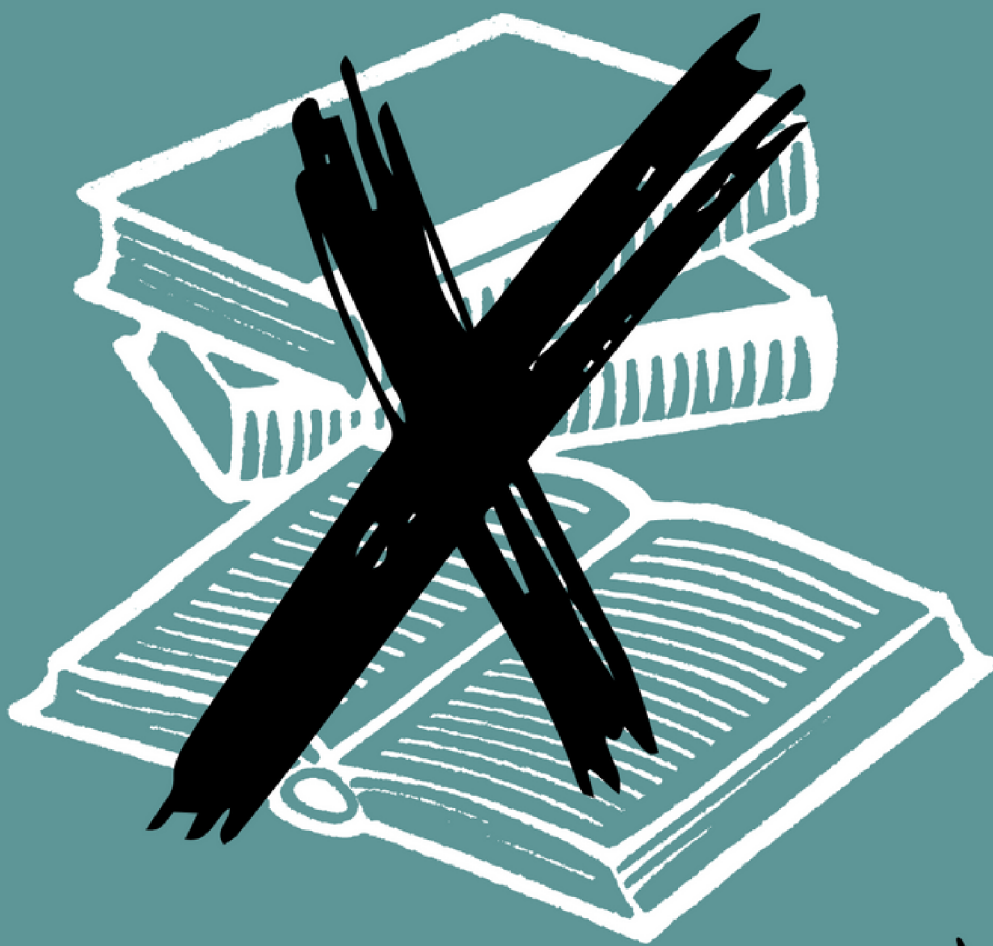


# CLICHÉS

AND HOW TO AVOID THEM



JERRY JENKINS



# CLICHÉS AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

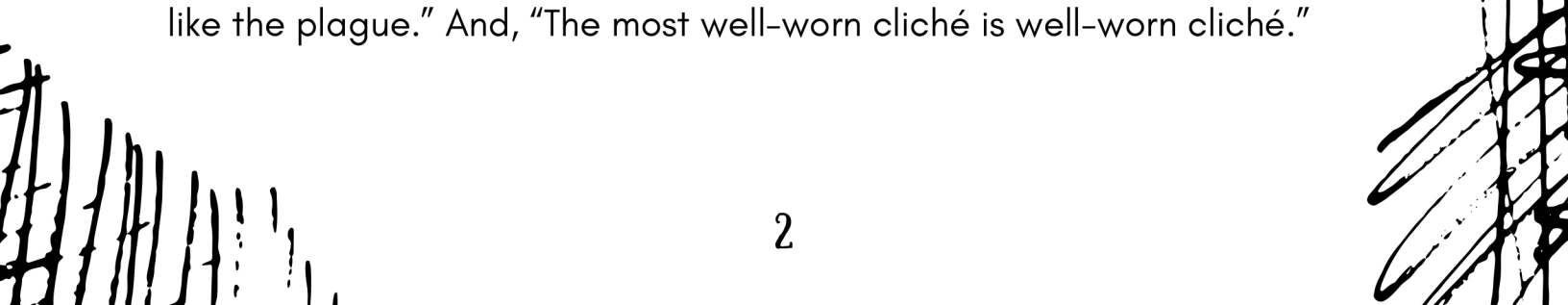
View every cliché you write as a missed opportunity for creativity.

Clichés should be easy to spot. They're simply expressions and phrases that have been so overused that they bore readers and make us writers lazy.

I've listed 160 of them below, but work at adding your own—because that's where they belong: in a list and not in your novel or nonfiction book. Sometimes I wonder if there is no limit to the number of clichés that exist.

The key is to remind ourselves of them so they jump out at us when they creep into our work.

I once worked under a newspaper editor who liked to joke, "Avoid clichés like the plague." And, "The most well-worn cliché is well-worn cliché."



## THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CLICHÉS AND TROPES

Be careful not to mistake a trope for a cliché. A trope is a convention writers use to convey certain ideas. These can encompass elements such as character archetypes, plot structures, symbols, motifs, and more. Unlike clichés, tropes are not inherently bad, depending on how they're executed.

Examples of tropes include "the hero's journey," "love triangle," "the chosen one," "damsel in distress," and "redemption arc"—common frameworks in countless stories. Tropes become tiresome when overused or poorly executed, leading to predictability or lack of originality.

Clichés on the other hand evidence uncreative writing because they bring nothing new or fresh to the narrative. They can lead to predictability and a lack of engagement for the reader.

Clichés can also refer to situations or character traits that have become so familiar that they no longer provoke genuine emotional responses from readers. While tropes can sometimes become clichés if used too frequently without innovation, not all tropes are inherently clichéd.

