"Clichés invite you not to think," wrote the poetry critic Christopher Ricks, "but you may always decline the invitation." Many writers agree: a cliché is a piece of expression that generally feels stale. O.K.: but says who? And what else is it?

To use a cliché can imply a desire to soothe, or to take an express-lane to a position of authority. It can create reassurance or quiet down suspicion. A cliché "gets the point across," and does much more besides: reaffirms a tacit connection, or leads both the user and the receiver away from truth. And clichés can be hard to define, probably because they can be hard to discern, probably because we all use them, probably because they have some use to us.

How can something so bad also be so useful? To some degree, we are made of them. The term comes from printing, maybe specifically the printing of newspapers. Journalism is a generator and safe-house for clichés, and much of the writing we read every day is either journalism or forms imitating journalism: social media, consumer-advice sites, paid content, fraudulent news stories. (Academic writing has its own clichés, too.) To avoid using them may be impossible. As Christopher Ricks also said: "The only way to speak of a cliché is with a cliché."

A course in general-audience cultural criticism organized around the idea of the cliché might be a redundancy. One of the most basic functions of a critic—a critic of anything—is to locate where and why clichés occur. But as we write and read we will try to move toward a sophisticated and sensitized relationship with the cliché, defining it as closely as we can, and placing it in a family of related ideas: received wisdom, euphemism, stereotype, hackneyed phrase, banality, homily, buzzword doublespeak, catchphrase, platitude, trope, cant, popular visual metaphor, sentimentality, societal norm, manners, dog-whistling, and necessary buffer against the indignities of life. (That’s a very long list. But we can and should add more to it.)

We will ask how it functions for the reader, listener or looker, but also how it functions in society, historically and politically. Does it flourish in certain eras, in certain countries, and at certain social levels? Beyond writing and the media, cliché (and its cousins) has long been used by politicians. Is this as true now as it ever has been, or is the situation changing—and if so, why? We will look for it everywhere and keep it in mind as we choose our subjects for writing.

We will read various forms of cultural criticism and journalism that both directly and indirectly explores the use of cliché, as well as some fiction, drama; also some work by linguists, literature scholars, comedians, politicians, and lawyers.
You will write three shorter essays—500-750 words—and one long essay (3000 words), on a topic of your choice. Also: we will make weekly contributions to a cliché library, amassing texts either directly or indirectly about the subject; and students will share texts of their choice which define or make reference to it.

Grades will be calculated as follows:
—60 percent written work—judged by the strength of what you turn in, but also your desire to grow.
—40 percent reading and demonstration of your reading through class participation. This is a writing class; it’s also a seminar. I need everybody to speak up regularly—that’s the only way this class can work.

**Please note:** Come talk to me about your work during office hours, at least once during the semester, preferably twice or more. This is not a “requirement”: it is an expectation. If you are sure that you can’t ever make it to office hours, be in touch soon, and we’ll figure out an alternative. Meeting one-to-one is the fastest way for me to know what kind of writing you want to be doing. I will share Google Doc sign-up schedules to make it easy.

All students must email their work to me at bpr212@nyu.edu, *double spaced*, complete and on time. If you hand in your work late, you will see that reflected in your grades.

Gallatin’s rules on academic integrity apply in this class: [http://gallatin.nyu.edu/about/bulletin/undergrad/policies/integrity.html](http://gallatin.nyu.edu/about/bulletin/undergrad/policies/integrity.html). Plagiarism and recycling is easy to spot and does you no favors.

**READINGS:**

Please buy these books, all of them available as paperbacks—

Samuel Beckett, “Happy Days”  
Paul Beatty, *The Sellout*  
Margo Jefferson, *Negroland*  
Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*

Other readings online as specified, or available in the course packet. (Please pick up the course packet from Unique Copy Center, 252 Greene St.)

