**Story Genius by Lisa Cron**

\*These are my notes for *me*. If you want more information on a certain chapter or topic, I encourage you to support the author and buy the book. Thanks!\*

This book gives writing exercises which can be found in an excel on my member’s page as well.

And this book covers another author’s example so you can check yourself along the way.

**Intro**

The juice of your story is how your protag is making sense of what’s happening, how she struggles with, evaluates, and weighs what matter most to her, and then makes hard decisions, moving the action forward. The struggle is based on the protag’s impossible goal: to achieve her desire AND remain true to the fear that’s keeping her from it.

Story is about how things that happen in the plot AFFECT the protag, and how they change internally as a result.

Get rid of anything that doesn’t impact the protag’s internal struggle.

**Chapter 1 - Story: The Brain’s Decoder Ring**

Why we stay up to read ‘one more page’. When we read we become a participant, not an observer. We feel rewarded when we finish a story. Stories educate us.

We want to know why people do what they do. Who are they? What do they believe and why? What’s their story?

The external plot changes your character’s worldview/creates internal change.

**Chapter 2 - Myths Galore: Everything We Were Taught About Writing is Wrong**

-Myth of Great Writing, and ‘advice’

-Myth of Pantsing - You need to know the past to know the meaning of the things in the present

-Myth of the Shitty First Draft - of an actual story vs random bits of brain dumps

-Myth of Plotting - focuses on external plot, the what, instead of the internal story, the why.

-Myth of External Story Structure Models - Stories follow a predictable pattern, this by page 20, this by page 50, this by page 100, etc, that you can spot early on (in movies and such). Would you rather the reader admire your words or get lost in your story?

\*You can’t write about how someone changes unless you know, specifically, what caused it. The story you’re telling didn’t start on page one, it started long before you got there.

\*In Medias Res doesn’t mean ‘in the middle of the action’, it means ‘in the middle of the story’. Don’t start at the beginning, start at the middle. The middle is the second half of the story, where the plot kicks in. You can’t leave the ‘why’ out of the picture or the action falls flat. You can have flashbacks for the ‘first half’ of the story.

>>>>Coming up are chapters/exercises to unearth your first half of your story so you can pinpoint where your novel begins, and lay the foundation for your second half plot. Along the way, there’s an example from Jennie to use.

**Chapter 3 - The What If? Expectation, Broken!**

Challenges the ‘What if’ prompts. Says they bring a surprise but no story.

We recognize patterns, ‘if this, then that’, explaining the ‘why’ behind something.

We have to know why those ‘what if’s’ matter to someone. An unexpected problem alone can’t drive the story.

Ask yourself instead, ‘What’s the point?’, which will tell you the internal problem your story will be about. The ‘What if?’ now centers on the external plot that will trigger that inner struggle, ultimately making the point.

Step 1: That first pinprick - what gave you the story idea? Write it down.

Step 2: Why *do* you care? - Why does this stick with you? Write it down.

Step 3: What is your point? - What do you want your readers to take away? What are you trying to say about human nature? Write it down in 1-3 sentences.

Step 4: Drafting your *What If* - don’t create a single vague question. Write several lines to convey the context, surprise, conflict, and consequences. Fully flesh it out but keep it concise.

**Chapter 4 - The Who: Whose Life Will You Utterly Upend?**

Pick your protag. Stories are character driven, so you need to know your protag. Who is the person whose transformation-whose inner change-will embody that point? It’s their internal struggle that will trigger the decisions that drive your plot. It’s not *what* the world throats at them, it’s the *meaning* they read into those events that your story is actually about.

Write 1-2 paragraphs of who your MC is & where they are BEFORE the story begins. Who are they on the inside? What do they believe? What do they want? Where are they in their life?

**Chapter 5 - The Why: Why, Exactly, Does Your Protagonist Care?**

Why will the unavoidable conflict matter to your protag? What will those things mean to her? What specific plan will they topple? What internal fear will they force her to confront? What long-held desire will they give her no choice but to go after? Dig deeper into their past. Know what your protag’s plans are from page one, their initial agenda, what they enter the novel already wanting, and what specific misbelief holds them back.

Understanding the ‘why’ changes our perception of the ‘what’. You need to know their why so you can write how they their actions/reactions.

Your protag’s inner struggle is their want (desire) and the misbelief that keeps them from getting it (their fear). This lets readers know what means the most to the protag and gives an emotional yardstick by which readers will measure the meaning of every event, every plot twist, every turn, allowing them to anticipate how they’ll react

Step 1: What does your protag already want? (Even if they have no chance of getting it). Write 1 paragraph.

Step 2: *Why* do they want it? (What will getting it *mean* to her?) Write it.

Step 3: Misbelief? But it feels so true! What’s stopping them from getting their want? What’s the worst that could happen? Write their misbelief.

(Book goes against calling it a ‘fatal flaw’ or ‘wound’).

**Chapter 6 - The Worldview: Your Protagonist’s, That is**

Worldview is the lens your protag is going to see and evaluate everything in your novel. It’s how they interpret things and what they do as a result. And those beliefs are subjective. Our worldview & beliefs are based on our personal experience. We assign different significance to things, giving things meaning. We all have different experiences, expectations, and interests.

Everyone would have a different visual/response for love, loyalty, hate, trust, etc.

When you think about your MC’s why, the goal isn’t to show *that* they’re changing, the goal is to show what they’re changing *from* and what they’re changing *to*, internally.

Your MC’s lens will help readers see what she’s thinking when something happens- her struggle to figure out what’s going on and what to do about it.

Can you envision the moment in your protag’s life when they’re misbelief took root?

When you find that defining moment:

-What does my protag go into the scene believing?

