

Clichés and Other Stressful Components of Writing

Katherine Peterson

From reading and writing fiction, Peterson has observed the negative connotation that surround clichés in different genres. Here, she discusses the mistakes and assumptions she made in her initial research into clichés and how it affected the way that earlier drafts of this article were received by *Grassroots* editors. Through an analysis of what the definition of a cliché really is, the article explains how a cliché's acceptance is strongly associated with genre, audience, and socialization.

Defining the Cliché

To me, clichés are like that concept that your professor talks about in class and you're like, "Oh, that makes sense. I get that." . . . but then when the time comes for the test, there's a question about that concept, and suddenly you realize that you really don't understand how it works. I thought that I had a strong grasp on clichés when I started writing this article, and, sure, the process of writing it improved my grasp, but here we are nine drafts later, and I'm still discovering how complex clichés are. For one, everyone has different definitions of clichés. There are a few reasons for this, which I'll get to later, but let me begin with what I knew (*or thought I knew*) about clichés going into the article.

Before the Article

"Cliché" is a commonly used word in the realm of writing fiction, especially when referring to plot clichés. An example would be when the heroine in a story is helpless and is always in need of being saved by the male lead. I will

not be getting into those types, but rather focusing on the types of clichés that are short phrases such as “plain as day,” “like a kid in a candy store,” and “it’s not brain surgery (or rocket science).” Thus when I use the word “cliché,” that is what I am referring to. These are also a common topic in fiction.

When I picked up the craft of writing fiction, I was disgusted with my basic two-dimensional descriptions and wanted to make them sound better. I found myself slipping in descriptions that can be found in seemingly every other novel (something “fading into nothingness,” “time passing in a blur,” “wreak havoc,” “balmy air,”—any of these sound familiar?). I wanted to describe things in ways that no one had before, and I wasn’t quite sure how.

Many articles and books warn aspiring writers to avoid using clichés because of how overused they have become. When I was a novice writer in my early teens, I would eat these texts up like they were writing gospel. However, I tend to question sweeping advice that includes words like “never” or “always.” These books would say to *never* use clichés, but I constantly wondered if it ever was okay to use clichés, and, if so, when they could be used.

Early Drafts of This Article

When I got the assignment to write a *Grassroots* article for my English 101 class, I decided that my topic would be clichés and that I would look at them more in-depth through reception. According to CHAT, **reception** is people’s reactions to the text and what they might do when or after they read it. I chose to look at reception partly because I thought people’s reaction could be the easiest to test, and because people’s reactions to clichés is a part of what makes them cliché. To test this component, I composed a survey that had sets of passages from various genres. Each passage set contained the passage utilizing a cliché, and one with an alternative phrasing.

My survey-takers were asked to indicate which passage better fulfilled their purpose for reading the genre it was written in. The reason I asked this was because there is almost always some sort of purpose as to why someone reads a text, whether it’s for entertainment or for school, so asking what someone’s purpose for reading something is ties into reception and how they take that text up. I thought that asking if the cliché affected their purpose for reading the text would be more insightful than asking if the cliché made the text sound “better” or “worse” because depending on their purpose for reading, they may not even be paying that much attention to wording.

Admittedly, there were some flaws with this survey. My passages were on the shorter side, and my panel of survey-takers was also on the small and

narrow side. I had asked ten undergraduate students my age, eight of which attended Illinois State, to take it. All in all, I ended up with four responses. My panel could have been larger and had more variety of backgrounds represented. I also could have come up with better alternative phrasing for the passages. For example, in a passage that used the cliché “going forward,” my substitute phrase was “in the future.” I realized that my alternative didn’t have the same sense of immediacy that “going forward” conveyed and a better equivalent could have been “from now on.” Also, while I never eluded to the survey being about clichés, it was probably easy for my survey-takers to figure out the general idea of what my survey was about, which may have created a bias in their responses as well. However, the editors of *Grassroots* found an even larger flaw with my survey: *they didn’t consider the clichés that I was using to be clichés.* This is kind of a major problem when your entire article is about clichés.

How I Got to My Definition of Clichés

When I started my research, I believed that any written phrase could be considered a cliché if it had been written countless times to the point where the audience recognizes it. This definition encompasses a lot of things, such as idioms, figures of speech, proverbs, or just about any familiar string of words. I came across all of these types of phrases within the online lists and books of clichés I looked through for my research. There was some overlapping of phrases between lists, but most of them varied greatly from each other. This made me wonder which sources were right in what they call clichés and which were wrong.

