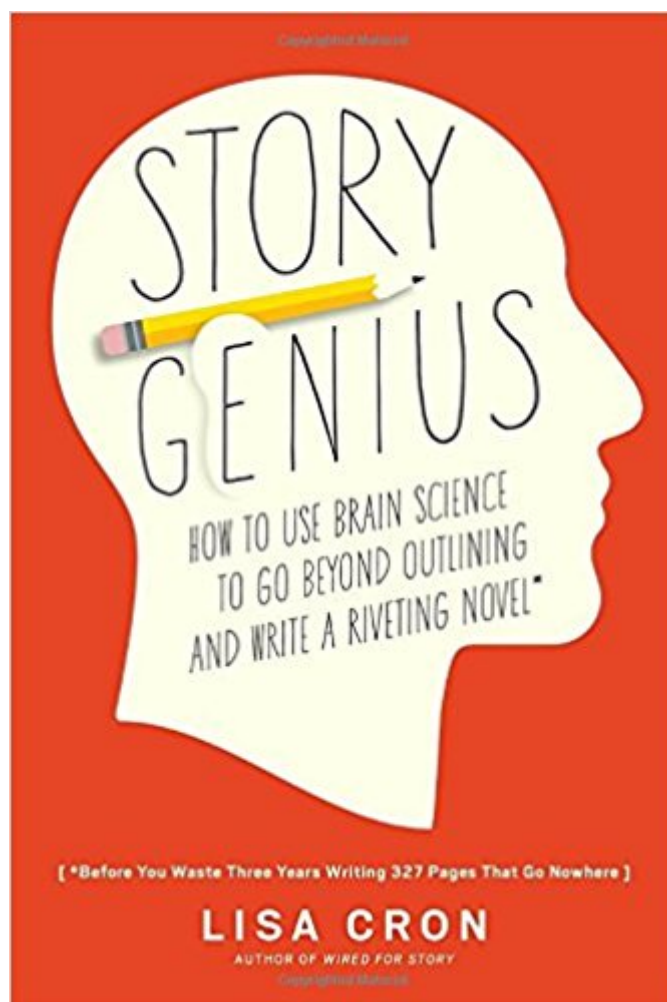


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# Story Genius: How To Use Brain Science To Go Beyond Outlining And Write A Riveting Novel (Before You Waste Three Years Writing 327 Pages That Go Nowhere)





## Synopsis

Following on the heels of Lisa Cron's breakout first book, *Wired for Story*, this writing guide reveals how to use cognitive storytelling strategies to build a scene-by-scene blueprint for a riveting story. It's every novelist's greatest fear: pouring their blood, sweat, and tears into writing hundreds of pages only to realize that their story has no sense of urgency, no internal logic, and so is a page one rewrite. The prevailing wisdom in the writing community is that there are just two ways around this problem: pantsing (winging it) and plotting (focusing on the external plot). Story coach Lisa Cron has spent her career discovering why these methods don't work and coming up with a powerful alternative, based on the science behind what our brains are wired to crave in every story we read (and it's not what you think). In *Story Genius* Cron takes you, step-by-step, through the creation of a novel from the first glimmer of an idea, to a complete multilayered blueprint including fully realized scenes that evolves into a first draft with the authority, richness, and command of a riveting sixth or seventh draft.

## Book Information

Paperback: 288 pages

Publisher: Ten Speed Press; 1 edition (August 9, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1607748894

ISBN-13: 978-1607748892

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.8 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.9 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 135 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #12,189 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #50 in Books > Textbooks > Reference > Writing Skills #84 in Books > Reference > Writing, Research & Publishing Guides > Writing > Writing Skills #101 in Books > Science & Math > Behavioral Sciences > Cognitive Psychology

## Customer Reviews

"Using brain science, Cron busts the myths of good writing to help you find the real story behind all that plot and metaphor."-- *The Writer* "In [Cron's] new book, *Story Genius*, she picks up the . . . theme. . . that a protagonist's internal struggle makes the story work, and offers step-by-step advice on how to exploit this truth about neuroscience for richer, deeper, better first drafts. . . . Cron provides exercises and examples to keep writers on track, always

highlighting the fact that emotions engage the brain faster than anything else. . . .The concepts are easy to understand and they are certainly important. Even if you can't go on a retreat, you should try to find time to do the exercises for your own blueprint."--

