, that the cliché was seen as a literary achievement prior to Romanticism, because it was not.⁴ But with Romanticism comes the aesthetically and economically motivated idea that the original expression is, in fact, original meaning or knowledge, meaning that was never thought or owned before. Meaning itself becomes a private property of sorts. Returning to Jane Aaron's handbook for a moment, Aaron emphasizes that "you" must revise clichés in order to find "your meaning." Aaron's suggestion is that the revision of a commonplace phrase into a unique expression secures authorship of the very meaning. Meaning has its true origins in the private mind of the writer, an idea that has been challenged often.⁵ Part of the Romantic nervousness toward the cliché involves the idea that the cliché's meaning, because it has become overdetermined, can no longer be ascribed to a private, singular writer.⁶

In the case of Romantic philosophy, we arrive at a view of history and society marked by the occasional maverick, an Ozymandias, or a maverick idea in the Hegelian sense that moves the world.⁷ The cliché has very little place in Romantic pedagogy, history, etc., because everyday practice in general has very little place in Romantic philosophy. Predating Marx's systematic and mechanistic critiques of Romantic history, we might recall Kierkegaard's more existential criticisms of the established order of Hegelianism, and its manifestation in Denmark's churches, for neglecting Christ's relationships with "the workers, the manual laborers, the cement mixers" (58). As writing teachers, we are challenged to tell a more complex story about history and society that recasts in a more participatory fashion run-of-the-mill phrases, sites, and labors. Such a suggestion leads to an unromantic view of history and culture. Such a focus, however, allows questions about who sticks out like sore thumbs in certain contexts, and why, to become visible and important questions for writers and readers who seek an understanding of the broader contexts involved in the reading, writing, and/or teaching of texts.

Connective Pathos

In a recent collection of second year composition papers, I came across several clichés, including "draw the line," "ride the fence," "crystal clear," "the last straw," and "the sands of time." None of these clichés was particularly insulting, and none was particularly striking, for that matter. All of these clichés generate discursive substratum, places that remind us of shared activities in a culture's discourse. When thinking about whether or not to delete the occasional cliché, we might ask our students to consider the nature and context of the connective pathos created by such discourse.⁸

Connection can be a good thing or a bad thing. Someone could compile a list of sexist clichés that obviously creates a destructive bond, a negative connective pathos. Along similar lines, Burke understood the destructive possibilities that accompany identification, especially as it related to fascist regimes. Unreflective connection, or identification, could lead to a dangerous and undesirable group mentality that the writer should oppose at every turn, and this is a key reason why a sensitivity toward the pathos created by clichés is important. The more sensitive we are to the connective energy generated by commonplace expressions, the better able we are as theorists and educators to focus such energy toward positive personal and social ends.⁹

Additionally, discourse that creates connection with others also must be examined for its ability to create difference from others. ESL students, for example, do not recognize some clichés. As Olson has pointed out as well, many students do not identify "generational clichés,"

phrases that are familiar to teachers but unfamiliar to many students, and vice versa. Olson's conception of the generational cliché complicates any effort to argue for a universal or systematic connection via the cliché, an argument I am not making. In general, the inability to recognize clichés reveals differences, interesting differences, that should be talked about openly in the classroom, but ESL students, for example, have a sense of what clichés do in their first languages, and have a sense of how clichés represent commonplaces in their cultures.¹⁰ The differences revealed by an ESL student's interaction with clichés become a great opportunity for sophisticated class discussion about how discourse functions, how substratums invoke connection and dissociation, and how our students might be conscious of and sensitive to these issues of similarity and difference in their own writing.

From a Romantic pedagogical standpoint, the cliché remains a villain in discourse. When using strategies to generate new epistemic grounds in writing courses, the cliché is not usually the most useful kind of language. With a focus upon the dynamic between the writer and cultural context, and with an interest in how writers and readers establish connective energy, the cliché's function takes on more complex dimensions, and the idea of valuing an occasional cliché is more tenable. Rather than defining the cliché as an over-used, worn-out, trite expression that should be revised immediately, we might define the cliché as a commonplace figurative expression that secures an immediate connection with other participants in the ordinary discourse of a culture. Such a definition does not applaud the cliché, but at the same time, this definition does not instantly assign negative connotations to the cliché.

As a discipline, we need to evaluate carefully the philosophical undertones and cultural implications of writing handbooks, which contain influential and practical manifestations of composition theories and pedagogies. We should take the opportunity in our classrooms to investigate with our students the theoretical dimensions in any given text, and sections on clichés in writing handbooks are complex places to explore. Topics for productive dialogue include the dynamic between the writer and the culture at large, social class and composition, property rights in discourse, and the ethical functions of language.

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Notes

¹ From Richard Young's criticism that Romanticism obfuscates heuristics ("Concepts of Art and the Teaching of Writing") to James Berlin's broader concerns about the cultural undertones in Romantic pedagogy, a wide range of critiques of Romantic writing pedagogy exists.

² Olson clarifies further this implication of mass literacy contained in the definition of the cliché when he notes, "the word referred to the early industrial process of making impressions of book illuminations," and "while an illustration lost its meaning as an original work of art, it gained in functionality by becoming available to thousands of readers" (115). The availability of texts to "thousands of readers," composition theorists might recall, becomes for Jürgen Habermas a key element in his conception of "the public sphere." Walter Benjamin's arguments about how some art forms change when they become more readily accessible are also relevant ("The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"). The tension between exclusivity and accessibility remains as an interesting part of the clichés' air.

³ On the topic of ethics, Nietzsche believed that the genius should not be held to ordinary standards.

⁴ We might remember Alexander Pope's well known praise of a witty remark as something that "oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed" (*An Essay on Criticism* 1: 298). Built into Pope's comment is a critical distinction between expressing something ingeniously and creating original truth and meaning *ex nihilo*, or out of a private faculty in consciousness. This private creation of meaning is emphasized in various forms of Romanticism.

⁵ For example, in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein argues famously against the possibility of a "private language" (92-4). Wittgenstein's argument is a precursor to subsequent critiques of the notion of private meaning in discourse, such as Michel Foucault's view of textuality in "The Discourse on Language."

⁶ As Patricia Harkin's analysis of the over-determined nature of lore suggests, part of the allure of commonplace lores involves the inability of individuals, institutions, and disciplines to control them ("The Postdisciplinary Politics of Lore").

⁷ In Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem "Ozymandias," a traveler encounters the remnant of a great statue that has as its ironic inscription, "look upon my works, ye mighty, and despair." A second irony in the poem involves Ozymandias's claim to ownership of the works.

⁸ Theorists may also need to address George Orwell's advice to "never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech" that one is "used to seeing in print" (350). Underlying Orwell's influential admonition against clichés are reasonable concerns about totalitarian slogans and about the sort of frustrations created if writers use too many clichés, which is why we need to ask our students to talk about how clichés function in their writing. Orwell's main argument that people use clichés because ready made phrases "save people the trouble of inventing phrases for themselves" (340), however, over-simplifies the issue by not taking into account the ways in which clichés are used consciously to generate connective paths.

⁹ Given Deborah Tannen's work on how women and men establish connections in conversation, research on the relationship between clichés and gender would be interesting.

¹⁰ In a master's thesis at Iowa State University, *An Investigation of the Role of Set Phrases in the Chinese Rhetorical Art*, Hongjie Wang argues that Chinese students, because of cultural differences, do not have the same negative attitudes toward clichés that American students have.

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