What I found, even in this early stage, was that what one person may consider a cliché may be completely unfamiliar to another person and thus not be seen as a cliché in his/her eyes. For example, in those first few drafts, I referred to the phrase “well-manicured lawn” as a cliché. It was one that I was familiar with because I’d seen it used in a lot of fiction books. A friend that I had look over the draft, though, said that she’d never heard of the phrase and did not consider it cliché. I believed that in this sense, anything that someone calls a cliché could be considered a cliché. Thus, when I was writing my article, I kept my definition of the word open and decided to label any familiar stringing of words as cliché, even if it could possibly overlap into another category of phrases, such as idioms and figures of speech.

However, there was one source that really stood out to me. It was a book. This book was not like the other sources I had gone through, which mostly just had a list of what the author thought to be clichés and what they meant. The book I chose went into more detail than that. In 2014, Orin

Hargraves wrote *It's Been Said Before* which lists out some of the most common phrases in the English language. Along with each phrase is a ranking of just how common they are on a scale from one to five. Hargraves has a very specific definition of cliché; to him, it is a phrase that is overused to the point of misuse. He makes a distinction between clichés and idioms in that even though idioms are also used all of the time, they are still effective because they paint a clear picture of the message that is being conveyed and cannot be substituted (8). Clichés, on the other hand, are typically not used in an appropriate context and are used way too many times so people grow tired of them quickly. Hargraves compares this process to using tools: “A tool used for the wrong purpose will be much more likely to show signs of wear than one used properly” (7). If you have a specific phrase in your “writing toolbox,” but use it in the wrong contexts, the result will be poor writing and a phrase becomes worn out too quickly.

I had done all this research and had a definition that was more nuanced than mine (clichés aren't just something that's used all the time; they're used inappropriately), and yet the *Grassroots* editors *still* didn't think the phrases I was using were clichés.

Drafts 7 and 8

Since it was the editors of the *Grassroots* journal that really didn't agree with my definition of clichés or the clichés that I used, I decided to interview four of them to get a better idea of what they thought about clichés. Editor 2 agreed that some of the phrases that Hargraves included in his book were clichés but noted that most were not, and said that was because of how he collected them. I thought that being a linguist made his research and his explanations more credible in his definition of clichés; however, the phrases that he included in his book were collected solely based on their quantities in the human language with no other deciding factor. Editor 1 explained that as literary scholars, she and some of the other editors looked at and defined clichés differently than linguists. However, not all of the editors at the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* are literary scholars, so some may have even different perspectives about clichés. And, according to some schools of thought, Hargraves' book may have actually been wrongly titled. When I spoke with Editor 4, who majored in English linguistics, she called Hargraves a lexicographer. Lexicography, by the way, is a part of linguistics, but it has a focus on writing dictionaries and making lists in general (Lew 5). This editor explained that lexicographers look at a text and then make their lists, while literary scholars analyze the text and assess its relationship with other factors. And, rhetoric and composition scholars look at a text in a completely different

way by considering the ways the words create effects. CHAT is an example of one of the ways they analyze a text because it involves breaking down the text and looking closely at seven components of it as a way to learn more about it. A simpler approach to explaining these differences in analyses is that lexicographers consider text with a top down thinking, while literary scholars look at it from bottom up thinking. With top down thinking, lexicographers draw conclusions about a text first, such as “‘going forward’ is used a lot in the English language” and then find a reason to explain it, such as “‘going forward’ must be a cliché.”

Editors 1 and 2 agreed that the phrases I chose were not clichés. Hargraves made an interesting point about analogizing phrases to tools and so perhaps there are ways to misuse the phrases in his book, but not to the point where they could be clichés. Some of the examples that Editor 2 came up with were “only time will tell,” “all’s well that ends well,” and “a dime a dozen,” none of which were mentioned by Hargraves. To her, Hargraves’ examples of clichés were necessary transitions for writing. They could maybe be overused within one piece of writing if the writer uses the same three transitions, but across an entire genre, they are more *conventions* than clichés. Editor 2, who described herself as more of a reader than a writer, explained that her examples of phrases were ones that she had seen too many times in reading for them to mean anything to her.

Editors 1 and 2 also did not consider idioms to be cliché. However, the two are both structured as phrases and sometimes clichés too require some explanation in order to be understood. Since they look the same, analyzing the context of how and at what frequency different phrases are found to be used could lead overused expressions to be considered cliché. This sense of overuse would be determined by socialization. **Socialization**, another CHAT component, refers to how interactions with a genre occur and how that reflects upon societal and cultural norms. Clichés and idioms all have their own personal histories that resulted in them entering common use. Over time though, clichés grow to be considered overused and may even evoke an emotion of disgust when noticed. This idea of disgust was something new to my definition. Disgust or annoyance is something that the reader develops on his or her own and can be a cause of the discretion that can occur when determining whether a phrase is a cliché. Basically people can develop different opinions of what phrases irritate them depending on their own backgrounds. It can also explain why the authors of some cliché dictionaries incorporate idioms into them—they personally find the idiom irritating and overused.