PsychologyToday.com"It's a simple question: 'How do you write an effective, engaging story?' Ask Lisa Cron. An accomplished author and story coach, she has just published her second book, Story Genius. A manual of sorts, it teaches cognitive storytelling strategies and uses actual brain science to help make its readers into better writers."-- Creative

Screenwriting"Cron, author of Wired for Story, proposes this new book as the answer to the question, What's the biggest mistake writers make? She uses psychology and other sciences to explain what makes an utterly compelling story and how to write one. . . .Novice writers looking for a step-by-step guide to how to build or fix their novel might find a lot of useful information in here. . . ."-- Publishers Weekly"Lost in the quagmire of trying to write a novel? Well, forget everything you've ever been told about story, because chances are, it's totally wrong. So where to turn? Story guru Cron not only gives you the skinny on why and how stories work (and why and how we respond to them), she also shows you how to craft a novel step by step, working with author Jenny Nash from the germ of an idea to a living, breathing story. I'd never consider writing a novel without Lisa's input, and neither should you." -- Caroline Leavitt, New York Times best-selling author of Is This Tomorrow and Pictures of You

LISA CRON is the author of Wired for Story and Story Genius. Her TEDx talk, Wired for Story opened Furman University's 2014 TEDx Conference, Stories: The Common Thread of Our Humanity. Lisa has worked in publishing at W.W. Norton, as an agent at the Angela Rinaldi Literary Agency, as a producer on shows for Showtime and Court TV, and as a story analyst for Warner Brothers and the William Morris Agency. Since 2006 she has been an instructor in the UCLA Extension Writers' Program, and she is on the faculty of the School of Visual Arts MFA Program in Visual Narrative in New York City. She is a frequent presenter at writers conferences, universities and schools nationwide, and in her work as a story coach Lisa helps novelists, screenwriters and journalists wrangle the story they want to tell onto the page.

This book stands apart from every other book about story I've ever read. And I've read quite a few. For someone who's primarily "interested" in the art and/or science of story, this book is bound to disappoint. But, for someone who's \*engaged\* in the hobby or profession of crafting stories that need to \*work\*, "Story Genius" is a godsend. Here's why: Lisa Cron has nailed down, in deceptively

simple language, the very exact steps a writer needs to take to go from interesting prose to a compelling story. While the book is highly readable and doesn't have lots of (any, in my reading) frightening and impressive words, I see the fingerprints of other geniuses on the page: Rupert Sheldrake, Nick Arrizza, Anders Ericsson, and even (and in this context, it's a high compliment), L. Ron Hubbard. Just fingerprints, though. The vast majority of the work here is all Cron's. She is so lighthearted and playful, you could easily miss the profound value (to the working storyteller) in her book *IF YOU WEREN'T ALREADY STARVING FOR IT*. Which I am. Because with all the wonderful books I've read and courses I've taken, a few things have been missing. Like: After you've identified the "wound" in the protagonist's past that informs the inner part of their journey through the story, what in the world do you do with that information? Most other writers, teachers, and gurus implicitly leave you with the challenge, "Well, that's for you to figure out." Translation: They don't know, and they don't want you to know that they don't know. Cron does, and she lays it out explicitly and generously. On the point of the protagonist's "wound" alone, this book is a complete though concise master class. Another thing I've found missing almost everywhere else: How much of your character's past do you need to tell your reader about -- and how do you determine what that how much is? I've only seen a partial answer to that question one place else -- in Aaron Sorkin's *MasterClass* on screenwriting -- and while he gave essentially the same answer, I find Cron's coverage of this topic in this book, much more useful and comprehensive. "Story Genius" might not be the best book for a beginner for one simple and ironic reason: Until you've been burned over and over again by the overconfident gurus of this field (and I don't include Sorkin here -- he's great, but again, not as comprehensive on certain key points), you won't be able to appreciate the finesse and extraordinary practical value of what's in this book. I know if I had read it, say, 30 years ago, I would have shrugged a lot of this stuff off. Might have called it "repetitive" or "incomplete." These days, I struggle with the real problems that Cron addresses in this book -- both as a working writer myself, and as a coach to other writers. In that way, I am like an experienced jeweler walking through a flea market of cubic zirconium. I have to make stuff work, rather than read or hear it five times just to understand what it is. So, I recognize a gem when I see it. If any of this resonates, you should get this book to ease your own suffering and increase your own productivity -- and satisfaction with the experience -- sooner, rather than later.