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**January 26: Introduction**
**February 2:**  *Language and the cliche/Getting our library started*

—Christopher Ricks: “Clichés,” from *The State of the Language*, ed. Leonard Michaels (readable in full on Google books)
—George Orwell: “Politics and the English Language” (http://www.npr.org/blogs/ombudsman/Politics_and_the_English_Language-1.pdf)
—Betty Kirkpatrick: “Clichés: Neither a Defense nor a Condemnation”

**750-word essay due:** Write an essay inspired by or responding to one of these pieces about how cliches work and how we tend to use them. Not an essay about one particular cliche—but perhaps about a certain species of cliché (political/sports/academic/hiphop production/country-song lyrics/social-media, etc.) and what they do for us.

**February 9:** *The positive uses of cliché*

—Ruth Amossy, “The Cliché in the Reading Process”
—Leslie Jamison, “In Defense of Saccharin(e)”

**Proposal for 3000-word essay due:** your 2500-word essay is due March 9. It will be work-shopped on April 6, and you’ll hand in a revised version on May 4, the last class. Your essay will illuminate a subject of your choice—artistic, social, political—with some reference to the general notion of the cliché. I’m calling it an “essay”: there’s a lot of latitude there. But it must use critical thinking, and it must be be clarifying. It must be working out an idea.

**February 16:**  *Art and the cliche*

—Gilles Deleuze: “The Painting Before Painting,” from *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*
—D. H. Lawrence: “Cézanne”
—John Berger, from “Here” (in *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*, pp. 47-75)
—Greg Tate: on Kara Walker, from *Flyboy 2: The Greg Tate Reader*
—Quentin Bell: “Conformity and Nonconformity in the Fine Arts”

**500-word essay due:** Write about a single artistic cliché you have encountered, in any art form. How is it used? What is its function? Is it a “coin that has lost its image,” or is it more valuable than that?

**February 23:**  *Politics and the cliche*
March 2: Critical writing on a single word or phrase

—Amanda Hess: “Is ‘Empathy’ Really What the Nation Needs?”
—Wesley Morris: “Why Calls For A ‘National Conversation’ Are Futile”
—C. Barthes: “African Grammar”
—Teju Cole: “In Place of Thought” (http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/in-place-of-thought)
—Gustave Flaubert, “Dictionary of Accepted Ideas”: sections “A” and “B”
—Brian O’Nolan (a.k.a. Flann O’Brien): “Catechism of Cliché” extracts
—750-word essay due: write an essay inspired by this idea, or by any of these texts in particular: criticism that interrogates the received meaning of a single word, or even on a list of words.

March 9: Social media and the cliche

—Hierophante: “Clichés” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XqwbqxzsA2g]
—Chicago Long March Reenactment Society
—Ryan Trecartin, “I-Be Area (Mother Everyone)”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S6MQ_xt5nuM
—OTHERS TBD
—3000-WORD ESSAY DUE

March 16: SPRING BREAK—NO CLASS

March 23: The cliche of stereotype I

—Paul Beatty: The Sellout
—Joan Didion: “Sentimental Journeys”
March 30: *Manners, norms, stereotype II*  
—Margo Jefferson: *Negroland*

April 6: *Long Essay Workshop*

April 13:  *Poetry and cliché/sentimentality*  
—Paul Muldoon: “Symposium,” “The Old Country”  
—John Ashbery: “Variations, Calypso and Fugue On A Theme of Ella Wheeler Wilcox”  
—Mary Ruefle: “On Sentimentality”  
[others TBD]  
—Gerald Early: “The Unquiet Kingdom of Providence: The Patterson-Liston Fight”  
—**750-word essay due:** You have now read a fair amount of literature with reference to the cliché (or stereotype, homily, manners, social norms, euphemisms, etc.). Write an essay about one of the texts in particular—not a summation of what you read, but an inquiry into how the writer's sensitivity to these ideas helps them see the world and forms their writing voice.

April 20: *Beckett and the cliché*  
—Samuel Beckett: “Happy Days”  
—from Elizabeth Barry, *Beckett and Authority: The Uses of Cliché*

April 27: *Music and the cliché*  
TBD

May 4: *LAST CLASS*  
—**REVISED 3000-WORD ESSAY DUE**