jcannonbooks

Because everybody
needs an editor . . .

and a newsletter

Burn these clichés at both ends

At the end of the day...

...it is what it is.

Clichés are insidious and toxic. Working near them greatly increases your chance of infection, and no vaccine exists. One day you're in a crowded room without a Cliché-95 mask and the next you're describing some undeniably normal thing as iconic. We can take a simple step to protect ourselves, however. If we stop using clichés, these phrases will no longer find hosts. We don't have to argue whether clichés escaped from a lab or if they passed from animals to humans at a wet market. All we have to do is stop saying or writing them.

A few weeks ago, I invited you to send me examples of words and phrases that are overused, misused, and abused. My inbox was swamped. Some participants sent long, inventive screeds. Some of you hate the same clichés. Some people added pronunciation mistakes and pronoun errors.

I've reached two conclusions. One is that with offensive words identified, we can focus on their removal so original expression can rise unhindered. The other is that you folks are really angry.

I need not tell you, but I will anyway, that some people do not consider overworked and underperforming words to be a problem. Who cares, they say. Save your outrage for something more deserving, they advise. How should we answer? With contempt, of course, because we are the righteous and self-appointed guardians of the language. We value fresh and attractive ways to express ideas in speech and writing. We sometimes compliment those who turn an innovative phrase. The more we explore unused avenues of English, the more the language flourishes, the better we communicate.

Here are usages that should be skimmed from the language, in your opinion and that of all sensible people. The responses have been lightly edited for length, flow, and because that's what I do. I have not converted anything to or from any particular guide, such as *The Associated Press Stylebook* or *Chicago Manual of Style*, which accounts for some style inconsistencies.

Rob Hallwachs:
Shelter in place – Just say stay inside.
Eponymous – If John's restaurant is called John's BBQ Ribs, no need to tell me that it is eponymously named. But writers just love to use that word. Barf.
Residential location – Just say house or home.
Airship – Helicopter
CURATED!
(Rob demands that writing be free of clutter and distracting elements. For example, he will not read a preface or any other part of a book longer than a single word if it is set in italics. He won't read this note. –Ed.)

Terry Rodgers:
OK, can't resist listing my list of hackneyed phrases that would be better if they were hacked and kneed:

1. Using
   "surreal"
   instead
   of
   "surprising"

2. The phrase "It's all good." Sorry, but it's never all good
3. The use of "let's unpack that" instead of "let's explain"
4. Using "let's circle back" instead of "let's review that later"
5. Using "bandwidth" in place of "capacity"

I have about 100 more, but that will do for now.

Ralph Colombino:
I had a boss that was never able/willing to say "supposedly." She always said "supposably" and never appreciated my suggestion to use the proper term.

Anne Krueger:
Awesome. The Grand Canyon is awesome. The fact that I just completed an assignment is good, maybe even great, but it's not awesome. Save the word for something truly magnificent.

Maureen Armato:

Here's my hated word: physicality. It's used by sports announcers, especially basketball sportscasters.

I doubted it was a word, but it is in the dictionary. Still, it annoys me because it is used so frequently.

Pat Broderick:

Full stop, radio silence, it's all good.

You don't always know why stuff annoys you, it just does. Full stop and radio silence? What do they mean? Where do they come from? It's all good actually means the opposite. It's not all good, it's a dumpster fire! There I go again.

Jack Herrmann:

We've talked about this before, but it seems as if there is an unending supply of ways to use words in a manner that I find annoying and grating. The following sentence, I think, captures some of my current disgust:

"I am curating my true self so that I may live my best life."

And, "I appreciate you."

Ken Stone:

"There are" to begin a sentence. Rarely necessary. Write around it.

There are many things I hate about lazy news writing.

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Kathie Burge:

"The reason why."

"Why" is extraneous, no? I've looked this up and apparently it's quite acceptable. The way people love "Ulysses" perhaps. I hate it and it grates when I hear it.

"Nucular." No explanation needed.

Jake Cannon:

"Unprecedented" is my loathsome word submission. Tired of hearing it.

(Attaboy. This battle for the ages requires a multigenerational response. – Ed.)

Tom Walsh:

"No problem." It wasn't a problem before you said this. But now it is.