While the phrases the editors came up with could be found as cliché in most genres, there are also some clichés out there that are genre-specific.

Editor 2 was quick to pick out “in conclusion” to be cliché when used in a student’s essay. However, if “in conclusion” were to be used at the end of a story, it may not be cliché because a story’s general convention is not to end with “in conclusion.” If the story was written in a specific tone where “in conclusion” would fit to perhaps describe the story’s resolution, it may not extract that same feeling of being overused because it’s being found in a genre that is different from where “in conclusion” would normally be placed.

I realized that Hargraves had such a different definition than what these editors were saying because of his background. What’s more, I was beginning to see that clichés depend on the context around them. They’re not a fixed thing. Whether or not a phrase is a cliché is relative to the person and to the context in which one finds them in.

Socializing the Cliché – Conventions vs. Cliché

The people who have the power to determine whether or not a genre-specific phrase is cliché are the people who interact with that genre the most—mainly its audience and its producers. A genre’s audience are the ones who firsthand recognize the clichés, but unless they communicate with producers of the genre or become producers themselves, clichés may never be eliminated from the genre. The producers of a text are the ones with the power to decide whether or not to use a cliché, so they have the responsibility to be aware of what is cliché for the genre that they are writing in. In most cases, the producer of a text will have read enough of that genre in order to make genre-appropriate choices. For example, authors don’t tend to write novels without ever having read a novel before. But, in the case of a school essay, teachers have read far more essays than the students writing them have, so the teachers have a better idea of what overly-formulaic transitional phrases besides “in conclusion” are cliché. When an audience member becomes a producer of a text belonging to that genre, they may have more familiarity with the genre and have a better idea of how to write it in a way that’s not clichéd. However, as anyone trying to write in a genre that is new to them can relate, it’s hard for writers new to a genre to avoid clichés even if they know they’re cliché because it’s hard to come up with something different that fits into this new genre. This was the problem that I was running into when I began writing fiction. I was trying to fit into the genres I was reading (following the conventions), but instead I was being redundant (and falling into clichés). Now, I’d like to say that I’m better at selecting word choice, but it still sometimes becomes a problem for me. With how easy it has become to publish and critique work online, though, it has also become easier for audience members to communicate to producers of a text about what they found to be cliché—and, by using the right resources,

new genre writers can fall out of the habit of using clichés in a way that is a detriment to their writing.

Editor 3 and I discussed the implications of genres that may not have clichés. These genres have very specific standards regarding how the content should be formatted and have little room for personal expression. All genres have certain conventions that need to be followed to be recognizable as that genre. These conventions require that a product of a certain genre follow a certain format and, in word-based genres, have certain phrasing to be considered a product of the genre. For example, at the bare minimum, the cover of a novel will have its title and then the author's name. There can also be other things too, such as some flavor text hinting at what the book is about, a quote from a review, and often the words "a novel" floating around there, too. Even though the words "a novel" are no stranger to a novel cover, it is never questioned as cliché but merely a convention of the genre. When the book is opened, the reader may encounter a variety of components. There is the point of view, the organization of the story, the style of the writing. All of these change from book to book but the fact that they are present in all novels show that they are also conventions of the genre. Within each convention, though, are ways that a novel can become cliché. For example, the presence of artwork on the cover of a novel would not be cliché, but rather a convention, since most novels have artwork on their covers. If the novel was a horror novel, though, and the cover presented some dark shadow on the cover, then this might be considered cliché since a lot of horror novels feature dark shadows on their covers. My thought is that what pieces make up a genre could be considered convention, but how those pieces are presented is how it might become cliché.

However, there are some genres where the content should rigidly follow the same organization and style, and there is only one suggested way for how to produce the genre. For example, Editor 3 explained about her job as an auditor and the formal language that she is supposed to use when documenting what she does. These documents are strictly meant for technical informational purposes, so the language must be tight. Some phrases used in them may be considered cliché in similar genres where more originality is a part of the convention, such as, "in conclusion," but they are not considered to be cliché in this genre, rather simply a part of the conventions.

