

You learn something new every day.

You learn something new every day.” It’s a cliché. And the word cliché actually comes from a printing term. It originated in the days when printing was done using metal blocks with individual letters arranged to form the words in a layout, and printers would pre-prepare the most commonly used phrases as a single piece of metal to avoid having to assemble the phrase every time they needed to use it. This block of type was called a cliché.

Raining Cats and Dogs

It was also known by another printing term; stereotype. In printing terms, a cliché and a stereotype were the same thing, and the former originated from the French language. It quickly developed into a word to describe an idea, or an element in an artistic work, which had become overused to the point of losing its original meaning or impact. A French poet in the 1800s called Gérard de Nerval said, “The first man who compared a woman to a rose was a poet. The second, an imbecile.” (Bit harsh I reckon, but you get the point.)

Clichés were used for visuals as well as phrases, where plates were engraved with stock images for use in layouts featuring stories on similar subjects. In modern times, visual clichés are often used effectively in comedy, and, some would say irritatingly, in advertising.

Stereotype was derived from the Greek word ‘stereos’, meaning ‘solid, firm’ and ‘blow, impression, engraved mark’ (not the plural for a ghetto blaster) and its modern sense was first coined (spot the cliché) in 1798. For example, an image of a stereotypical banker may still be imagined as a stern looking mustachioed fellow wearing a bowler hat and carrying an umbrella, even though that’s not what they look like these days.

Above: A stereotypical image about slavery in Brazil, used by an early 20th century printer, from designer Gustavo Piqueira’s book ‘Brazilian Clichés’.

So there you go. That’s the something new I’ve learned today. There are quite a few other modern terms and phrases that originate from old printing techniques, such as ‘uppercase’ and ‘lowercase’, ‘wrong end of the stick’ and, most obviously, ‘hot off the press’. But I’d better leave it at that so there’s something left to learn tomorrow...

Laurie Cansfield

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