

*Overused, meaningless phrases fall out of fashion. It would be awesome if they did it a little quicker.*

# The Incredibly Massive Number of Hackneyed Words Is Surreal

By Joseph Epstein

A hackneyed phrase is one characterized by its unoriginality, overuse and, not least, imprecision. The air seems filled with such phrases just now. Consider how the often-used word "focused" has taken on the adjective "laser," to become the fully hackneyed "laser-focused." Not all hackneyed language comes in full phrases; some single words also qualify. How they catch on remains a bit of a mystery, but catch on they do. "Incredible," you might say.

You might say it, that is, if you have no ear for language and don't mind sounding like everyone else who currently avails himself of this hackneyed word. Incredible, a synonym for unbelievable or surpassing belief, has become the hackneyed word of the day. The word has a hackneyed history. An ad for "the incredible edible egg" ran in the 1970s. The show "That's Incredible!" was on television from 1980-84.

Now the word has flared up again. "Incredible" is much favored by President Trump, who regularly cites people he has hired for doing "an incredible job," often not long before firing them. In the mouths of sports announcers, athletes fairly regularly bring off "incredible" feats. The experience of younger actors working with older ones tends to be "incredible." So many otherwise quite credible experiences are now considered incredible.

The use of "incredible," to put it another way, is massive. A home run in the late innings of a game can also be massive. "Massive" was the Republicans' defeat of the Democrats in the last election. As for the laughter at Sarah Silverman's most recent HBO performance, it, too, was massive. With all these things and more being massive, we no longer have a word meaning large and heavy or solid, to describe mountains or skyscrapers or offensive linemen in the National Football League. When words become hackneyed, as incredible and massive have, they lose their original, useful functions, a loss for the language and another gain for unoriginality.

Surreal, really, when you think about it. Yet if you really thought about it, you would never call anything "surreal." Derrek Lee recently described being elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame as "incredible," adding that the feeling was "surreal." Originally meaning fantastic, "surreal" is now regularly used to mean just about anything out of the ordinary. Your getting a ticket for speeding was surreal. So, too, was the way you first met your wife, and the recent firing of your supervisor at work. Surreal, all of it. As for the surrealism of the artists Miró, Magritte and Dalí, what did those jokers know about the surreal?

Hackneyed words that previously had their day pass, alas not quickly enough, into oblivion. Such seems to be the case with "awesome." I used to lunch weekly at a neighborhood restaurant, where our waiter greeted my friends and me by saying, in response to our entrance, "Awesome." When after having been seated we told him we were ready to order, he said, "Awesome." When he asked if everything was all right,

or if one or another of us wanted more coffee, in answer to our response, he replied, "Awesome." Leaving I always thanked him for his good service, to which he replied not "thanks," not even "no problem," but with a final, "Awesome."

The awesome waiter has long since left the restaurant to attend chef school, which I trust he will find awesome. Now, though, I wish that for every one of his awesomes, I had responded with a "Whatever!" another hackneyed word that I hope is on its way out. "Whatever!" always understood with an exclamation mark, was used as a way to end the thread of a conversation, if not the entire conversation. You make an interesting point, and, instead of engaging you on the point, I exclaim "Whatever!" which means, in effect, case closed, I'd rather not talk about it. Damn rude, when you think about it, but then you may not wish to think about it.



Hackneyed words and phrases come and go. Let us hope that the mis- and overused “incredible,” “massive” and “surreal” will soon depart everyday language. No doubt newly hackneyed words await in the wings. Oh, well, rack 'em up; or, should I say, hack 'em-up?

*Mr. Epstein is author, most recently, of “Never Say You’ve Had a Lucky Life.”*

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