



Trite, Even If True

A roundup of thoughts on bad writing, cliches, etc.

Inverted attribution--said Jones, instead of Jones said

. Editor's Note in a preceed--it is unnecessary. It's obvious that it is an editor's note.

Redundancies--Rain showers (instead of rain or showers), snow showers.

--Clair Cobb

"Said at a news conference."--These things are set up to benefit us as well as them. Is it ever germane that it was said there?

And its companion, "said in an interview." Much the same argument here. I also detest "told a reporter." Readers aren't stupid. They know it's you. Just make it "said" or "told the Daily Whizzer" or whatever.

"Emergency situation" or "crisis situation"--It's simply an emergency or a crisis.

"He declined to comment/She refused to comment"--the first implies a politeness that may not be there; the second a brusqueness. I prefer something neutral, such as "would not comment" because it keeps out any bias.

--Greg Hilliard

"Safe haven"--It makes my colon slap shut like a mausoleum door whenever I hear it.

"Fat" words (currently, last, next, very, located at, at the intersection of, among others). They are almost never needed and most of them make my eyeballs snap inside out with a great sucking sound that frightens those around me.

"Anxious" when we mean "eager"--yes. the dictionary does accept "anxious" but it's still not right.

The unnecessary use of "the," as in "the actor Mel Gibson"

--Jack Legg

"small child" when we mean "young child"

--Dave Michaels

"To try and" for "to try to"

--Dave Sweet

"The good old boy network". It doesn't exist. There are "good old boys" and there's an "old-boy network" but don't expect to find any "good old boys" in the "old-boy network."

A "good old boy" according to Webster's New World Dictionary, is a "man of the Southern U.S., variously characterized as easy-going, companionable, assertively masculine and strongly identified with his regional lifestyle." An "old boy" also according to Webster's, is "an alumnus, especially of an English preparatory school."

--Cathy Coggins

My most hated stupid oxymoron is "model prisoner." Unless you're talking about Christie Brinkley after a conviction for tax evasion or something, it makes no sense even as an idiom. How do you act like a model prisoner? From the point of view of the guards? Don't be a prisoner in the first place. From the point of view of the prisoners? Bigger guys and get lots of servants while you're in the joint. In fact, the only way to be a "model prisoner" is not to be one. It's like being a "model Nazi."

-- Mike Pollak

Tectonic shift.

-- Kal Lindenberg

Hovering, as in, Because the company is hovering on the edge of bankruptcy.

-- Martha Miles

Low Technology

-- George Kaough

The bottom line

state of the art

-- Peter McLennan

Massive comes to mind. It may be the most overused adjective of all time.

-- Clark Line

Putting on hold,

Feisty elderly people

Articulate blacks (or women)

Senior citizens (or just seniors)

-- Margot Slade

Leafy suburb

He was a quiet boy

Oil-rich Saudi Arabia

-- Wallace Schroeder

Roving bands of youths
Limped into port
after an intensive manhunt
by a disgruntled postal employee
in a quiet, middle-class neighborhood
of modest red-brick single-family homes
off tree-lined streets
in a shallow grave
in a densely wooded area
and were rushed to the hospital
in a firestorm of protest
by the Texas billionaire
and the slain civil rights leader
and the financially ailing tabloid
In the hushed courtroom
the defendant showed no emotion
at the all-important loss column
-- Mike Pollak

PLAIN SPEAKING:

Gambling. Don't use "gaming." It's a casino industry euphemism. Power failure or cutoff, not "outage." That's a utility industry euphemism. Mr. Toad is a "motorist." When Nancy Drew hops into her roadster with her chums for a jaunty trip to watch her school nine, she is a "motorist." So was Robert Moses, who went everywhere by chauffeur and who was an enthusiast of automobile travel as a leisurely recreation (which is what the euphemism implies). No one else uses that word except motor vehicle bureaucrats (insurance companies, state agencies and the A.A.A.) and reporters. The rest of us are drivers.

Avoid as beaten to death: "landmark" in court stories, "innovative" in education stories and "bashing" in any context except physically pounding an object. Avoid "private sector." "Private" or "business" usually suffices. I suspect "sector" as an unnecessary extra word to mean business may come from the sales and marketing meeting that middle-level managers have to sit through, many of which involve a pie chart and a ponderous speaker who is trying to sound important by sounding "mathematical."

Upwards of
Biannual and biennial
First- and second- generation immigrants.
One-reel and two-reel movies
Tri-state area.
Between 1994 and 1995

Football fields and city blocks as units of measurement.

Use "strapped for cash" only if the story is about a dominatrix.

An employee is not a "new hire," a book is not a "good read" and a student is not a "quick study," any more than a restaurant is a "good eat."

Klingons are aliens. People from other countries are foreigners or immigrants.

-- Mike Pollak

PHRASED ANOTHER WAY...

To be sure... (the throwaway line injected when someone wants to hedge his bets)

Welcome to ... (a stylistic affectation)

In order to

-- Margot Slade

"They are not alone." (Or, He is not alone, She is not alone, It is not alone, etc. etc.). I see it all the time as a transitional device, and I think it's trite and just plain lazy. And there's no newspaper or magazine in the land where it doesn't appear constantly. This particular phrase really bugs me. -- Tony Marcano, with thanks to Dave Krajicek, Columbia University

And, just for fun, a stylebook entry (UPI, mid-1970s): Burro, burrow: A burro is an ass; a burrow is a hole in the ground. As a journalist, you are expected to know the difference.

--Cathy Coggins

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