

“LET’S PUSH THE ENVELOPE OUT OF THE BOX” More Mixed and Mashed Metaphors

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I last wrote about mixed metaphors in the November 2008 issue of *Word Ways*. A friend who read that article chastised me because not all the examples I cited meet the strict definition of a mixed metaphor. After some consideration, I conceded that she had a point.

So let’s review: A mixed metaphor is a combination of two figures of speech that unintentionally results in an incongruous or impossible image: “The proposal is on the back burner in a holding pattern.” “It’s the whole kettle of fish in a nutshell.” Or ponder this classic student blooper: “A virgin forest is a place where the hand of man has never set foot.”

In contrast, the following examples were among those that provoked my friend’s criticism: “You’ve got to have the stomach for this and be able to take the heat.” “I plan on sitting on the money for a while so I can get my feet on the ground.” “He made an offer only to pull the plug in the eleventh hour.”

It’s true: These are not literally mixed metaphors. They don’t display blatant incongruities, nor do they describe something that physically cannot exist. But the sentences are still problematic. They sound awkward; they use clichés that collide; they create ludicrous mental images. So perhaps examples in this genre should be dubbed *clashing metaphors*—or, to preserve the alliteration, *mashed metaphors*.

Here’s a new collection of specimens, culled from my routine reading and other sources. But this time, let’s divide them by category. First, a few that meet the official definition of a mixed metaphor:

- “I’m going to milk the gold rush as long as I can.”
- “She’s been burning the midnight oil at both ends.”
- “Let’s plant the seed and watch it catch fire.”
- “This will take the edge off the nail biting.”
- “Flying under the radar, we don’t do everything with a splash.”
- “By 2011, Mr. Robinov plans for DC Comics to supply the material for up to two of the six or eight tent-pole films he hopes Warner Bros. will have in the pipeline by then.”

- “If we crush the grapes of hope into raisins of despair, they may not be able to bounce back in the fall.”
- A sportswriter interviewing a basketball player asked how his team was doing. “The ship be sinking,” he replied. How far it could sink? “Sky’s the limit.”

Now here are examples that fit our new rubric of clashing or mashed metaphors:

- “I’m the last of the Mohicans and I’m hanging on by a thread.”
- “I had issues with the DNA of the project and because there were so many chefs in the kitchen.”
- “We saved for a rainy day, but . . . the depth of this emergency means there are no longer any sacred cows.”
- “Sure, I wish we were all on the same page but it just so happens the Catholic Church is a very big tent.”
- “If President Obama isn’t already in enough hot water being behind the curve of American political and personal thinking. . . .”
- “How is it possible that these people have not been frog-walked to the nearest jail, let alone being given responsibility for selling the henhouse they were supposed to be protecting?”
- “If he had a weakness as a performer, it was his workaholic’s tendency to accept projects out of the second drawer, just to keep the wheels spinning.”
- “Just before the ax fell, lightning struck and my life changed. . . .”

Finally, I spotted in a newspaper article this remarkable sequence of bromides, all within a single quotation:

- “The downturn has had a huge impact, but I feel we’ve turned a corner. We’re not out of the woods, but we are being told all the time that we are the beacon of light out there. . . . At the end of the day, we’re hopeful that advertisers will realize. . . .”

Whew! Here’s a tip for writers: Be careful to avoid mixing or mashing your metaphors, which can result in embarrassing consequences like those above. When you review your draft, *visualize* any metaphors it contains. See them as if they were literal. If the images are contradictory or impossible or absurd, or strings of clichés, delete or rewrite.

Trust me: When you “iron all the bugs out,” your writing will improve!