

95 And Not Dead Yet: To Add or Subtract? That's the Question

by [Reg Green](#) (March 2024)



St Paul's from the Surrey Side, Charles-François Daubigny, 1871

For readers describing how their day went, who wonder if it's more effective to include as much detail as possible or cut through to the essentials and allow the listener's imagination to fill out the scene, two arresting examples came to mind this week that I hope will make them wonder even more! The first is from the opening of Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, itself a classic story of uncertainty.

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls

defiled among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little 'prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds.

....And still more details that encase his readers in this narrow choking world.

Or, alternatively, should you respond like the cotton picker in days gone by, whose answers about working conditions, though as bare as a skeleton, conjure up a picture of back-breaking toil, chronic exhaustion, of eating breakfast and dinner in the dark in a broken-down, noisy, over-crowded house with no expectation that things would ever change?

Being asked how many hours a day she worked she replied, "From can see to can't see."

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