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THE FACTS ON FILE DICTIONARY OF CLICHÉS

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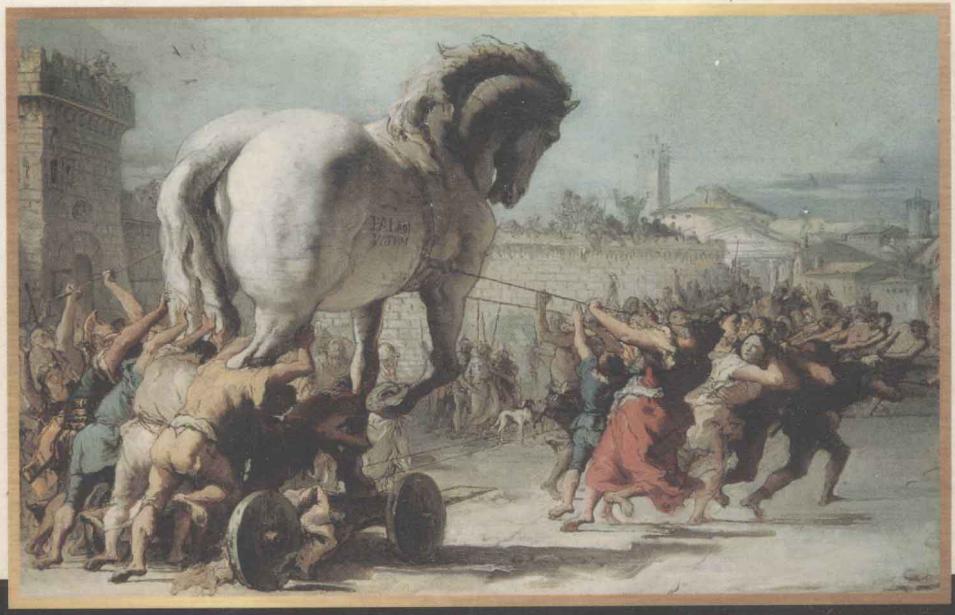

reeks bearing gifts, beware of/like. Do not trust enemies who pretend to be iends. The term refers to the treachery of the Greeks during the Trojan Wars, hen they entered the city of Troy bearing the "gift" of a large wooden horse that as actually filled with soldiers who then burned down the city.

CHRISTINE AMMER

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Checkmark Books
An imprint of Facts On File, Inc.
132 West 31st Street
New York NY 10001

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ammer, Christine.
The Facts On File dictionary of clichés / Christine Ammer.
p.cm.
Rev. ed. of: Have a nice day—no problem! c1992.
Includes index.
ISBN 0-8160-4356-6 (hardcover: alk. paper)—ISBN 0-8160-4357-4 (pbk.: alk. paper)
1. Clichés—Dictionaries. 2. English language—Usage—Dictionaries.
I. Title: Dictionary of clichés. II. Ammer, Christine. Have a nice day—no problem!
III. Title.
PE1689 .A48 2001
423'.1—dc21 2001023191

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You can find Facts On File on the World Wide Web at http://www.factsonfile.com

Text design by Sandra Watanabe
Cover design by Cathy Rincon

Printed in the United States of America

MP FOF 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
(pbk) 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

In memory of Dean S. Ammer

Author's Note

The 3,500 or so clichés in this dictionary include some of the most commonly used verbal formulas in our language. Some of them have been so overused that they set our teeth on edge (there's one!); *have a nice day* probably fits that category. Others are useful and picturesque shorthand that simplifies communication; *an eye for an eye* is one of those. In short, not all clichés are bad, and it is not the purpose of this book to persuade speakers and writers to avoid them altogether. Rather, it is to clarify their meaning, to describe their origin, and to illustrate their use. Indeed, clichés are fine, provided that the user is aware of using them. At the very least this book helps to identify them.