Another genre we talked about was the genre of a woman's figure skating performance. Though this is a genre with more expression, judges have expectations for how they want the figure skaters to perform, thus the style of their routine must conform to expectations if they want a desirable score from the judges. At one point, figure skaters were expected to have cutesy performances with light music, little hand flourishes and an overall

more playful routine. Figure skater Surya Bonaly defied this norm in the 1998 Olympics with an athletic routine set to harsher-sounding music and including tricks that were performed that displayed her strength. She also incorporated a backflip, which was illegal in figure skating. Because of this, her score was docked points. With figure skating, there were certain expectations from the judges, and the performances of a more clichéd tone with the cutesy routines were what they wanted, rather than something more creative that moved away from that. Thus, these characteristics, though cliché in comparison to other routines, became a part of the genre's conventions. Eventually, though, the conventions were adjusted when cutesy figure skating faded out, and there are now more options for how figure skaters may incorporate their moves. It has evolved into a type of performance where the dramatic is acceptable, and oftentimes, more desirable. Now that this has become a pattern, perhaps the tone of dramatic figure skating routines may eventually grow to be cliché as well, and a new type of figure skating will fill that void.

The Changing Cliché

All genres have an intended audience and exist in a specific time period, and a part of what determines whether a cliché is appropriate for a genre is how it would affect the audience's expectations. As mentioned before, the audience's reactions to phrases play a part in labeling them as clichés. With the genre of figure skating, there is the audience of the spectators, and there is the audience of the judges. These two audiences have very different reasons for watching routines—spectators watch to be entertained; judges watch to look for very specific criteria so that they can give it a proper rating. When performing with the judges in mind, a routine with a clichéd tone might be preferable as it is likely to guarantee a higher score. However, the spectators could be considered easier to please if any sort of trick excites them, which might change the type of routine used. Up until Surya Bonaly changed the tone of figure skating, spectators may not have even realized how repetitive the genre of the figure skating was. When Bonaly incorporated a backflip, it may have been to show spectators that there's more that can be done with figure skating than what they'd seen so far. What may have been happening in the figure skating genre that caused a shift in the tone of their routines is that the desire to be different and to stand out to the spectators was stronger than getting a desirable score. Thus, routines have been adjusted to be more entertaining for the spectators.

However, perhaps to someone who's new to watching figure skating, any repetitive hand flourishes or tones in the skater's body language may not pop out as cliché because identifying clichés comes with the familiarity of experiencing the genre. The same applies to clichéd phrases in writing.

If someone does not consider a phrase to be overused, they're not going to consider it a cliché. However, since clichés are so closely related with genre, unfamiliarity with a cliché may indicate unfamiliarity with the genre it is most closely linked to. One of the so-called clichés that I came across in my research was “a silver bullet,” which I had never heard of. When I did a search on the phrase, I discovered that it was because it is mainly used in the genre of scientific journalism, a genre that I do not read. What this means is that people who are new to producing texts in a certain genre should probably get some practice reading it first so that they have a better idea of how to produce it and what clichés not to use. For example, when I started this article, I felt completely comfortable with how to go about discussing my topic and establishing my tone because I had read so many *Grassroots* articles in my ENG 101 class.

The first time I had written this article, I had taken a very narrow look at clichés and was mostly analyzing how the composition of each individual phrase could make it acceptable or not acceptable in writing. I was looking a little into genre, but not enough for my findings to make a difference. As the editors began to work with me on my article, I began to expand my focus to look more into how clichés are affected by genre, but I was still under the assumption that the same phrase could be considered cliché in every genre. It was not until recently that I realized how clichés can be genre specific and how their presence is dependent on how the text is received and produced. My research has suggested that the best way to avoid clichés in writing is for writers to be well-versed in the conventions of the genre that they're writing in and aware of what possible clichéd phrases may be associated with those before they start writing.

With regards to writing research, I learned that it's best to approach a topic broadly before delving into details. This can sound like an obvious thing to do, but when I started my research, I was too eager to figure out the details and didn't stop to look at the big picture first and discover where the details exactly fit. This can be compared to painting someone's portrait and starting on the person's eyebrows before drawing the face shape and figuring out the exact location of all the other facial features. What happens is that the eyebrows may not end up looking right in the context of the rest of the picture. The details that I found on clichés when I first started writing didn't sound right because they weren't placed in the context of the entire relationship that clichés have with genre. The same phrases can't be considered cliché within every single type of word-based genre, but rather it is dependent on what the genre is *and* how they fit into that genre's overall conventions. Figuring out these broader ideas first when doing writing research saves a lot of time and can even make researching the smaller details easier.

Editor Key

Editor 1: Tharini Viswanath

Editor 2: Erika Romero

Editor 3: Laura Skokan

Editor 4: Christina Sánchez-Martín

Note: Editors are numbered by the order I interviewed them. Tharini Viswanath and Erika Romero were interviewed jointly.

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