

TRITE AS A CLICHE

RICHARD LEDERER
Concord, New Hampshire

A cliché is a stale, commonplace, worn out word, phrase, or figure of speech that many speakers and writers fall into using out of hurry or sheer laziness.

It is one of the ironies of language that vivid comparisons soon become clichés precisely because they initially express an idea so well. These comparisons catch on, are picked up by many people, and quickly become trite and dead in the sense that they no longer strike us as original or clever.

The prevailing triteness in modern writing led the English novelist and critic George Orwell (*Animal Farm*, 1984) to lament that "prose consists less and less of words chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of phrases tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated henhouse."

Take the hackneyed formula "(adjective) as a (noun)." Offer the first half of the phrase and instantly into the minds of almost everybody flashes the second half. If, for example, I say "dead as a . . .," most readers will say "doornail." In fact, this expression has been wheezed for more than 600 years, back to at least 1350, when an anonymous poet, describing the hunting of a deer, wrote:

And happened that I hitt hym be-hynde the left sholdire. Dead as a dornayle was he fallen.

The very fact that the second half of such comparisons skips so easily into the mind is a danger sign. It means that everyone else would use the same simile, and this is exactly what makes for triteness. To prove my point, I present over one hundred "... as a ..." clichés; see how many you can complete correctly. The first set is completed by inserting members of the animal kingdom:

- | | | |
|-------------|---------------|----------------|
| 1. blind as | 8. cross as | 15. happy as |
| 2. brave as | 9. drunk as | 16. happy as |
| 3. busy as | 10. dumb as | 17. healthy as |
| 4. clean as | 11. fat as | 18. hungry as |
| 5. crazy as | 12. free as | 19. loose as |
| 6. crazy as | 13. gentle as | 20. mad as |
| 7. crazy as | 14. hairy as | 21. mad as |

- | | | |
|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 22. naked as | 27. quiet as | 32. snug as |
| 23. nervous as | 28. sick as | 33. strong as |
| 24. plump as | 29. silly as | 34. strong as |
| 25. poor as | 30. slippery as | 35. stubborn as |
| 26. proud as | 31. sly as | 36. wise as |

Complete the following by using types of food:

- | | | |
|-----------------|----------------|-----------------|
| 37. American as | 42. nutty as | 47. soft as |
| 38. brown as | 43. pleased as | 48. sweet as |
| 39. cool as | 44. red as | 49. warm as |
| 40. easy as | 45. red as | 50. wrinkled as |
| 41. flat as | 46. slow as | |

Complete the following by using objects often found in the house or associated with houses:

- | | | |
|--------------|---------------|---------------|
| 51. bald as | 58. hard as | 65. sharp as |
| 52. big as | 59. high as | 66. smooth as |
| 53. black as | 60. limp as | 67. soft as |
| 54. cute as | 61. neat as | 68. stiff as |
| 55. dead as | 62. pretty as | 69. tight as |
| 56. deaf as | 63. rough as | 70. tough as |
| 57. dull as | 64. safe as | 71. white as |

Complete the following by using things found in nature:

- | | | |
|-------------|--------------|--------------|
| 72. cold as | 77. fresh as | 82. old as |
| 73. dry as | 78. good as | 83. pure as |
| 74. dry as | 79. hard as | 84. right as |
| 75. easy as | 80. hot as | 85. solid as |
| 76. fast as | 81. light as | |

Now, for a change in approach, fill in the beginning of each cliché by inserting the appropriately hackneyed adjective:

- | | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 86. as an arrow | 101. as Methuselah |
| 87. as a bell | 102. as a new-born babe |
| 88. as a bell | 103. as a new penny |
| 89. as Croesus | 104. as night |
| 90. as day | 105. as a pistol |
| 91. as the day is long | 106. as a rail |
| 92. as the day you were born | 107. as shootin' |
| 93. as a dollar | 108. as sin |
| 94. as a drum | 109. as thieves |
| 95. as a fiddle | 110. as a tomb |
| 96. as a ghost | 111. as a two-dollar bill |
| 97. as a hatter | 112. as a whip |
| 98. as a judge | 113. as a whistle |
| 99. as life | 114. as a wink |
| 100. as a lord | |