For etymology, for the derivation and history of these phrases, I have relied on the standard sources used by most lexicographers. Chief among them are the early proverb collections of John Heywood, James Howell, John Ray, Erasmus, and Thomas Fuller; the record of contemporary speech made by Jonathan Swift and the dictionaries of colloquialisms by Francis Grose; and that bible of modern etymology, the *Oxford English Dictionary,* which merits one of the few abbreviations used in this book, *OED.* Other modern linguists whose work has been helpful include the late Ebenezer Cobham Brewer, Eric Partridge, and John Ciardi, and the very much alive William Safire and his many correspondents via *The New York Times.*

For quotations I have relied on similar standard sources, principally *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* and the Oxford and Penguin dictionaries of quotations. To identify quotations from the Bible and from plays, I use the system 2:3, where 2 stands for the Bible chapter (or act of the play) and 3 for the Bible verse (or scene). Unless otherwise noted, Bible references are to the King James Version (1611).

The entries are arranged in alphabetical order, letter by letter up to the comma in the case of inversion. Thus, if a comma is part of the main term (as in *bell, book, and candle*), the entry is alphabetized as though there were no comma; if a comma is not part of the term (as in *lean over backward, to*), the alphabetization stops at the comma. Further, words in parentheses are disregarded for alphabetizing purposes; *get (something) off one's chest* is alphabetized as though it were *get off one's chest.*

Terms are listed under the initial article (*a* or *the*) only when it is an essential part of the term. For example, *the pits* is considered to begin with *t* but *a pig in a*

poke is considered to begin with *p.* In phrases where a pronoun is implied, such as *lick his chops* or *take her down a peg,* I have substituted either *one(s)* or *someone;* thus it is *lick one's chops* and *take someone down a peg.* Numbers in figures, as in *A-1,* are treated as though written out (A-one). Alternate forms of a cliché are indicated by a slash, as in *make the best of it / a bad bargain.* Where there are several phrases around a central word, the term is alphabetized under that word; *to catch napping* and *to be caught napping* are found under *napping, to be caught / catch.* In cases where a reader is likely to look up an alternative word, I have supplied cross-references, which are printed in SMALL CAPITALS (for example, see also ON THE FENCE.)

Because this system is admittedly imperfect, the reader who has difficulty locating a term is advised to look in the index at the back of the book.

I am deeply indebted to the many friends and acquaintances who have lent their assistance and expertise to this project. Among those who must be singled out are the late Albert H. Morehead, who first taught me the rudiments of lexicography; and my many librarian friends, with special thanks to the reference staff of Cary Memorial Library in Lexington, Massachusetts, who unstintingly gave their precious time to help track down elusive sources. The greatest debt is owed to my late husband, Dean S. Ammer, who patiently put up with countless interruptions and supplied the best intuitive knowledge of idiomatic speech that any cliché collector could wish for. This book is vastly better owing to their help. Its errors and shortcomings are solely my own.

—Christine Ammer

THE FACTS ON FILE DICTIONARY OF CLICHÉS

Contents

a

about face, to do an To reverse a decision or change one's opinion. The term comes from the American military command to turn 180 degrees at attention, dating from the mid-nineteenth century, and by 1900 was being used figuratively. A more recent colloquial usage is *to do a 180,* but it has not yet reached cliché status.

about the size of it An approximately accurate version of a situation, event, or circumstance. It generally is used as a summing up: "That's about the size of it."

absence makes the heart grow fonder A separation enhances love. This counterpart of FAMILIARITY BREEDS CONTEMPT first appeared in an anthology of poems published in 1602 (it was the first line of an anonymous poem), but it was more or less ignored until it reappeared in 1850 as the last line of a song, "The Isle of Beauty," by T. Haynes Bayly. Within the next half-century it was used so much that by 1900 it was a threadbare cliché.

according to Hoyle On highest authority, in keeping with established rules. Edmond Hoyle, an Englishman born in 1679 and buried in 1769, wrote short treatises on five different card games (they were bound together in one volume in 1746). Within a year his name appeared on other books published by plagiarists, which also gave rules and advice for playing games. This practice has continued to the present day, and there are rule books about poker and numerous other games, all invoking the authority of Hoyle, who died long before these games were invented.

ace in the hole A hidden advantage. In stud poker the dealer gives each player a card facedown, called a "hole card"; from that point on all other cards are dealt faceup. Should the hole card be an ace, a high card, the player has an advantage unknown to his opponents. Stud poker was first introduced shortly after the Civil War and played mostly in what is now the Midwest but then was the West. In time "ace in the hole" became western slang for a hidden weapon, such as a gun carried in a shoulder holster, and by the early 1920s it was used figuratively for any hidden leverage. The related *ace up one's sleeve* comes from the practice of dishonest gamblers who would hide a winning card in just this way. See also UP ONE'S SLEEVE.