3.5 out of 5 stars. This will be one of my "long" reviews, as it is a subject I am both interested in and passionate about. Craft books, they never seem to stop coming out do they? I have read a lot of craft books in addition to doing my MFA and increasingly they blur together in saying the same

things. Lisa Cron's book, for starters, is focused on "popular" fiction. She never quite says this, but there is a lot of focus on writing something that sells. There is nothing wrong with this, I just think it is worth noting. Before I delve into details, I think this craft book is not bad, especially if you have never read one of the more recent craft books put out by an agent (Ms. Cron was an agent. She is now a "story coach" and faculty member at UCLA extension and has done a lot of media. This is important because she has a lot of media savvy, persuasion savvy, self-confidence and self-promotion in her background. All fine, but worth understanding that this drags some hubris into her book. What I like: she is willing to disagree with some of the past approaches to writing, although that disagreement is more subtle than she implies. Really it still boils down to tension, a focus on characters, the arc of the character that should pull us along, and getting inside the character. What makes this different is the angle she approaches it, her terminology, her interpretation as to why this works. More on that later. My reviews on non-fiction, especially if it is not creative non-fiction, tend to be harsh. I tend to pull my scientific background, logic, and understanding of statistics and the scientific method into play. Unfortunately, this ruined a good portion of this book for me. Lisa makes some statements, conclusions, and implications that are just steaming piles of B.S. and reveal biases and hubris. The tone of the book makes opinions sound like fact, which are not facts, but badly drawn conclusions. This is worthy of criticism, because of the subtitle on this book "How to use brain science to go beyond outline and write a riveting novel." Thus, I get to zing her on the science part. Some examples of not understanding statistics (or misusing them): In one breath she says that the story is the crucial ingredient. That the story overcomes bad writing and that the reason 95% of manuscripts are rejected by agents or don't sell is because the story itself is bad, even if the writing is gorgeous. Then she uses 50 Shades of Gray as the example to "prove" her point. For the record, I did speed read 50 Shades of Gray to analyze it, so I am not one of those who are criticizing it based on reading a few pages. Rather, the logic here is completely flawed. First, 50 Shades was initially rejected by all major houses. So, it was one of the 95% rejects. But, more importantly, any statistician/scientist will tell you that using outliers (from Wikipedia, this reminder: In statistics, an outlier is an observation point that is distant from other observations. An outlier may be due to variability in the measurement or it may indicate experimental error; the latter are sometimes excluded from the data set.) is dangerous. Outliers rarely tell you what you are looking for. The whole what sells and what agents accept is used again and again, almost always in a flawed way. For example, she discusses the 95% (she may use 96 or 94 percent, I don't recall) of manuscripts that are rejected. Well let's look at those for a moment. Of the 95% that are accepted, 95% or so never sell enough to cover a publisher's costs. So, how accurate is that agent

filter? The agent filter is only accurate as the gatekeeper, not on whether we are "hardwired" (her term) to a story as she perceives it. In fact, in the introduction, where she is hooking us as to why this book is the right one and why it is worthwhile she gives us an old statistic (2012) on the average number of copies a self published book sells (in 2012 it was 150, based on one source, which we could spend hours debating how valid that source is--it captures only through books sold via a certain type of venue, using a particular data system). This statistic is vaguely interesting, but sits there out of context. What does the average publisher book sell? In fact, what does the average publisher book ROI (Return on Investment) equal. Yeah, you guessed it. Negative ROI and the average book from even a big 5 publisher sells very few copies. In fact, one of the top ten books for the Man Booker Prize, even after making it to the final list, sold 600 or so copies that year. Yes, my counter point is also a single data point, but what it illustrates is that I can tell an entirely different story with weak statistics, outliers, and random examples. The reason this sort of "logic" is so dangerous is it destroys the credibility of the author when she does make good points. There are examples like this in every chapter. It is a classic sales technique and persuasion technique, so I shouldn't be so harsh, but for me it ruined the credibility--again due to the sub-title. It was the tone. She had no shades of gray in her explanation of why her approach is right--even though I think her core points are not bad (not perfect, but not bad). The issue is how to sort through what is really a suggestion and how to apply a variation of what she is pushing. Pushing is perhaps the operative phrase for the book. The way one should read this is "here are some alternative ideas that you can incorporate into you thinking--modify as it makes sense." For example, she is strongly against the writing technique sometimes known as pantsing (flying by the seat of your pants). While she acknowledges some famous authors, she essentially says they are outliers -- oh wait, you might say, doesn't she use outliers to prove her point in the beginning? Isn't this a bit hypocritical? Why is an outlier proving a point in one instance and should be ignored in another? Uh-huh. But I digress. She implies that if you fly by the seat of your pants you will not get a good story. Story the way she defines it. You will stall, you will have great scenes but not a story. B.S. The gem, or lesson really should be stated: be prepared to totally rewrite/edit your manuscript at least once if you fly by the seat of your pants and are not a master. Then, explain further that the reason is that flying by the seat of your pants OFTEN means you don't have the story in your head yet. You don't have the "why" (which is a gem also in the beginning of the book) firmly in you thinking if you simply fly along. This may sound pedantic on my part, but really I think it is Ms. Cron who is sort of pendantic. She needs to allow for the gray and how her insights can be used in that gray area. There are several famous writers who fly by the seat of their pants AND do not have the instinct Ms. Cron mentions for

