

Bleak house close reading

Adapted from <<http://www.slideshare.net/andyfisher/bleak-house-close-reading>>

1. Learning how to write a good descriptive passage
2. [2.](#) The best way to learn how to write good prose fiction is to study how great writers in the past have done so. This is a similar process to sketching great paintings to learn the rules of composition and line.
3. [3.](#) In order to do this we are going to refine your ability to carry out 'close reading'.
4. [4.](#) Close reading is an important skill for any form of literary study. It means paying especially close attention to your text and the effect of the writer's choices. In the IGCSE examination this is tested in the 'writer's effect' question.
5. [5.](#) Close reading means not only reading and understanding the meanings of the individual printed words; it also involves making yourself sensitive to all the nuances and subtleties of language used by skilled writers.
6. [6.](#) You should look carefully at:
 - vocabulary
 - sentence construction
 - imagery
 - themes addressed
 - narrative perspective
 - aural effects
 - the relationship between the words
7. [7.](#) Close reading can be seen as four separate levels of attention which we bring to the text. Most casual readers unconsciously employ all four simultaneously, but may be unable to articulate how they have arrived at their understanding or appreciation of the text. You are looking to become conscious of the 'coding' and be able to articulate how it is operating.
8. [8.](#) Writer's effect Linguistic Semantic Structural Cultural
9. [9.](#) Linguistic You pay close attention to the surface linguistic elements of the text – that is, to aspects of vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. You might also note such things as figures of speech or any other features which contribute to the writer's individual style.
10. [10.](#) Semantic You take account at a deeper level what the words chosen imply – that is, what information they yield up upon 'unpacking', what meanings they denote and connote.
11. [11.](#) Denotation: A skull and two long bones
12. [12.](#) Connotation: death, piracy, poison, gravestone
13. [13.](#) Context is all!
14. [14.](#) Structural You note the possible relationships between words within the text. Often writers create lexical fields which build to create an atmosphere, tone or become meaningful only because they exist alongside one another.
15. [15.](#) Cultural You look at the relationship between elements of the text and things outside it.
 - How does the text position itself in relationship to other texts?
 - What stance or attitude is it adopting in relation to cultural norms?
 - What values and beliefs does it seem to hold?
16. [16.](#) Meaning Linguistic Semantic Structural Cultural
17. [17.](#) Linguistic reading is largely descriptive. We are noting what is in the text and naming its parts for possible use in the next stage of reading. Semantic reading is cognitive. That is, we need to understand what the words are telling us – both at a surface and maybe at an implicit level. Structural reading is analytic. We must assess, examine, sift, and judge a large number of items from within the text in their relationships to each other. Cultural reading is interpretive. We offer judgements on the work in its general relationship to a large body of cultural material outside it.
18. [18.](#) London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full grown snowflakes – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun.
19. [19.](#) This extract doesn't just 'describe what is there' – but it invents images and impressions. There is as much "it was as if ..." material in the extract as there is anything descriptive.
20. [20.](#) London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired

from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full grown snowflakes – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun.

21. [21.](#) This is an abrupt and astonishingly short ‘sentence’ with which to start a six hundred page novel. It is grammatically incomplete, because it does not have a verb or an object. It somehow implies the meaning ‘The scene is London.’
22. [22.](#) Each of the first four sentences here are ‘incomplete’. Dickens is taking liberties with conventional grammar – and obviously he is writing for a literate and fairly sophisticated readership. Notice also the variance in sentence length and structure for sustaining interest.
23. [23.](#) London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln’s Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full grown snowflakes – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun.
24. [24.](#) There are several proper nouns in these sentences, all signalled by capital letters. This helps to create the very credible and realistic world Dickens presents in his fiction. We believe that this is the same London which we could visit today. He seeks to establish a sense of familiarity for the target reader.
25. [25.](#) London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln’s Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full grown snowflakes – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun.
26. [26.](#) This occurs in autumn and comes from the language of the old universities (Oxford and Cambridge) which is shared by the legal profession and the Church. This will become part of a lexical field which builds throughout the rest of the first chapter.
27. [27.](#) London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln’s Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full grown snowflakes – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun.
28. [28.](#) Here ‘sitting’ is a present participle. The novel is being told in the present tense at this point, which is rather unusual. The effect is to give vividness and immediacy to the story. We are being persuaded that these events are taking place now as we bear witness to them.
29. [29.](#) London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln’s Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full grown snowflakes – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun.
30. [30.](#) This is an unusual and very strong term to describe the weather. Synonyms for ‘implacable’ include: merciless, ruthless, cruel, hard-hearted. This reflects Dickens’ genius for making almost everything in his writing original, striking, and dramatic.
31. [31.](#) London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln’s Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full grown snowflakes – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun.