Achilles' heel A vulnerable or weak spot. The term is derived from the Greek myth of the hero Achilles, whose mother held him by the heel while dipping him into the River Styx to make him immortal. He eventually was killed by an arrow shot into his heel. The term became a literary metaphor about two centuries ago and remains current as a cliché.

acid test, the A conclusive trial to establish the truth or worth of something or someone. The term comes from a test long used to distinguish gold from copper or some other metal. Most corrosive acids do not affect gold, but a solution of nitric acid and hydrochloric acid dissolves the metal. Used literally by jewelers in the late nineteenth century, the term soon was employed figuratively, by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson among others.

across the board Affecting all classes and categories. The term, originally American, comes from horse-racing, where a bet covering all winning possibilities—win (first place), place (second place), or show (third place)—was so described. By about 1950 it was extended to other situations, principally of an economic nature, as in across-the-board wage increases (for all employees), tax reductions (for all brackets), air-fare increases, and the like.

actions speak louder than words What you do is more important than what you say. A proverb appearing in ancient Greek as well as in practically every modern language, this precise wording dates from the nineteenth century. A fifteenth-century version was "A man ought not to be deemed by his wordes, but by his workis" (*Dictes and Sayenges of the Philosophirs,* 1477).

act your age Don't be childish or act foolish. This admonition appears to date from the 1920s. "Be your age" is the caption of a 1925 *New Yorker* cartoon; "act your age" appears in a 1932 issue of *American Speech,* a journal that chronicles current usage.

add fuel to the fire/flames, to To exacerbate an already inflammatory situation, increasing anger or hostility. The Roman historian Livy used this turn of phrase (in Latin) nearly two thousand years ago, and it was repeated (in English) by numerous writers thereafter, among them John Milton (*Samson Agonistes,* 1671): "He's gone, and who knows how he may report thy words by adding fuel to the flame."

add insult to injury, to To make harm worse by adding humiliation. The phrase has been traced to a Greek fable in which a bald man, trying to kill a fly on his head, misses and hits himself very hard, and the fly replies, "You wanted to kill me for merely landing on you; what will you do to yourself

now that you have added insult to injury?" It has since been applied to countless situations by as many writers, and has long been a cliché.

a dog's age A long time. An American slang term dating from about 1830, this expression doesn't make a great deal of sense, since the average dog is not especially long-lived. It appeared in print in 1836: "That blamed line gale has kept me in bilboes such a dog's age" (*Knickerbocker* magazine).

a dog's life Miserable circumstances. The term has been traced to Erasmus, who pointed out the wretched subservient existence of dogs in the mid-sixteenth century, as well as to the seventeenth-century proverb, "It's a dog's life, hunger and ease." It was certainly a cliché by the time Rudyard Kipling (*A Diversity of Creatures,* 1899) wrote, "Politics are not my concern. . . . They impressed me as a dog's life without a dog's decencies." See also DIE LIKE A DOG.

afraid of one's own shadow Extremely timid, excessively fearful. In *Richard III* (c. 1513), Sir Thomas More wrote, "Who may lette her feare her owne shadowe," although a few years later Erasmus cited Plato as having said the same thing in Greek hundreds of years before. Henry David Thoreau used the phrase to describe the timidity of Concord's town selectmen in refusing to toll the parish bell at John Brown's hanging (1859), and by then it had been in use for at least two centuries.

after one's own heart Precisely to one's liking. Considered a cliché since the late nineteenth century, this phrase appears in the Old Testament's first Book of Samuel (13:14): "The Lord hath sought him a man after his own heart, and the Lord hath commanded him to be captain over his people."

against the grain, to go "There was something about Prohibition that went against the American grain," a high school history teacher once said, quite innocent of her pun on this phrase, which means contrary to expectations, custom, or common sense. The literal meaning, against the natural direction of the fibers in a piece of wood, was turned figurative by Shakespeare in *Coriolanus* ("Preoccupied with what you rather must do than what you should, made you against the grain to voice him consul"). By the time Dickens used it in *Edwin Drood* (1870) it probably was already a cliché.