outlier authors. One technique I have heard is that the author writes the entire manuscript, without a lot of prep, by the seat of his pants. Then deletes the file off of his computer. Then writes it again. This is the author's technique for getting at all the insights Ms. Cron is pushing. The issue is not that flying by the seat of your pants doesn't work. The issue is when the author thinks she is done immediately afterward. Back to the good. There is a lot of recap from any other good craft book here. There are also a lot of insights that I really like, if only they were not stated in this manner: Here is some cool research and insights from Dr/Professor/Scientist and here is what it means (absolutely). No, I love to hear the cool research and I would love to have a subtle difference in presenting the conclusion. For example she discusses the misconception of the protagonist as a camera in her Worldview chapter. First, she tells us that the example author she is pulling the lesson from later went on to get a seven figure advance and that the seven figure advance proves how brilliant of a writer she is. Oh, please. I can point to research that shows that the key ingredient to success, after the basics are satisfied, is one thing: luck. Yes, you need to be able to take advantage of the luck, but Ms. Cron and the U.S. as a whole is hardwired to think that success is due to specific things, like brilliance and hard work. For every person who does make it, there are 9 who objectively are just as brilliant and worked just as hard, who didn't make it. The real point is that to take advantage of the luck, you have to get your ducks in a row. But, back to "Misconception #3: Your Protagonist is a Camera" in the Worldview chapter. I totally agree with her point. It is part of the general discussion on POV. POV is taught badly in many craft books and writing forums and other places. The point is hugely important. POV is not a camera. She also ties this in nicely with the main point of the entire book, "why" is the question to always ask. The approach she uses is interesting. She never uses the term POV (or Viewpoint, which some craft writers use). She sticks with the lens simile/metaphor and digs into the why. Why do we see, hear, smell different things (actually this is where the lens metaphor breaks down, but the point is still a good one). I would have liked her to acknowledge the approach other craft writers (good ones) do to tackle this: every character, no matter how small, has a backstory (AKA in Ms. Cron's terminology a Worldview). When asked, any author should be able to discuss the backstory of both major and minor characters. The POV of any of those characters will be filtered through that backstory. Additionally, this "lens" -- to borrow Ms. Cron's metaphor -- can show us things that a camera cannot. POV is not absolute. The critique of someone saying "but she could never see that from where she was" is not really valid by itself. Rather, the reader needs to feel that this is the worldview interpretation of things, possibly even by going to a momentary omniscient POV. I really like, for instance, that part of the backstory (not Ms. Cron's term) is coming up with an origin scene. No matter what you are writing, there is something that happened "before."



