Watch Your P’s and Q’s

Video Transcript

Clichés are forms of expression. They can appear in language, in motifs, and in artistic creations. We've all heard them. That’s the nature of clichés.

– Read between the lines.

– As old as the hills.

– Someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed.

– Oh yeah? You and what army?

Clichés are generally considered to be trite. And boring. And unoriginal. Their overuse can even be experienced as irritating. Clichés tend to leave the hearer, the reader, or the viewer assessing the purveyor of the clichés as being callow and amateurish. Or, to be cliché about it, as being wet behind the ears.

Clichés tend to produce a less, rather than a more, engaged response from the receiver. They can even generate downright apathy.

But, clichés don’t begin as clichés. They start as simple statements, usually attempts at colorful or witty description. What is cliché today may have once been a fascinating way to encourage a new awareness.

You can imagine the first time someone asked a friend, “What’s wrong? Cat got your tongue?” The vivid image this now-cliché expression might have conjured in its original outing could have produced a meaningful recognition on the part of the hearer. It wouldn’t have sounded cliché.

“Yes,” the friend might have thought. “I can see how my silence might have made me appear not merely reticent, but so uncomfortable it were as though something were holding me back, preventing me from speaking — as though a cat had my tongue.”
And, perhaps, after considering the reasons behind their failure to respond, the hearer might then continue the conversation, even more engaged than they’d been before.

Today, if someone asked you if a cat had your tongue, instead of prompting reflection and expanded self-awareness, you might feel more like giving that person a new cliché about what the cat might get next.

Given the passage of time and repetitious use, what once may have been a profound and meaningful statement can be transmogrified into an irritating nuisance that causes eyes to roll.

One set of eyes you don’t want rolling belongs to the instructor reading your paper. Using clichés in academic writing does not make your writing colorful. It makes it flabby. It makes it lethargic. And it makes your paper look unattractive when it gets a bad grade written on it.

So be attentive to clichés that might slip into your writing and find a better way to make the same point.

About this transcript:

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