

Avoiding Clichés

Some common phrases used in everyday speech and less formal writing do not belong in academic writing. Such phrases are often hyperbolized (i.e., exaggerated), too casual, and so commonplace that most readers glance over them. While some clichés are idioms, whose figurative meaning differs from the literal definition, other clichés have become stale because their original meaning has been forgotten or dulled through overuse. Have you frequently heard the phrase you want to use in casual conversation, newscasts, and advertising? If so, it is probably a cliché.

How do clichés weaken your written work?

- Clichés make you seem lazy: Emphasis in academic writing should be on original thought, and clichés are the antithesis of originality.
- Clichés are vague: They can obscure well-developed ideas by serving as placeholders for a more sophisticated discussion. Specific details and explanations make better evidence than generalizations and banal phrases.
- Clichés make readers question your credibility: Your reader will not trust you as an authoritative source because clichés are poor substitutes for actual evidence.
- Clichés are often steeped in cultural meaning and can, therefore, confuse people not native to the culture.

Examples of clichés to avoid in academic writing

Cliché	Alternatives
at the end of the day	ultimately
this day and age	currently, presently
since the dawn of time	for centuries (or narrow your time frame)
from time immemorial	for centuries (or narrow your time frame)
avoid it like the plague	to eschew
in the same boat	similarly
nip it in the bud	to be proactive, to quell
leaps and bounds	great progress, marked improvement

leave no stone unturned	relentless pursuit
last but not least	finally
bring to the table	to offer
uphill battle	a struggle or challenge

Avoiding clichés in introductory paragraphs

An introduction that makes broad, sweeping statements about the relevance of a given topic “since the dawn of man” and “throughout human history” is usually too general and fails to connect to the thesis of an essay. Instructors often find such clichés annoying. Instead of writing “throughout history” as your introductory line, stop and ask yourself, “When? In what era? Where? Who were the prominent historical figures of that time?” The answers to these questions will give you a more focused opening line that narrows your paper’s scope to a certain country or society rather than the entire world. Compare the examples below of the opening line from a paper about papal history. Adding more historical details to the second version strengthens the statement and sounds more authoritative.

Generic	“Throughout history, only two popes have resigned.” ¹
More precise	“In what represented a nearly unprecedented departure from papal tradition, Pope Benedict XVI became the second pope to resign in 2013.” ¹

If, however, you are writing about a recent issue, your audience likely does not need a complete historical background to understand your viewpoint. Lastly, give yourself plenty of time to proofread your paper so you can spot clichés and replace them with more precise wording.

Material quoted from:

¹The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

References:

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