When the topic is most serious, understate; when least serious, exaggerate.

The American writer, author, and teacher of writing, Roy Peter Clark, offers this “tool of thumb” about when to understate and when to exaggerate: The more serious or dramatic the subject, the more the writer backs off, creating the effect that the story tells itself. The playful or inconsequential the topic, the more the writer can show off. Back off or show off.

He then cites this example from John Hersey’s opening to *Hiroshima*:

> At exactly fifteen minutes past eight in the morning, on August 6, 1945, Japanese time, at the moment when the atomic bomb flashed above Hiroshima, Miss Toshiko Sasaki, had just sat down at her place in the plant office and was turning her head to speak to the girl in the next desk.

Clark explains how this book begins “with the most ordinary of circumstances, a recitation of the time and date, with two office workers about to converse. The flash of the atomic bomb hides inside the sentence. Because we imagine the horror to follow, Hersey’s understatement creates the anxiety of anticipation.”