Even before the origin scene there is a before. You don't need to write it all down. There doesn't need to be a chronicle from birth. One point I would make is that while Ms. Cron is talking about protagonists, this applies to a number of characters. Her taste is toward single protagonist, single (often first person) POV. I think this is too limiting. Apply these ideas to all major characters and consider the advantages of multiple POV. Sometimes there are compelling reasons to go single POV, but what is really interesting sometimes is conflicting "worldviews" and the lessons learned. Even popular fiction can have this approach. One final note on the pseudoscience, or misinterpretation of science that she keeps using. Functional MRIs (fMRI). She makes the same mistake that so many journalists make and there is huge irony that she mentions this so many times, including in a chapter starting out with "cause and effect." So many people confuse correlation and cause and effect. The fact that during a fMRI the same areas light up as when we are experiencing something is really NOT telling you much. We CONCLUDE some things, but we don't KNOW. Additionally, the data is much less than Ms. Cron seems to think. I am focusing on this a bit because of the "hardwired" concept that she seems to love--and that silly subtitle of the book. A fMRI is still an MRI. That means, for all intents and purposes, it is extremely limited, because you can't move and you are inside of a machine. So, reading about running and catching a frisbee, for example, and actually doing it? We have no example of that. You can't do a fMRI while throwing a frisbee. It is completely faulty logic to conclude that. I see an object in the sky. It comes down and lands on my hand. It's a bird! All objects in the sky must be birds. What the fMRI tells us is that the same parts of the brain get blood while reading as a very small, minuscule, number of activities do--activities that require almost no movement and can be done in this tiny chamber. We CONCLUDE that PERHAPS the brain is experiencing things in a similar way. But we don't even know that the same neurons are fired, only that blood flow has increased to the same areas. It poses intriguing questions as to "why." (Sound familiar, Ms. Cron? All this does is pose a Why.) It does NOT answer that why. Many scientists who deal in fMRI try and remind journalists about the limited things that fMRI tells us. Unlike Ms. Cron's conclusion that this is like a Vulcan mind meld, it is not even close. fMRIs are not "brain waves" (as she links the two). She is making the conclusion leap that we are reliving/living these things. This conclusion is from her worldview, not from a scientific perspective. It makes some sense, but is hardly a given. There is some correlation between those who daydream certain events and then have to react to them, but it is a correlation, not a proven cause and effect. I can find a correlation, for instance, that those who eat tomatoes three times per week have a (self reported) better sex life than those who don't. But, it does NOT mean there is a cause and effect. It could be that those who eat tomatoes three times a week are

wealthier, healthier, and those are the reasons they have a better sex life. Correlation and cause and effect are wildly different. Similarly, the implication that well written stories sell well and accepted by agents and then accepted by publishers tells us very little. For example, of the books by self published authors, that sell well, 95% of them were rejected by agents. We don't immediately jump to the conclusion that only good books get rejected by agents! Or, I can easily demonstrate that 80% of the books that sell badly and that come from publishing houses, were written well and written with a good story as defined by Ms. Cron. That does not mean that her ideas are not good ones, possibly even key ingredients. What it means is that there are other factors at work. I know it helps sell. 95% of all non-fiction, how to, books that sell well tout pseudoscience and statistics that are meaningless. Ms. Cron's book has that ingredient. Bottom line and ending on a positive note. I really like a lot of this book, if only some of the hubris and faulty logic were not there. Most of this is in the beginning sections of the book, but as Ms. Cron knows, this is where you capture or lose your audience (witness craft books focusing on the first five pages, or first fifty pages). The ideas presented here are not new, but they are presented in a manner that is fairly comprehensive and not too much fluff. The focus is on characters and backstory, or put another way on every "what" should have a "why" that is understood and that we want to know the answer to the "why." If you only have a couple of craft books, or want a new summary craft book, this is not a bad one to have. Think about all the ideas presented, but don't take them all as absolutes. These are ideas as to what makes a story work. They are possible "whys" not conclusive "whys." My dinging on stars is a combination of: is this really new, I rarely give 5 stars, and minor hubris/absolutism-dragging "science" into the book and being wrong on the science. I will be using her book in my own critique group and discussing writing, but I will not be trying to persuade people that there is a brain science behind it! I received this book from Blogging for Books for this review. All my book reviews are available on my blog, BooksStillMatter

The kindlebook Story Genius: How to Use Brain Science to Go Beyond Outlining and Write a Riveting Novel (Before You Waste Three Years Writing 327 Pages That Go Nowhere) by Lisa Cron caught my attention in response to a subconscious intent that I have to attract key information to improve my writing (especially with my awareness that even getting published is competitive for authors from much more professionally prestigious backgrounds than myself). Some of the writing mentoring ideas discussed; thinking of writing from the What If perspective, the tricky whose life you will turn upside down, disclosure on the worldview of a protagonist and more.

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