

# BLEAK HOUSE

## (FOG)

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**LEVEL:**

Upper intermediate plus (B2+); suitable for adults and older teens who enjoy creative writing.

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**TIME:**

90 minutes.

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**MAIN AIM(S):**

For students to understand how stylistic choices can influence meaning, and practise making such choices in their own work.

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**SUBSIDIARY AIM(S):**

For students to practise reading for gist.

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**SUGGESTED TIMETABLE FIT:**

After a creative writing lesson, when students have brought the first draft of their writing with them to class.

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**MATERIALS:**

One worksheet per student.

A reading by Jeremy Harmer of the fog in *Bleak House* can be found on the British Council Dickens 2012 DVD (optional).

An interpretation and close reading of the fog in the opening of *Bleak House* from Lucinda Dickens Hawksley can also be found on the 'Dickens and Language' section on the British Council Dickens 2012 DVD (optional).

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**PROCEDURE:**

Stage and stage aim(s)	Timing (mins)	Interaction	Procedure
Lead in (to focus on topic, predict content)	5	teacher – student student – student teacher – student	Ask students what sort of weather they prefer. Tell students they will read a text set in London during November. Pairs/threes predict how the weather will be described. Using adjectives, they make two columns; one of likely and one of unlikely weather. Brief feedback to whiteboard.
Gist reading (to develop the skill of skimming for main ideas)	8	teacher student student – student teacher – student	Hand out <i>worksheet one</i> . Focus students on the questions in exercise one. Tell them they have four minutes to find the answers. Stress that there are some words even an educated native speaker will find difficult, but that doesn't stop the meaning from coming through. Pairs/threes discuss their answers. Encourage students to go back to text to justify their answers/find supporting evidence. Class feedback (answer, weather is muggy/foggy/dark. Maybe rainy (from 'drizzle'), or 'drizzly'.
Detailed reading (to understand imagery)	12	student – student teacher – student	Pairs work through exercise two. Allow dictionary use as outlined. Class feedback (answers provided).
Detailed reading two (to focus on writing style choices)	20	student – student (teacher monitoring actively, supporting)	Pairs/small groups work through exercise three. Class feedback (answers provided).
Speaking (to widen examples of choices in writing style)	15	student student – student	Give students four minutes to think of a favourite piece of writing, writing that has struck them as beautifully styled. It could be in English or another language, including their own. It could be prose or poetry. Groups of four or five share their ideas. Class feedback.
Writing	30	student – student	Students share the first drafts of the creative writing done earlier, in pairs or small groups. Ideally, this is short enough to read aloud to bring out any stylistic emphasis. In groups students decide what changes could be made to have more impact. Students can start redrafting if time allows, and try out early changes on each other. Redraft can be finished at home. It can be given in for assessment or (preferably) posted round the room for students to read and enjoy. They could vote for their favourite piece instead of formal assessment.

**Extra feature:** An interpretation and close reading of the fog in the opening of *Bleak House* from Lucinda Dickens Hawksley could be incorporated into this lesson plan. This short film can be found on the 'Dickens and language' section on the British Council Dickens 2012 DVD.

**BLEAK HOUSE**

(FOG) – UPPER INTERMEDIATE

# WORKSHEET ONE

## – for students

The passage below is the opening of Charles Dickens' novel *Bleak House*, missing the very first sentence.

**Exercise one**

What adjectives do you think describe the London weather in November?

Read the passage; were you right? You must not worry about any new words at the moment.

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*<sup>1</sup>, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. ❶ 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. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire<sup>2</sup>. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers. Foot passengers, jostling one another's umbrellas, in a general infection of ill temper, and losing their foot-hold at street-corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if this day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest.

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits<sup>3</sup> 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; ❷ 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.

**References:**

Charles Dickens (1993) *Bleak House*. London: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, chapter one.

<sup>1</sup> A type of dinosaur

<sup>2</sup> Another word for mud

<sup>3</sup> Small islands in the river

# WORKSHEET ONE

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## Exercise two

We will now look in detail at two images Dickens uses to convey the thickness of the mud and dirt, and the thickness of the fog.

1. Re-read the sentence starting 'Smoke lowering' **1**. Discuss the sentence with your partner. You may choose two words (together, not each, so choose carefully) to look up in the dictionary. Dickens is comparing what with what?
2. Re-read from **2** 'fog in the stem' to 'cabin'. Again, work with a partner, and again you can look up two words. What is Dickens comparing the fog to?

## Exercise three

Dickens uses this imagery to create an atmosphere (dark, thick, heavy) which will suit his story. He also uses elements of style.

1. Repetition, or overuse of any words, is usually avoided and writers reach for a thesaurus to find synonyms. But in the second paragraph, how many times does Dickens use the word 'fog'? Why?
2. How many sentences are there in each paragraph? Can you identify the main verb in each sentence? How would you describe Dickens' sentence style here, and why do you think he is using it?

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(FOG) – UPPER INTERMEDIATE

# WORKSHEET ONE

## – *trainer's notes*

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The passage below is the opening of Charles Dickens' novel *Bleak House*, missing the very first sentence.

### Exercise one

What adjectives do you think describe the London weather in November?

Read the passage; were you right? You must not worry about any new words at the moment. (I had to look 'aits' up and there are two or three others I am not completely certain about – this is perfectly normal! I know aits are found up rivers, like meadows, and that's enough for me at the moment.)

Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters **3** had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and **4** it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus<sup>1</sup>, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. **1** 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. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire<sup>2</sup>. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers. Foot passengers, **8** jostling one another's umbrellas, in a general infection of ill temper, and losing their foot-hold at street-corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers **5** have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if this day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest.

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where **6** it flows among green aits<sup>3</sup> 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 **9** 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; **2** 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, **7** as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds.

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# WORKSHEET ONE

## – answers

### Exercise one

Answers are based on class feedback. Answers may include that the weather is muggy/foggy/dark.

Maybe rainy (from 'drizzle'), or 'drizzly' etc.

### Exercise two

1. Comparing the black, sooty flakes to snow that has decided to wear black, like humans do when in mourning.
2. Comparing the fog to smoke, like the smoke in the captain's pipe.

### Exercise three

1. Is a simple matter of counting. Answer – 13 mentions of fog.
2. Each paragraph has six sentences. There is no main verb for a sentence in the entire passage. This is obvious in sentences like the first one in each paragraph. Where there are main verbs, they are in dependent clauses, not the main clause of the sentence. Examples include 'had but newly retired' ③, 'it would not be' ④, 'have been slipping and sliding' ⑤, 'it flows' ⑥, and 'as if they were' ⑦.

Instead, -ing forms have been used extensively. 'Smoke lowering' ①, 'jostling' ⑧, 'creeping... lying... hovering' ⑨.

As to why, it creates a sense of timelessness, as no main verbs means no tense. Other interpretations may be just as valid.