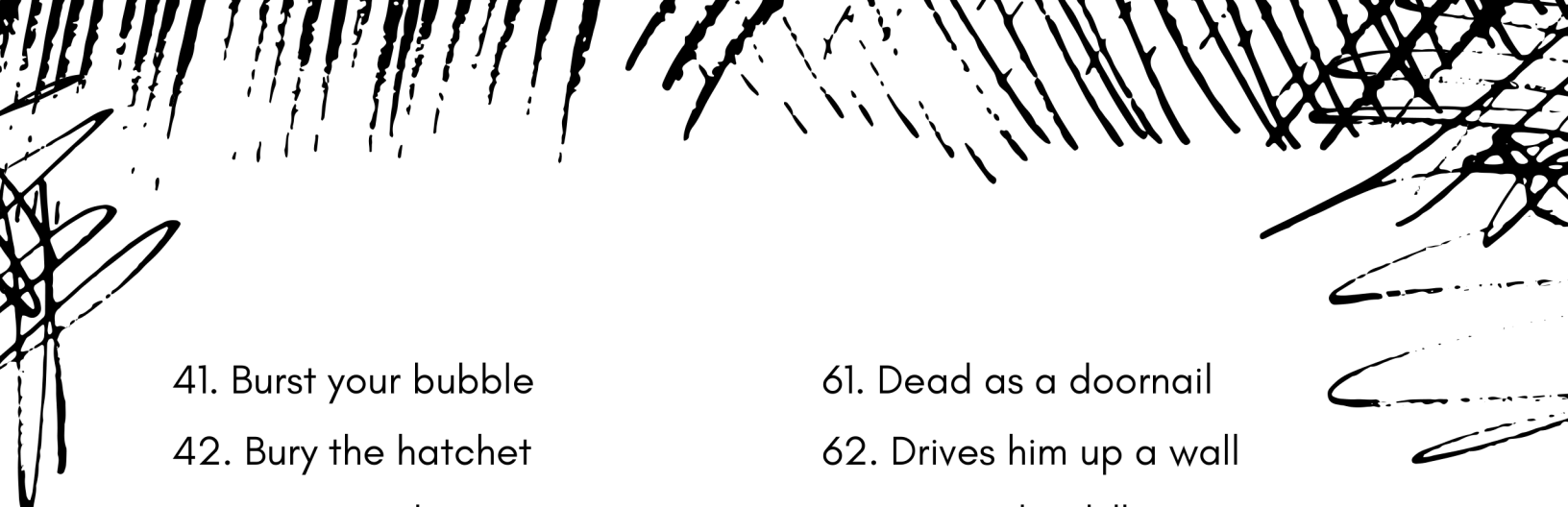
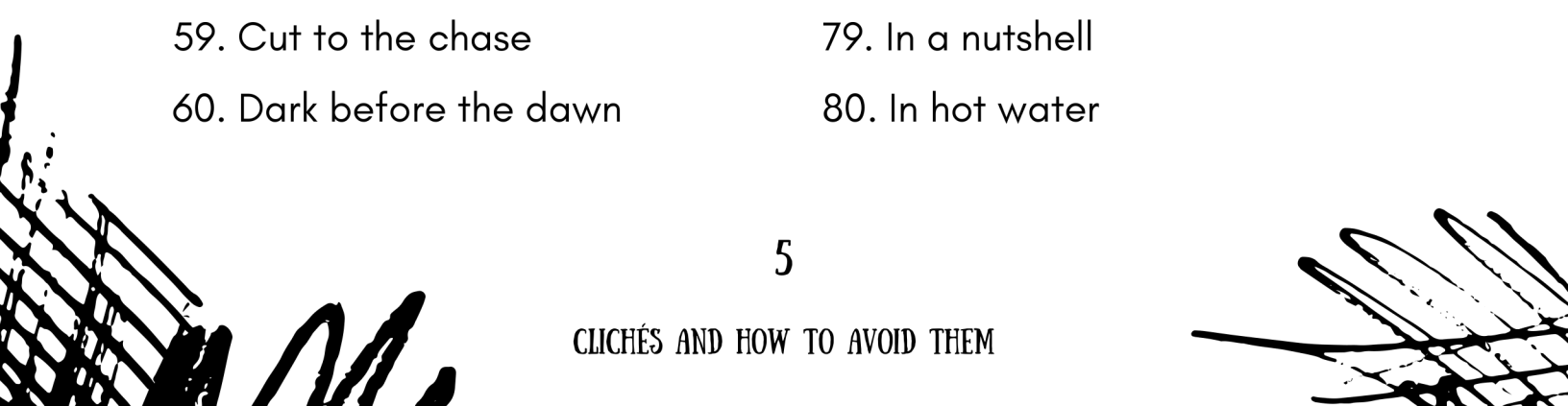
In summary, tropes can be effective when used creatively, while clichés should be avoided.