32. [32.](#) This is the start of his extended simile comparing the muddy streets with the primeval world.
33. [33.](#) London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full grown snowflakes – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun.
34. [34.](#) These are slightly archaic expressions. We might normally expect 'recently' and 'astonishing' but Dickens is selecting his vocabulary to suit the subject – the prehistoric world. 'Wonderful' is being used in its original sense of – 'something we wonder at'.
35. [35.](#) London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full grown snowflakes – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun.
36. [36.](#) This suggests a humorous presentation of the Megalosaurus – and note the breadth of his vocabulary in naming the beast with such scientific precision.
37. [37.](#) London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full grown snowflakes – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun.
38. [38.](#) This is another simile, announced by the word 'like'. Dickens converts a 'large' noun ('elephant') into an adjective ('elephantine') and couples it to something which is usually small ('lizard') to describe, very appropriately it seems, his dinosaur.
39. [39.](#) London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full grown snowflakes – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun.
40. [40.](#) There is a distinct contrast, almost a shock here, in this abrupt transition from an imagined prehistoric world and its monsters to the 'real' world of Holborn in London.
41. [41.](#) London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full grown snowflakes – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun.
42. [42.](#) This is another present participle, and an unusual verb. It means 'to sink, descend, or slope downwards'. It comes from a rather 'poetic' verbal register, and it has a softness (there are no sharp or harsh sounds in it) which makes it very suitable for describing the movement of smoke.
43. [43.](#) London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full grown snowflakes – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun.
44. [44.](#) He is comparing the dense smoke (from coal fires) with another form of particularly depressing atmosphere – a drizzle of rain. Notice how he goes on to elaborate the comparison.

45. [45.](#) London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full grown snowflakes – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun.
46. [46.](#) The comparison becomes another simile: 'as big as'. Then 'snowflakes' is a well-observed comparison for an enlarged flake of soot, because they are of similar size and texture.
47. [47.](#) London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full grown snowflakes – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun.
48. [48.](#) This is an example of anthropomorphism. The inanimate world is being brought to life and of course 'mourning' reinforces the gloomy tone he is trying to evoke. It also introduces blackness (the colour of mourning) to explain how these snowflakes (actually flakes of soot) might have changed from white to black.
49. [49.](#) London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full grown snowflakes – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun.
50. [50.](#) This is why the flakes have changed colour – it extends the simile. If the sun has died, the light and life it brings to earth have also been extinguished – which reinforces the atmosphere of pre-historic darkness he is creating.
51. [51.](#) Vladimir Nabokov once observed: "Curiously enough, one cannot read a book: one can only re-read it".
52. [52.](#) So we have seen that Dickens makes this passage so effective by: Making imaginative comparisons which overlay with the descriptive details he offers Using rich vocabulary Using the present participle Making use of contrasting images Employing anthropomorphism
53. [53.](#) Now let's look at the next couple of paragraphs of the novel and see what else makes Dickens such a good writer.
54. [54.](#) Structure Point of view Strong verb choices Appealing to the senses Similes and metaphors Variety of sentence structures Concrete details Human activity to contextualise the setting Mood or atmosphere