age before beauty Defer to the older person. This phrase is traditionally used when inviting another individual to pass through a doorway before one. Eric Partridge described it as a mock courtesy uttered by a young woman to an older man. Currently it is used only ironically or sarcastically. According to an old story, it was said rather snidely by Clare Boothe Luce when ushering Dorothy Parker through a doorway, and Parker replied,

"Pearls before swine." A related cliché is *after you, Alphonse—no, after you, Gaston,* repeated a number of times (in Britain, *after you, Claude—no, after you, Cecil*). The American version is based on a comic strip by Frederick Burr Opper, *Alphonse and Gaston,* which was popular in the early 1900s, and pokes fun at exaggerated politeness.

ahead of the pack In advance of the rest of a group, doing better than the others. The noun *pack* has been used for a group of persons since the 1400s, although for about 400 years it had a derogatory connotation, as in "a pack of thieves." That sense is not implied in the cliché. The act of advancing beyond the others is called *breaking out of the pack.*

A related phrase is *ahead of the game,* meaning in a position of advantage, usually financial advantage. The *game* here alludes to gambling, but the term is applied to any endeavor.

aid and abet, to To assist and promote or encourage something or someone. The pairing of these nearly synonymous verbs, always in this order, comes from criminal law, where it denotes helping, facilitating and promoting the commission of a crime. The verbs themselves are quite old, *aid* dating from about 1400 and *abet* from about 1300. Although the term still is principally used in relation to criminal actions, it gradually crept into more general speech, as in "The influx of Canada geese on the golf course, aided and abetted by people feeding them . . ."

ain't it the truth That's definitely so. This slangy phrase dates from about 1900. It is often put regretfully—That's so but I wish it weren't—as in "'I'll have to lower the price if I want to sell it fast.'—'Ain't it the truth.'"

alarums and excursions A commotion. The term comes from a stage direction often appearing in Elizabethan plays. In those days *alarums* meant a call to arms or a warning sound, especially a bell or chime, and *excursions* referred to the rushing about of soldiers or other characters. The term then came to be used humorously for any confused fighting or skirmishes, and by extension any sort of hullabaloo.

alas and alack An expression of distress, which, like *Woe is me,* is becoming obsolete. "Alas," which appears in a number of Chaucer's poems, comes from the Latin *lassum,* for "weary"; *alack* means just that, that is, wanting or missing. In time the two were combined, and eventually they were used ironically.

albatross around one's neck, an A burden or curse. The figurative meaning comes straight from Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798), a narrative poem in which a young sailor who shot an albatross,

considered an extremely unlucky action, was punished by having the dead bird hung around his neck.

alive (live) and kicking (well) Very much alive and alert; still surviving. The term originated with fishmongers who thus described their wares, meaning that they were extremely fresh. By the mid-nineteenth century it was considered a cliché. A more recent version is *alive and well,* which originated as a denial to a false report of someone's death. It was given a boost by the French singer Jacques Brel, whose show and recording, translated as *Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris,* became immensely popular in the 1970s.

all and sundry Everyone, both collectively and individually. The term dates from at least the fourteenth century and is tautological—that is, it needlessly repeats the same thing, just as the related *each and every* does.

all bets are off The agreement is canceled, because the relevant conditions have changed. This phrase comes from gambling, such as betting on a horse race, where it indicates that wagers are withdrawn. It is much more widely applied, as in "They say the wedding's scheduled for December, but to tell you the truth, all bets are off."

all cats are gray after dark/at night Without sufficient knowledge one cannot distinguish between alternatives. This assertion appeared in numerous proverb collections, beginning with John Heywood's of 1546, where it was put, "When all candels be out, all cats be grey." A still older version, dating back some 2,000 years and stated by the Roman writers Ovid and Plutarch as well as by later writers, had it that all women are the same in the dark, a view now disputed by all but the most hardened misogynists.

all ears, to be To pay close attention to what is said. The term may have originated in John Milton's *Comus* (1634): "I am all ear and took in strains that might create a soul under the ribs of death." It has been used again and again, by Anthony Trollope and others, to the present day.