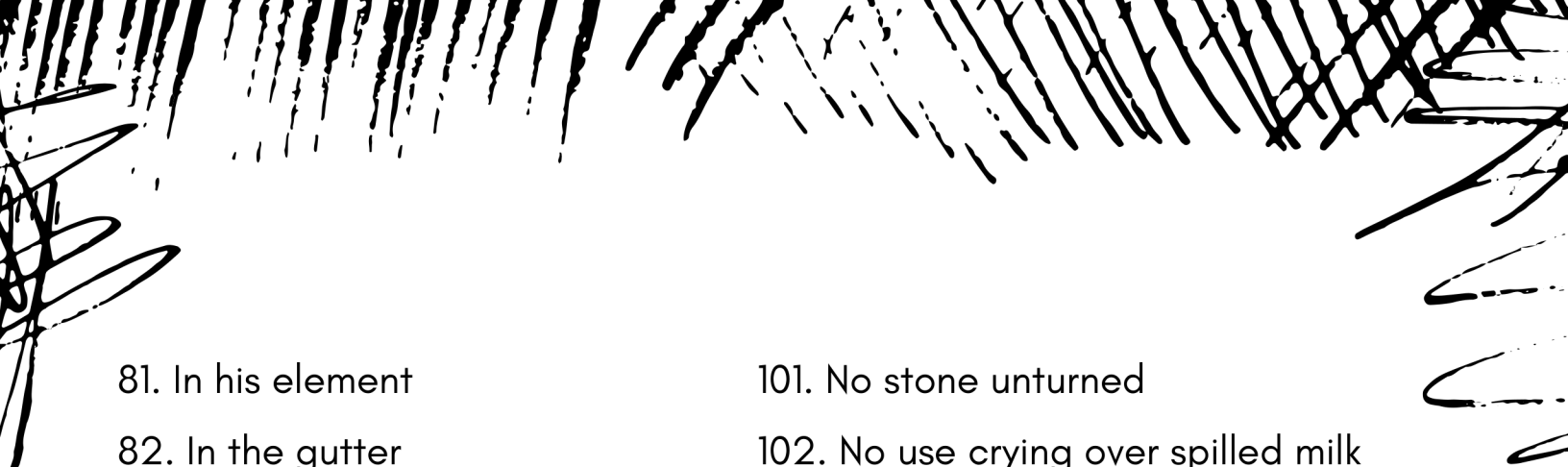


Naturally, characters might speak in clichés, and including them in dialogue can add realism. But otherwise, when one on this list emerges in your prose, root it out, wax creative, and find a new way to express an old truth.



# LIST OF CLICHES

1. At long last
2. An uphill battle
3. A dark and stormy night
4. A pain in the neck (or other places!)
5. An ace up his sleeve
6. Add insult to injury
7. A far cry
8. All her eggs in one basket
9. As old as time
10. Avoid like the plague
11. As luck would have it
12. Back in the saddle
13. Back to the drawing board
14. His bark is worse than his bite
15. Beat around the bush
16. Bend over backwards for her
17. Better late than never
18. Better safe than sorry
19. Big fish in a small pond
20. Bite the bullet
21. Bite the dust
22. Bite the hand that feeds you
23. Bitten off more than he can chew
24. Black as coal
25. Black as pitch
26. Blind as a bat
27. Blind ambition
28. Blind leading the blind
29. Blow off steam
30. Blood, sweat, and tears
31. Boils down to
32. Bone to pick
33. Bored to tears
34. Bored stiff
35. Bright and early
36. Bull by the horns
37. Bull in a china shop
38. Burn the midnight oil
39. Burning the candle at both ends
40. Burning question

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41. Burst your bubble
  42. Bury the hatchet
  43. Busy as a bee
  44. Calm before the storm
  45. Can of worms
  46. Can't hold a candle to her
  47. Cat got your tongue
  48. Caught in the crossfire
  49. Caught red-handed
  50. Chip on his shoulder
  51. Chomping at the bit
  52. Clear as a bell
  53. Clear as mud
  54. Cost an arm and a leg
  55. Crack of dawn
  56. Crash course
  57. Cry her eyes out
  58. Cry like a baby
  59. Cut to the chase
  60. Dark before the dawn
  61. Dead as a doornail
  62. Drives him up a wall
  63. Dressed to kill
  64. Eagle eye
  65. Easy as pie
  66. Every fiber of her being
  67. Fish out of water
  68. Fly the coop
  69. Gets his goat
  70. Go against the grain
  71. Go with the flow
  72. Happy as a clam
  73. Have the last laugh
  74. Hear a pin drop
  75. Hear it through the grapevine
  76. Held her horses
  77. Hot under the collar
  78. If the shoe were on the other foot
  79. In a nutshell
  80. In hot water

