



Dear Reader,

Last month's issue on Three Letter Acronyms spurred a flood of emails and phone calls from TLA-weary readers, bringing many more of them to our attention – so many, in fact, that we may devote another issue to TLAs.

This time *EC Buzz* turns the spotlight on another well-worn figure of speech – the cliché. Like TLAs, many clichés are so entrenched in our language – and do their jobs quite well, we grudgingly admit – that banishing them would seem a bit heartless. Instead we'll examine the roots of several long-standing clichés whose original meanings or origins may surprise you. Sometimes they use vocabulary rarely found elsewhere. So before trotting out the same old hoary cliché, consider that you might be trampling on a highly respectable heritage.



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### Consulting Your Inner Cliché

- 1. Build a better mousetrap and the world will beat a path to your door**  
*Meaning:* Come up with a great new idea, and you've got it made.  
*Origin:* Attributed, somewhat dubiously, to the poet Ralph Waldo Emerson.  
*Food for thought:* Marketing got left out of this simplistic business model. In fact, over 5000 mousetrap patents have been issued since the classic snap-trap of 1899. Few have enjoyed success, despite their ingenuity (see "Reinvent the wheel" below). Oh, and Emerson also said, more tersely, "I hate quotations. Tell me what you know."
- 2. For all intents and purposes**  
*Meaning:* In every practical sense.  
*Origin:* This is a shortening of the legal phrase "to all intents, constructions, and purposes", which can be found in an act adopted by Henry VIII in 1547.  
*Food for thought:* This phrase easily morphs into the nonsensical "for all intensive purposes". Even your own Chief Buzzword Banisher once believed this to be the true expression.
- 3. Foregone conclusion**  
*Meaning:* A result regarded as inevitable.  
*Origin:* This phrase comes from Shakespeare's *Othello*: "But this denoted a foregone conclusion: 'Tis a shrewd doubt, though it be but a dream."  
*Food for thought:* According to an old joke, the problem with *Hamlet* is that it's full of clichés. In fact, over 150 modern clichés originated in the works of Shakespeare. Does this enrich the language or debase Shakespeare?
- 4. Reinvent the wheel**  
*Meaning:* To design a tool or implement a policy equivalent to an existing one, with the implication that doing so is a waste of time or effort.  
*Origin:* The wheel is thought to have originated in the Sumerian civilization of Mesopotamia around 5500 BCE, and (nearly) everything has run on wheels ever since.  
*Food for thought:* Reinventing the wheel may not be such a waste of time after all, if it's the right kind of wheel. Earlier this year scientists in Berlin demonstrated that a small molecule designed as two "wheels" connected by an "axle" rolled when prodded, paving the way, so to speak, for nano-machines.
- 5. Tip of the iceberg**  
*Meaning:* A small, seemingly trivial issue that actually signifies a much larger problem looming ahead.  
*Origin:* Only one-ninth of an iceberg floats above the surface, with the bulk of its mass lurking below.  
*Food for thought:* Not many *Titanics* bump into icebergs these days, thanks to modern navigational instruments.

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### Buzz Off : "They"

This personal pet peeve is often found in television commercial voice-overs. Who exactly are "they" – the anonymous but ubiquitous group of people who prefer a particular brand of toilet paper, or the high percentage of dentists who recommend a certain toothpaste? The US Federal Trade Commission requires advertisers to have evidence to back up their claims. Thus it makes good sense to avoid attributing anything to these nebulous people.

Instead of proclaiming support from "them", why not be more precise? State where your claims come from, or else rethink your argument.

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Is there a buzzword you would like to banish? Send your suggestion to [writer@ecwriting.com](mailto:writer@ecwriting.com), then look for your buzzword and name in an upcoming issue.

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### Parting Words

"At the beginning there was the Word – at the end just the Cliché"

– Stanislaw Jerzy Lec, Polish writer, poet and satirist, 1906-1966