all for naught Everything done has been in vain. Today a poetic word for "nothing," *naught* formerly meant "morally bad" or "worthless." Thus the King James version of the first Book of Kings (2:19) says, "The water is naught and the ground barren."

all hell breaks loose Chaos prevails. The expression crops up often in Elizabethan poetry (Robert Greene, Ben Jonson, William Shakespeare) and continued to be used by an amazing number of fine poets (Milton, Dryden, Swift, and Browning, among others).

all intents and purposes, for (to) In practical terms; virtually. Since *intent* and *purpose* mean the same thing, the term is a tautology. According to Eric Partridge, it has been a cliché since the mid-nineteenth century. It originated in English law in the 1500s, when it was even more long-windedly phrased, *to all intents, constructions and purposes.*

all in the/a day's work To be considered a normal part of one's job or routine. Traced back to the eighteenth century, the expression occurred with considerable frequency and was used both seriously and ironically: "As the huntsman said when the lion ate him" (Charles Kingsley, *Westward Ho!,* 1855).

all in the same boat See IN THE SAME BOAT AS.

all other things (else) being equal Given the same circumstances. This term began as the Latin phrase *ceteris paribus;* sometimes the word *all* is omitted, and *else* is substituted for *other things.* Eric Partridge held that the Latin form was already a cliché in the eighteenth century, and the English form became one in the late nineteenth century. Thomas Babington Macaulay was among the many learned writers who used it (although slightly differently) in his *History of England* (1849–61): "All other circumstances being supposed equal . . ."

all over but the shouting, it's The outcome is certain, though it may not yet be widely known. Probably originating in the mid-nineteenth century, the phrase was first used for the outcome of sporting events, elections, and similar competitive undertakings, and still is.

all over creation Everywhere. This homespun cliché uses *creation* in the sense of everything in the world that, by implication, God created.

all present and accounted for Everyone (or everything) is here. This cliché originated in the military as a response to roll call and actually is redundant—if one is present one is also accounted for. The British version, *all present and correct,* where *correct* means "in order," makes more sense but did not cross the Atlantic.

all roads lead to Rome Any of several choices will lead to the same result. The metaphor is based on the ancient empire's system of roads, which radiated from the capital like the spokes of a wheel. As a figure of speech it appeared as early as the twelfth century. It was used by Chaucer, and occurs in numerous other languages as well.

all's fair in love and war Any tactic or strategy is permissible. The idea was expressed for centuries by numerous writers, from Chaucer (*Troilus and*

Criseyde) to Maxwell Anderson (*What Price Glory?*). Modern versions sometimes add or substitute another enterprise, such as "in love and war and politics" (George Ade), or "in love and tennis (or any other competitive sport)."

all systems go Everything is ready for action. The term is relatively new, originating in the space launches of the 1960s, and became well known through widespread television coverage of these events. John Powers, the public information officer for the United States space program from 1959 to 1964, would announce, "All systems go. Everything is A-OK." The phrase soon was extended to other endeavors.

all that glitters is not gold Appearances can be deceiving. A proverbial saying since the late Middle Ages, it appears in numerous languages to this day. O. Henry wrote a story entitled "The Gold that Glittered," and two other writers observed in addition that "all isn't garbage that smells."

all things considered When everything has been taken into account. The modern sense implies a careful weighing of all circumstances involved, making this phrase a precautionary one (compare it to WHEN ALL'S SAID AND DONE). G. K. Chesterton used it as the title of a collection of his essays (1908), and it also is the name of a thoughtful but long-winded talk show on U.S. public radio. In both cases it is the idea of thoughtfulness that is stressed. In ordinary speech the phrase has been in common use for about a century.

all things to all men, to be To adapt so as to satisfy everyone. The term appears in the New Testament of the Bible, in the first book of Corinthians (9:22): "I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some." Today it is more often used negatively—that is, one cannot be all things to all men, although political candidates in particular continue to try. Eric Partridge believed it was a cliché by the nineteenth century.

all thumbs, to be To be clumsy. The locution was already considered proverbial in John Heywood's collection in 1546 ("When he should get ought, eche fynger is a thumbe") and has been repeated countless times since.

all-time high (low) A record achievement (or failure), never before surpassed. An Americanism from the early twentieth century, the term has been applied to matters economic (production), recreational (golf score), and numerous other areas.