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81. In his element
  82. In the gutter
  83. In the thick of it
  84. In the nick of time
  85. In this day and age
  86. Joined at the hip
  87. Keep his chin up
  88. Kill two birds with one stone
  89. Kiss of death
  90. Knock it out of the park
  91. Know the ropes
  92. Leaps and bounds
  93. Light as a feather
  94. Lighter than air
  95. Like clockwork
  96. Like taking candy from a baby
  97. Like a kid in a candy store
  98. Make her blood boil
  99. Moment of truth
  100. Never say never
  101. No stone unturned
  102. No use crying over spilled milk
  103. Nose to the grindstone
  104. Not written in stone
  105. Old as dirt
  106. Old hat
  107. On thin ice
  108. One in a million
  109. Once upon a time
  110. Open a can of worms
  111. Out of the frying pan and into the fire
  112. Out on a limb
  113. Perfect storm
  114. Pitter patter of little feet
  115. Plain as day
  116. Play your cards right
  117. Playing with fire
  118. Pleased as punch
  119. Plenty of fish in the sea
  120. Pot calling the kettle black

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121. Put the cart before the horse  
122. Put his foot down  
123. Quick as a bunny  
124. Quick as a wink  
125. Quick as lightning  
126. Quiet as a mouse  
127. Rags to riches  
128. Raining buckets  
129. Raining cats and dogs  
130. Red as a beet  
131. Rubbed the wrong way  
132. Scared stiff  
133. Scared to death  
134. Sharp as a tack  
135. Sick as a dog  
136. Since the dawn of time  
137. Sigh of relief  
138. Slept like a log  
139. Slept like a baby  
140. Slow as molasses  
141. Spilled the beans  
142. Stick in the mud  
143. Strong as an ox  
144. Stubborn as a mule  
145. Sweating bullets  
146. Take the bull by the horns  
147. Thick as thieves  
148. Think outside the box  
149. Throw in the towel  
150. Touch with a ten-foot pole  
151. Tough as nails  
152. Two peas in a pod  
153. Ugly as sin  
154. Until the cows come home  
155. Went belly up  
156. White as a sheet  
157. Whole nine yards  
158. Wild goose chase  
159. Work like a dog  
160. Wrong side of the bed




# CLICHÉD PLOT POINTS

My favorite clichés to hate are situational ones that have been done to death (see what I did there?). Avoid such tired, overdone scenes—your readers will thank you!

- Starting your story with your character waking to an alarm clock; this is usually followed by their smacking it to the floor, then walking past a full-length mirror, before which they describe themselves.
- Future lovers literally bumping into each other upon first meeting; she drops her groceries or her library books, he apologetically helps her, and love becomes inevitable.
- Beginning a dramatic and evocative scene, only to have the character wake up and realize it was all a dream; if your character has a dream, just say so. Don't try to surprise the reader with that fact.
- A character dying mid-sentence, just as they were about to reveal a secret.
- Beginning a story with "Hello, my name is..."
- A character responding to a question with, "Yes. No. I don't know."
- A character hearing someone screaming and suddenly realizing, "It was me."



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- Two characters are traveling, and one asks the other to remind them where they are going and why. People usually don't need to be reminded of these things mid-journey.
  - Ending a story with the main character dying for shock value.
  - The bad guy has the drop on the good guy and attempts to easily kill him when a shot rings out and the bad guy falls. Someone offscreen we're supposed to have forgotten has saved the day. I still see this in otherwise great movies and novels. Please...
  - Having your villain explain his whole plan and backstory to your captive hero. This is usually a convenient way to give the offscreen hero time to get there and "surprise" us by shooting the bad guy just in time.
  - The villain or the monster has apparently been killed, but just as the potential victims are celebrating or sighing with relief, he or it surges back to life and attacks again.