"Let's do lunch." The most overused phrase of the '80s.

And the worst from the business world: "Let's think outside the box."

Gag!

Jim Froberg:

My pet peeve is with the repeated misuse of the phrase "No problem!"
May I have mustard but no catsup or ketchup on my Portillo Chicago-style hotdogs?
No problem.
May I have the check so I can pay for this sumptuous Berghoff wienerschnitzel?
No problem.
And, of course, I always remain a bit mystified by servers who when presented with two Andy Jacksons to try to settle up a $25 tab inquire: "Would you like some change?" Duh or Doh?
I ain't no transcendental transaction mentalist who believes change comes from within. Exact change please or there may indeed be a problem!
I also have a problem with the overuse of "24/7."

Dan Biggins:
No problem, I'm glad to help your project.
From where I sit the usage of no problem has peaked and is in decline. Cross those fingers.
Not so for exclamation points! But they can be valuable because if used more than once you can set that piece aside and read something intended for adults.
(The previous three contributors either taught at or graduated from the same Chicago-area high school. Something in the water maybe? No problem! –Ed.)

Jule Bishop:
"Super" as anything other than slang for a building caretaker [I cringe].
"Irregardless," no comment needed, it is what it is.

Bill Stanton:
"Unbelievable," for so much. Really? Believe it.
"Absolutely, POSITIVELY prohibited." What can be "positive" about a prohibition?
"Amazing," for everything. Only possibly true and accurate if you've lived under a rock for years.

Mike Burge:

I can't believe you shared[0] such an incredible[00] email. It was just amazing[000], even awesome[0000]. It was so impactful[00000] and had such an impact[000000] on my life.
[0] Do I have to give it back now?
[00] I believed every word, so I don't know why I said this.
[000] So what if I'm easily impressed?
[0000] Like a total eclipse. Of intelligence.

⁰⁰⁰⁰⁰ I can hear Asteroid XYZ321 screaming through the atmosphere …
⁰⁰⁰⁰⁰⁰ I'm dead now, and my suffering is finally over.

As you asked for these, you have no one to blame but yourself.

I read recently that someone was a "supermodel." If a supermodel leaves her cape at home, does she get busted down to a mere model? What makes a supermodel super? Seems a bit cheeky.

And later I read that someone was "legally blind." How can someone be illegally blind? By impersonating a blind person? Being blind drunk? What's the penalty for being illegally blind? Someone should clear this up.

Karen Kucher:
I especially like iconic words.
(Karen invented sarcasm –Ed.)

Linda Cannon:
Woke!!!!! (The use of multiple exclamation points is required.) Does anyone really know what it means? You could ask 20 people on the street. Half of them would shrug their shoulders and the other half would offer 10 different definitions.

Name withheld by agreement with jcannonbooks, which can confirm that this person retired from a career in a Midwestern library system:
When I worked, we actually had a bingo game we secretly played at meetings, among the initiated, to identify and make fun of jargon in all its ugly forms. We had a board and all, although I don't remember actually winning anything. The boxes held such terms as best practices, end of the day (!), return on investment (really? In a library?), intelligent design (is there an ignorant design?), due diligence (again, in a library?), on-boarding (what is wrong with orientation?), in another life (really? Do you mean your last job?). I destroyed the game board when I retired knowing I would never put up with such a meeting again. Too bad, it would have worked for your article.
A pet peeve that may or may not fit is the current use of the age categories Boomers, Gen X, Gen Z, millennials, and whatever! Clear speech would indicate the speaker should merely say, "Individuals in the age group ___." I know what Boomers are, but I cannot keep the others straight. Maybe because, very deeply, I don't care.
I end with the worst example that I used to see in my job and now I see in the news: Majority minority. What the hell?

Jerry Kolins:
Here is my cliché list of the standard language one is required to use as a hospital administrator. I escaped this ordeal when I returned to the lab in 2019. In quotation marks are short sentences or phrases that are standard operating

language required of the executive.

"Just connect the dots." We'll "drill down" and "grab the low-hanging fruit." Grab that fruit, squeeze it, ferment it and "drink the Kool-Aid." Once "we empower our staff" then "we can take the lead on this." If we "get buy-in," we will surely "move the needle and position ourselves to celebrate our successes."