all to the good Largely an advantage. The term dates from the days when *good* was an accounting term that meant profit or worth, so that "all

to the good" meant net profit. By the late nineteenth century the meaning had become much more general and the phrase a cliché.

all wet, to be To be completely mistaken. The expression is American slang that became current in the first half of the twentieth century. It is not known what *wet* refers to—soaked from a rainstorm or dunking, drunk and therefore incapable of good judgment, or something else.

all wool and a yard wide Genuine, not a sham. The expression comes from the yard-goods industry, where a seller would claim that a piece of cloth was 100 percent wool and measured fully a yard, in contrast to inferior material and short measures.

almighty dollar, the The power of money; by extension, crass materialism. The term was used by Washington Irving in *The Creole Village* (1836) ("The almighty dollar, that great object of universal devotion"), perhaps echoing Ben Jonson's sentiment of two centuries earlier ("That for which all virtue now is sold, and almost every vice—almighty gold").

a long face, to wear/draw/pull To look sad or dissatisfied. A common expression in the nineteenth century, it no doubt came from the elongated look resulting from the mouth being drawn down at the corners and the eyes downcast.

along for the ride, to go/to come/just To take part but passively. The phrase, originating in the United States in the mid-twentieth century, implies some of the acquiescence of *go along with* but makes it clear that one is not IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT.

alpha and omega, the The sum of something, the beginning and the end, symbolized by the first (alpha) and last (omega) letters of the Greek alphabet. The Book of Revelation (1:8) states: "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord." The modern equivalent is *a to z*. Also see FROM SOUP TO NUTS.

American dream, the The image of prosperity, achievable through hard work. A political cliché invoked by candidates, it was used by Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* (1835) but may be even older. In 1975 psychoanalyst David Abrahansen was quoted as saying, "The American dream is in part responsible for a great deal of crime and violence, because people feel that the country owes them not only a living but a good living." A similar cliché of even less precise definition is *the American way,* evoking an image of democracy, fairness, and other desirable traits.

an apple a day (keeps the doctor away) A proverbial preventive remedy. Versions of this saying date from the seventeenth century or earlier, appearing in John Ray's proverb collection of 1670 and elsewhere. A cliché by the late nineteenth century, it gave rise to numerous humorous versions, such as "A stanza a day to keep the wolf away" by the poet Phyllis McGinley.

and then some A great deal more, more of the same. This intensifier is used in such contexts as "Their house needs new paint, a new roof, new landscaping, and then some," or "There were speeches by the president, vice-president, chief financial officer, general counsel, and then some." The phrase dates from the early 1900s.

an open book, he/she is (like an) Very obvious. See READ SOMEONE LIKE AN OPEN BOOK.

another day, another dollar Another day's work is done. The expression became current in the United States in the early twentieth century, presumably when a dollar a day was a living wage.

ants in one's pants Extremely restless, jumpy. This vivid metaphor no doubt has survived because of its rhyming character, just as alliteration enhanced its seventeenth-century forerunner, *a breeze (gadfly) in one's breech(es)*. Several twentieth-century writers are credited with popularizing the phrase; among them are George Kaufman and Moss Hart, in *The Man Who Came to Dinner* (1939): "I'll get the ants out of those moonlit pants." The cliché also gave rise to the slangy adjective *antsy,* for restless or jumpy.

any port in a storm Any relief is welcome when one is in great difficulties. The phrase appears in an eighteenth-century play by James Cobb and in *Fanny Hill* (1759), by John Cleland, where it is suggested that it was already common.

A-OK Excellent. The term dates from a specific incident in 1961, when the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Colonel "Shorty" Power misunderstood astronaut Alan Shepard's "OK" for "A-OK," indicating that his suborbital flight was going well. The term caught on, along with other space-flight terms that entered the language about the same time.

A-1 The best quality. The term originated in the 1775 edition of *Lloyd's Register of British and Foreign Shipping,* in which the state of a ship's hull was designated by a letter grade and the condition of the anchor, cables, and so forth by a number grade. This insurance rating was soon transferred to numerous other areas and has been a cliché since the late nineteenth century.

a poor thing but mine own It may not be much, but it belongs to me. The phrase misquotes Touchstone's description of Audrey in Shakespeare's