

## IT'S ALL LOW-HANGING FRUIT ON STEROIDS Many More Mixed and Mashed Metaphors

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I spotted it in an ad for a vitamin supplement. The company lambastes its competitors for selling what it calls “kitchen-sink formulas that are all hat and no cattle.”

This is a quintessential mixed metaphor. It deserves to take its place with such classics as “It’s on the back burner in a holding pattern” and “We need to iron the bugs out.”

To review, a *mixed metaphor* is a phrase in which two or more figures of speech are contradictory, ludicrous, or impossible when visualized as if they were literal. In some cases, the tropes don’t meet this definition but still clash awkwardly or create a string of eye-rolling clichés. I’ve dubbed this latter phenomenon a *mashed metaphor*. Both types usually qualify as linguistic errors and bad writing, although the unintentional humor they generate is lagniappe.

In my recent exposure to the media and e-mail correspondence—along with examples contributed by friends—I’ve encountered more specimens of this genre than you can shake a carload at! At the risk of ruffling feathers, let’s throw these bad apples under the bus. Sure, I might be accused of cherry-picking the rotten eggs. But when you draw a line in the sand, you have to pull back the curtain.

All of the following are, alas, genuine.

- “Let’s roll with the hot hand.”
- “I hope this pulls into focus the bottom line on this work.”
- “Oh my God; I’ve been sleeping on a gold mine.”
- Re *Downton Abbey*, perhaps intended jokingly: “Can a cash cow jump a shark?”
- “Reading takes its color . . . from the ways it is aerated by those interruptions.”
- “But I don’t recall there was ever a guillotine in January where it was just, ‘Everybody out of the pool immediately.’”
- “The harassed and humiliated Sam has a nimbus of pathos around him that lets a little helium out of the humor balloon.”
- “We don’t want to jettison that avenue of approach.”

- “Such violence does not exist in a vacuum but snowballs from intolerance and bullying that begins in classrooms. . . .”
- Webinar title: “Unleashing Barriers to Maximize Think-Tank Impact.”
- “What a great time it was to create a brave new world from whole cloth. . . .”

Now for the somewhat less ridiculous but still problematic mashed metaphors:

- “I need to put the brakes on that and look at it in a different light.”
- “She’s just kind of someone who wants to swim with the fish. She didn’t like royal treatment.”
- “Let’s not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Let’s try to jump-start things. . . .”
- “We looked at eternity right in the face a couple of times and he was as cool as a hog on ice.”
- “People thought he was a shoot-from-the-hip, back-of-the napkin kind of guy.”
- Re Trump’s candidacy: “Just the right dose of smelling salts to revive a public life that had long wilted.”
- “Once in a blue moon, a run-of-the-mill sitcom ends up catching lightning in a bottle. . . .”
- “Everybody is really having their fingers crossed. I’m sure there are a few businesses that are really hanging on by a thread, waiting for this bump up.”
- “I have a very thick skin. Without going down a rabbit hole here, you could argue that some of my emotional wiring wasn’t working terribly well.”
- “We would probably have to hold our noses if we have to cave in and give her our vote in order to keep the monster at bay.”
- “Americans have tightened our belts to cope with a roller-coaster economy which now seems stuck in low gear.”

It’s time to nip this in the bud by throwing in the towel. This is my ninth collection of mixed metaphors for *Word Ways*, but it won’t be the last. If that ship hasn’t sailed, I’ll be back to square one with guns blazing. You can build a better mousetrap when you have skin in the game. And after all, at the end of the day, there’s no silver bullet.

*CREDITS AND THANKS: “Jettison”: Fred Cookinham, Woodside, New York. “Whole cloth”: John Mauldin, Dallas, Texas. “Tightened belts”: Patrick Peterson, San Jose, California.*