



Dear Reader,

This month we look at snowclones, a particularly apt cliché for this time of year in the Great White North. So far this winter Toronto has experienced about as much snow as in an entire average winter. Since February is usually our snowiest month, the all-time record of 207 cm (81.5 in) set in 1937 could even be broken.

Happy snowclone shovelling!



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Three Snowclones Fit for the Slush Pile

A *snowclone* is a phrase or expression in which new words are inserted into a familiar template to express a different idea understandable in the same cultural context. The term was coined by the same folks at the Language Log blog (see <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languageblog>) who gave us *eggcorns*, which we covered in April and May last year. Their original example referred to the oft-quoted truism that “Eskimos have hundreds of words for snow”. Replace “Eskimos” and “snow” and you can create self-evident “truths” about other ethnic groups.

So what’s the problem? Like many initially clever plays on words, they become clichés when used repeatedly by lazy writers who shun trying to invent something fresh. Below we offer you three of the least inspired snowclones that will weaken any marketing or business message. They’re more than ready for the slush pile (a publishing term describing the fate of most unsolicited manuscripts).

But what of the Inuit and their snow words? It’s true the Inuit have many words for different forms of snow that might require descriptive phrases in English. However, English has its own avalanche of words for frozen water, such as sleet, hail, flurry, blizzard, whiteout, powder, drift, slush, hardpack, frost, rime, ice, icicle – and that’s just the tip of the iceberg.

1. **X is the greatest thing since sliced bread.** This snowclone owes its undeserved endurance to a successful advertising campaign by Wonder Bread way back in the 1930s. Considering all the other mouth-watering treats served up by the food industry, such as processed cheese, Spam® and tofuburgers, surely it’s time for a change of menu?
2. **X is the new Y.** This construction began to appear in fashion journalism in the 1970s, as in “Pink is the new black”. Since then it has proliferated like a virus. Recently minted are “Obama is the new Reagan”, or for the British audience, “Obama is the new Tony Blair.” Sounds more like the same old cliché.
3. **X-gate.** When French vintners became embroiled in a scandal in 1974, shortly after the Watergate scandal that ultimately forced US President Richard Nixon from office, calling it “Winegate” was a neat play on words. Since then we’ve groaned through Koreagate, Irangate, Billygate, Nannygate, Spygate, Whitewatergate, Monicagate, Shawingate, Nipplegate, Hot Coffeegate, Katrinagate, Troopergate and oh so many more. As the sign says, please shut the gate.

Buzz Off : *Perfect storm*

The phrase *perfect storm* was coined by author Sebastian Junger to describe the unusual concurrence of three weather-related phenomena that gave rise to the epic Halloween Nor’easter storm of 1991 that took nine lives and racked up \$2 billion in damage along the north-eastern seaboard of the USA. Meteorologists rarely use this term because perfect storms are, well, rare. As for popular usage, that all changed with the 2000 disaster movie of the same name. Now it seems that any series of inconvenient events gets labelled as a “perfect storm”, however minor the consequences.

If you must use *perfect storm*, save it for those truly monumental situations – say, if a series of massive strategic blunders by major financial institutions were to lead to a global economic crisis. Otherwise, try to put things in perspective:

- unfortunate coincidence
- bad luck
- synchronicity
- Murphy’s Law

Is there a buzzword you would like to banish? Send your suggestion to writer@ecwriting.com, and we’ll do our best to send it packing in a future issue.

Parting Words

“Man does not live by bread alone, even presliced bread.”

– Sir Denis William Brogan, author (1900-1974)