



More Cliches Than You Can Shake a Stick At

Compiled by [Mimi Burkhardt](#)

CLICHE: ``A trite expression or idea."

CLICHED: ``Trite; hackneyed."

-- American Heritage

Some of these are classics. Others (niche cliches?) might more accurately be called newspaper or media jargon because you'll never see or hear these phrases anywhere else. What normal person says ``densely wooded area" or ``blueprint for growth" in everyday -- or any -- conversation?

This modest collection, more like a starter kit, comes from present and former colleagues, 40 years of reading, 20 years of editing, and the ACES discussion board. But of course it's just the tip of the iceberg. To coin a phrase.

KILLER CLICHES

armed with a search warrant

back to the drawing board/square one

battle with cancer

bid farewell

blueprint for growth

bottom line

calls it quits

carnival atmosphere

changed his/her life forever

charred rubble (which someone is often sifting or combing through in search of clues)

choked with emotion

closure

cloudless sky

concerned residents

cope/deal with grief (``Counselors will be on hand to help students ...")

crisis proportions (see OVERKILL)

densely wooded area
dire straits
(American) dream turns to nightmare
drug-sniffing dogs
early-morning hours
emotional roller coaster
epidemic proportions (see OVERKILL)
every parent's worst nightmare
execution-style
final good-byes
firestorm/storm of protest/controversy
fled on foot
ground zero
hammer out (an agreement, contract)
heated debate
hushed courtroom
in the wake of (unless you're writing about
boats)
kick off (unless you're writing about
football)
laid to rest
leafy suburb (and its cousin tree-lined
streets -)
makeshift memorial
manicured lawns
media circus
mixed reviews
Mother Nature's wrath
Olympic proportions
outpouring of support
packing xx-mph winds
poster boy/girl/child
predawn darkness
rain fails to dampen (anything, but often
spirits at a parade or
graduation)
rushed to the hospital
sent shock waves
shallow grave
shocked and saddened/dismayed
showed no emotion
sparked controversy
square off

step down (for resign)
step up (efforts)
struggling to make sense of (a tragedy)
tense standoff
tree-lined streets (especially quiet ones)
voicing concern
wait-and-see attitude
wellspring of ...
white stuff, the (usually dumped on a region)

DEADLY DEVICES

He/she/they knew something was terribly wrong when...

If xyz has his way,

In what has become ...

Move over, xxx.

Plans for xyz took a step toward reality ...

They are (he/she is) not alone.

Welcome to ...

What began as ... turned into...

What he/she/they didn't know was that...

(well, duh ^)

MAXED-OUT MODIFIERS

gut-wrenching

landmark

massive

oil-rich

rain-drenched

state-of-the-art

storm-tossed (-ravaged, etc.)

sun-drenched (-dappled)

tightlipped

war-torn (-ravaged, etc.)

OVERKILL

crisis proportions

crisis situation

emergency situation

epidemic proportions

general consensus

old adage
rain showers
sworn affidavit
the fatal shooting death
the drowning death
strangled to death

CULTURE SCHLOCK

Schools to state: Show us the money

Show us the money, the teachers' union
responded.

Sweepless in Seattle

Meatless in Monroe

Jeepleless in Seattle

And the newest offenders: ``Final answer";
``Who wants to (fill in the
blank)"

* * * * *

A roundup of comments from editors on the [ACES discussion board](#):

There's the inevitable horror story involving some heinous crime against a child and the equally inevitable hed: EVERY PARENT'S NIGHTMARE.

And the ubiquitous holiday season hed: 'TIS THE SEASON (at a previous paper, the copy chief set a limit on the times this would see print per year: once)

STEPPED UP....as in ``the teams STEPPED UP and played better" or ``the campaign has STEPPED UP its efforts."

SENDING A MESSAGE....I hate this one. Everybody, it seems, is sending messages. What kind of message does this act/this decision) send? This act/this decision will ``send the wrong message." What ever happened to ``setting an example" or ``setting a bad example."

An old one but a terrible one: CALLS IT QUILTS. I never have heard a person at a press conference at which they are resigning say ``it's quits." What about ``Smith resigns"?.....Also, why is it also when somebody quits, they STEP DOWN?

Before they call it quits or step down, they ``kick off." Nothing just

starts or begins anymore.

I'm with you. A United Way campaign STARTS, it doesn't kickoff!!

Here's one taken out of a lead recently here - ``harken back to a more innocent time." Two problems - harken back - and even worse, the whole concept of a more innocent time. anything more than 20 years ago was a ``more innocent time." i recently read where the pre-AIDS era was ``a more innocent time." Yep, all those drugs, swingers' clubs and unprotected sex with strangers - sounds REAL innocent to me!

It just gets worse: ``Harken back" itself is an error. The verb meaning to revert to an earlier time is ``to hark back." ``Harken," a variant spelling of ``hearken," means ``to listen carefully" or ``to heed." Both verbs are so dated that we should probably just remove them from copy whenever they occur.

How about every nickel-and-dime car accident or other event being described as something that ``changed their lives (or the town or the cops) forever"? it's unbelievably overused.

Maybe it's because I live in the Seattle area, but a number of papers here seem irrationally infatuated with making endless lead and headline puns on the execrable movie ``sleepless in Seattle." Just last week, a good eight years after the flick's release, I read the headline ``meatless in Monroe," about a new vegetarian restaurant. and ``sweepless in Seattle," about a local sports team's failure to sweep the season series against an ostensibly lesser opponent.

And ``jeepleless in Seattle," from an advertorial insert, about the decline in Jeep (TM) sales in the last year here. Isn't there some state-mandated statute of limitations on imitating bad movies?

And in other movie cliches ... ``IF YOU BUILD IT THEY WILL COME" Management finally outlawed that particular gem at a former workplace of mine.

And let's not even talk about plays on ``SHOW ME THE MONEY!"

In Arizona some of us on the copy desk loved ``Raising Arizona" plays (and that's a 13-year-old movie!) I wrote two myself, I'm somewhat ashamed to say: ``Grazing Arizona" and ``Raving Arizona."

What about... ``in the wake of"? ``In the wake of the Columbine massacre" is the most common, with ``massacre" being overused as well. But I've seen this phrase in stories on every topic possible. The only thing in the wake of something else had better be in the water.

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