"Are you tracking?"

I am asking you to "peel back that onion."

"Herd those cats."

And, at the end of the day, when we are all on the same page, we will hold hands and sing Kumbaya.

There are some phrases that are entertaining the first time you hear them. But every day, day after day, is cruel and unusual punishment.

(Jerry also related his sister's tale of a bingo game similar to what Anonymous described above. –Ed.)

Toni Nessi:

I hate when people post messages that say:

Italians be like...(fill in the blank)

Chicagoans be like...

I want to blow my brains out when I read that.

Lorie Hearn:

Between a rock and a hard place — just yuck.

First and foremost — way overused and sounds pompous.

Indeed — just yuck and pointless.

Another one that is sometimes unavoidable but just as crazy-making: It's not clear or it's unclear. Not clear to whom? To the writer or to the world? As in, it's not clear how many people were injured. Why can't you just say so-and-so (named person) said they have not been able to provide an accurate number of the injured. It's more words but it's more accurate.

Gina Lubrano:

I may be alone in this, but what bugs me is reading and hearing reporters say they "reached out" to a source. It brings to mind a vivid image of a long, long arm, reaching out, out, out to touch someone. Why couldn't the person simply be asked or telephoned or contacted?

This is not what you're looking for but the other thing that leaves me screaming internally is the misuse of pronouns "I" and "me." He did not give the book to John and I. He gave the book to me. Sigh.

Katie Nelson:

"Déjà vu all over again" drives Don crazy. ***(Katie refers here to her husband, Don, and I am glad they spend time together identifying objectionable***

phrases. It's one of the secrets of a strong marriage. –Ed.)
"These ones" or "those ones" drives me crazy.
Not using adverbs correctly (drives us both crazy). As in "he ran slow." You hear this on TV and read this all the time.
(Katie filed this follow-up before deadline –Ed.) We are amazed we forgot about amazing when pointing out a pet peeve! Also not thrilled about "let's unpack that" when referring to explaining something, not the task you do when you return home from a trip.

Mike McBride:
Good chance this is not what you are seeking, but being retired I'm already a burden to society so I'll submit it anyway:
The phrase "the American people." The words themselves are just dandy but allow a politician to use them, as you often hear, you get one person speaking for all of us regardless of what comes out of his or her mouth, i.e., politician #1, "The American people love cats and want one in every house," and politician #2, "The American people want all cats run out of the country."
(Useless sidenote: We shouldn't run all cats out of the country. Maybe keep one or two in zoos.)

Luann Zanzola:
Okay, John, you may be sorry you even asked:
ecosystem
robust
input
optimize
elucidate
intentional
illuminating
deliberative
de-risk
overarching
via
These are all words I encountered WAY too many times in a recent editing project, in which my duties included eliminating jargon. Oy!
And here's a sentence that makes me roll my eyes:
"Now that's great question."
This has become a standard preface to almost EVERY response to any reporter's question.
It makes me disregard almost every response that follows.
Please discourage this phrase!

Beth Olson:

"Thank you for your service." It's so ubiquitous it means nothing.
Here are two more — sucks and crap. Hate them both but the first one with a fiery passion.

Keith Kurko:
"Cutting edge."
Massive overuse in an attempt to impress.
If I had $50 for every time I heard this phrase over my career, I could have retired five years earlier than I did!

Ray Tessler:
I despise no word more than BROUHAHA. It sounds like the beer of German cretins.
IMPACTED. It used to mean a tooth.
TRANSPARENCY. That's management speak for tell us exactly how you feel so we can screw you over with it later.

(And finally, phrases from readers who would not include a reason for their offerings, despite my extra prodding. Carl has a cache of phrases I'm mostly unfamiliar with, but I support any effort to keep problems from sprouting. Kind of like pre-emergent weed killer. John's offering, which Jule Bishop also mentioned, requires no rationale because it is dangerously vapid. –Ed.)

Carl Larsen:
Timing it out (as in a weather forecast).
The images are coming in.
It's on my sheet (short for curriculum vitae).
Doom loop, as in cities spiraling into cesspools of crime amid vacant downtowns.

John Madormo:
It is what it is.

Kind regards
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