

Newsweek MY TURN: *Let's Think Outside The Box of Bad Clichés*

Sloppy writing leads to sloppy thinking, which is why I have a 'bone of contention' with trite phrases. Opening Pandora's Box: A favorite of undergraduates is 'It's not for me to say,' to which I respond, 'Then why continue writing?'

By Gregory Pence / Newsweek / <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19999629/site/newsweek/>

Aug. 6, 2007 issue - As a professor of bioethics, I strive to teach my students that clear writing fosters clear thinking. But as I was grading a stack of blue books today, I discovered so many clichés that I couldn't help writing them down. Before I knew it, I had spent the afternoon not grading essays but cataloging the many trite or inaccurate phrases my students rely on to express themselves.

When I grade written work by students, one of the phrases I hate most is "It goes without saying," in response to which I scribble on their essays, "Then why write it?" Another favorite of undergraduates is "It's not for me to say," to which I jot in their blue books, "Then why continue writing?"

I also despise the phrase "Who can say?" to which I reply, "You! That's who! That's the point of writing an essay!"

In teaching bioethics, I constantly hear about "playing God," as in "To allow couples to choose X is to play God." Undergraduates use the phrase constantly as a rhetorical hammer, as if saying it ends all discussion. And I don't even want to get into "opening Pandora's box" or "sliding down the slippery slope."

Sometimes the clichés are simply redundant, as when my students write of a "mass exodus." Can there be a "small" exodus? "Exodus" implies a mass of people. Other times the expressions defy the rules of logic. A student in a philosophy class writes that philosophy "bores me to tears." But if something brings him to tears, it's certainly not boring.

I also fear that most students don't know what they are saying when they write that a question "boggles the mind." Does every problem in bioethics really boggle the mind? What does this mean?

My students aren't the only ones guilty of cliché abuse. The language of medicine confuses patients' families when physicians write, "On Tuesday the patient was declared brain dead, and on Wednesday life support was removed." So when did the patient really die? Can people die in two ways, once when they are declared brain dead and second when their respirators are removed? Better to write, "Physicians declared the patient dead by neurological criteria and the next day removed his respirator."

All of us repeat trite expressions without thinking. My TV weatherman sometimes says, "It's raining cats and dogs."

Should I call the Humane Society? Where did this silly expression come from?

Another common mistake involves "literally." I often hear people on election night say, "He literally won by a landslide." If so, should geologists help us understand how?

Then, of course, there's the criminal who was caught in "broad daylight." I guess he could not have been caught in "narrow" daylight. And are we sure that the sun shone on the day he was caught? I sometimes read about a "bone of contention." I imagine two animals fighting over a bone from a carcass (and not, as students write, from "a dead carcass"). But do writers want to convey that image?

And how can we forget about the "foreseeable future" (versus the "unforeseeable future?") and the "foregone conclusion" (versus the "non-foregone conclusion?").

Spare me jargon from sports, such as being "on the bubble" for something. I'd also rather do without other jargon, such as "pushing the [edge of the] envelope." And has writing that we should "think outside the box" become such a cliché that it's now in-side the box?

Some of the worst phrases come from the business world. Because of my profession, I read a lot of essays on medicine, ethics and money. So I must endure endless strings of nouns acting as adjectival phrases, such as "health care finance administration official business." Even authors of textbooks on business and hospital ad-ministration use such phrases; no wonder that students use them, too.

And in these fields and others, can we do away with "take a leadership role"? These days, can't anyone just lead?

Can we also hear more about the short arm of the law (versus its "long" one), about things that sell well besides "hotcakes" and about a quick tour other than a "whirlwind" one?

Beyond the shadow of a doubt, I'd like to leave no stone unturned in grinding such writing to a halt, saving each and every student's essay in the nick of time. But I have a sneaking suspicion that, from time immemorial, that has been an errand of mercy and easier said than done.

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