

## Fashionable expressions and clichés

Spike Milligan called clichés *the handrail of the crippled mind*. I think of them as stepping-stones — words forming a pre-ordained route which the writer must follow even if led in the wrong direction.

Clichés sound bad because they are stale, and because their use suggests that you are mindlessly repeating someone else’s catchphrase (which tells the reader that you have nothing new to say). And those many clichés that were unimaginative on first use can be condemned on both counts.

It is currently fashionable to refer to something as “in place”, and when claiming credit for it to say that you have “put-in-place” whatever it is (retaining this word order even when it is inappropriate):

**I have put-in-place arrangements for insurance**  
(Rather than the more natural “I have put arrangements in place”).

Whichever the word order, “putting in place” skews the meaning by emphasising the wrong part of the sentence, in that it suggests that your job has been to move pre-existing arrangements from the wrong place to somewhere more useful. *Putting (in place)* is an example of “nominalisation”, mentioned on page 99.

Similarly, the craze for referring to people “out there” would only be useful if it was necessary to distinguish those in the same room as the speaker.

We no longer *learn* when we can be *on a learning curve*. What, incidentally, is the graph-inspired *steep learning curve* (since a curve is a line whose gradient changes)?

The law has been infected by the Thatcheristic conversion of vocations and professions to money-centred businesses, which has encouraged the use of commercial clichés. Firms have adopted the current obsession with image, whose once-familiar contrast with substance has been masked by *rebranding* “image” as *brand*. And where once we were people we have been downgraded to *human resources*, as though we were tins on a supermarket shelf.

As much as possible is standardised to save thought. So we have *mortgage products*, *insurance products*, and *this product* instead of *mortgages*, *insurance policies*, and *these peas*, losing all shades of meaning in the interests of uninformative uniformity.

These goods and services are *delivered* by ubiquitous *providers*, rather than supplied by *lenders*, *insurers*, and *greengrocers* (so the language will be ready when we order them all online from the same superstore).

We even *deliver on our promises* instead of *keeping* them, and we are expected to *deliver a quality product* (using three pretentious, inappropriate, polysyllabic words) rather than *give a good service* (the plain, appropriate alternatives). *Quality* is useful in its traditional role as an abstract noun but we don’t need another synonym for the adjective *good*. Not long ago I saw a minicab decorated with the slogan *We deliver*

*destinations* and was tempted to ask the driver to bring me Gatwick Airport.

Now solicitors' firms are adopting these vacuous *mission statements*, though the inaccurate platitudes of advertising puff contrast unfavourably with the rigour and integrity of professionalism. To give a typical (though at least concise) example (distorted to protect the perpetrators) a firm that seemed if anything *uncaring* proudly boasted *We care*, as though the rest of us don't.

We must relentlessly *address issues*, even if we don't really know what we're talking about. For instance, does *until the issue of IRA criminality is addressed* mean *until the IRA stops committing crimes, until we stop them committing crimes*, or just *until we start thinking about it*?

Some clichés show an ignorance of the meaning of words (an inadvisable failing in an expensive professional writer). For example:

**A window of opportunity**

(in which *window* is intended to indicate that the opportunity is for a limited time although that is already implicit in the meaning of *opportunity*)

and

**He literally got the government out of a hole it dug itself into.**

Others demonstrate cultural ignorance:

**It isn't written on tablets of stone and handed down from Mount Olympus**

(from a Conservative cabinet minister whose religious education must have been inclusive)

Some reveal the need to ramble while the speaker wonders what to say:

**We have been proceeding with the business of developing our plans for the future of the economy**

(= We have been planning the economy)

**They are falling behind in terms of the pace of their schedule**

**Give some clarification as to what is going on**

**It depends on what happens in terms of addressing these issues**

(≈ It depends on solving the problems?)

**I would argue that**

**NOW THIS DEED WITNESSETH as follows:-**

In the worst examples, the lack of thought is given away by absurdly mixed metaphors, as in *a falling marketplace*, or the reputed announcement in an annual state of the nation speech that *Last year we were on the edge of an abyss. This year we have taken a giant leap forward*. And over-metaphorising distracts even if the images are consistent with each other:

**The ball is in Cuban hands and the door is ajar.**

Conveyancers used to highlight the point where the property was identified, somewhere deep in their single-paragraph document, by writing or typing "ALL THAT". Anyone looking for the address of the property only had to scan for that capitalised phrase. The draftsman (as he then was) would continue "the property situate at and known as 1 The Witterings..." (giving the full address). And such was the power of tradition that "ALL THAT the premises" was invariably preferred to the correct and neater "ALL THOSE premises". But these introductory words have become unnecessary now that conveyancing documents emphasise on the first page

**Property: 1 The Witterings....**

though many lawyers still use it anyway, giving us

**Property: All that the premises situate at and known as 1 The Witterings....**

sometimes adapted, even more absurdly, to

**Property: All that the land situate at and known as land adjoining Norwich Road....**

*Situate at* land adjoining Norwich Road? And *known as* land adjoining Norwich Road? Surely not! Moreover, about 15 years ago, one conveyancer, somewhere, forgot the *at*, so that the document read, ungrammatically, “ALL THAT the premises situate and known as...”. Just as schoolchildren are caught cheating because they reproduce their neighbours’ mistakes, so lawyers have shown themselves up as unthinking plagiarists: this corrupted precedent has spread through the profession to such an extent that almost every week I receive drafts with this simple error. And they often include other fallacies, like “situate (at) ... April Cottage”; the house may be *known as* April Cottage but it is hardly “situated” there.

As George Orwell said in his essay *Politics and the English Language*:

This invasion of one’s mind by ready-made phrases ... can only be prevented if one is constantly on guard against them, and every such phrase anaesthetizes a portion of one’s brain.