-Why does she believe it? (What instilled her old belief?)

-What is my protag’s goal in the scene? (What do they want the outcome to be?)

-What does my protag expect will happen in this scene? (What goes on internally if they get it for the wrong reasons, like because someone hoped they’d fail?) Your protag could weigh what she hopes will happen vs what she expects will happen.

^Write this scene. Your protag’s expectations won’t be met and their worldview will skew as they’ve just learned an important lesson.

**Chapter 7 - What’s Next? The Beauty of Cause and Effect**

There’s always a cause, always an answer to ‘why?’.

On an internal level: What would my protag’s belief/past experience cause them to do in this situation?

On an external level: How will the other character(s) and the world react to what my protag will do?

Find 3 turning points in their life before your story begins (and after their misbelief has formed). Think of times where your protag stood at a crossroads and had to make a decision that had escalating ongoing ramifications.

Find those 3 ideas and write the scenes.

**Chapter 8 - The When: An Offer Your Protag Can’t Refuse (But Probably Wants To)**

When does your novel begin? Identify the overarching external problem that your protag will battle from the first page to the last. They’ve been avoiding change, ignoring it, as it grew, ready to explode in your story. SO, what unavoidable external change will catapult my protag into the fray, triggering her internal battle.

Make a list of as many ideas for your novel’s main problem as possible, as potential beginnings and then put them to the test.

Test 1 - Can the problem sustain the entire novel from the first page to the last?

Can the problem build?

Is there a real-world specific, impending consequence that this escalating problem will give my protag no choice but to face?

Is there a clear-cut deadline, a ticking clock counting down to that consequence?

Test 2 - Is the problem capable of forcing your protag to make the inner change that your novel is actually about? Will the ticking clock continually hit your protag’s inner problem?

Will the problem’s impending consequence force my protag to struggle with her misbelief?

Regardless of whether or not my protag achieves their goal, will the approaching consequence cost them something big—emotionally speaking, this is?

Write down which main problem passed all those tests.

Write down 5 (or more or less) ticks that take you to your opening scene, the chain reaction that causes everything to happen. What will trigger your protag’s decision to take that first step out of their comfort zone?

\*Takeaway - when you describe your book to someone, share the story, the protag’s story, not the plot with subplots.

**Chapter 9 - The Opening: Of Your Novel and of the Story Genius Blueprint System**

\*Scene Card Template\* p150 Cause and Effect Chart

Every scene must produce a hard-won change, both externally and internally.

-Fill out the scene card-

-Take that scene card and write your opening scene-

**Chapter 10 - The Real Aha! Moment: Where Will Your Story End?**

Often the first scene in a novel includes a glimpse of what the ending will be. By letting readers know where the novel is headed, it lures them in.

The ending should be about what your protag learns, not (just) the ending to the external plot. & the point is not *that* your protag makes the change, it’s *how* they get there internally that counts.

How to get the revelation right: Let the protag earn the revelation; put the reader in the midst of the event itself; let the reader be inside the protag- let them see how the protag reaches their conclusion as they make sense of what’s happening to them in the moment and what they’re learning, and why they do what they do.

To get to your protag’s aha! moment: At the end, will your protag achieve their external goal?; What will change for your protag internally?; What will happen externally in this scene that forces your protag to confront, and hopefully overcome their misbelief?

Things to keep in mind to go along with the above paragraph:

\*Shove your protag as far out of their comfort zone as possible so they realize it wasn’t nearly as comfortable, or as safe, as they thought.

\*Your protag will return, either literally or figuratively, to the place where they started, but now they see things very differently because of their realization/aha! moment.

\*What will happen plot wise for your protag to see their misbelief for what it really is? And how will they make sense of it internally?

-Answer the 3 questions from the aha moment paragraph. Next, write a scene card, and then tackle the scene itself.

**Chapter 11 - Building Your Blueprint: How to Keep Track of All the Moving Parts**

\*Goes against outlines, says no blueprint or novel is made up of a prescribed number of scenes, beats, turns, or plot points. It’ll find its own organic architecture. Built your story by creating a plot that will constantly force your increasingly reluctant protag to change. Digging deep will feel like you’re uncovering facts about your character instead of making them up. And this isn’t a process where you first blueprint your entire novel and then write it, but you’ll be writing and at the same time developing the blueprint for what comes next.

You must write a scene card for every scene, but you don’t have to finish all the cards before you begin writing. Begin writing once you flesh out the first five scenes and the last scene. (Don’t work on these just yet.)

Story Genius recommends creating folders (hard copies or on your computer) to keep track of everything. These folders will be for key characters (1 folder for each character; will contain story-specific bio and any backstory scene), the rules of the world, idea list (try to keep them in chronological order if you can), random scene cards (for those that don’t quite meet all the internal and/or external cause and effect and you aren’t sure where they go in the story), scene cards in development (almost there), and scenes (the ones that make it into your manuscript).

-Task: Set up these folders. To help, continually ask yourself ‘why?’.

**Chapter 12 - Going Back to Move Forward: How to Harvest the Past to Set Up the Plot**

Build your plot points around your protag’s inner struggle. Don’t go off with scenes that don’t relate back to the problem in some way and propel the story forward.

Make sure each event/scene causes the next one, in an escalating succession as things go from bad to worse, and tie each event to the internal change it triggers in your protag, giving a glimpse of why, and how it then triggers the next thing that happens.

-Jot down a brief overview of your novel as you see it now as if it were a blurb. Mention the plot problem, how it’ll escalate, why it is a problem and what it might cost your angst emotionally to solve it.

-Look at that overview and pinpoint all the moments that challenged your protag and caused them to take action. Make a list of every potential scene, plot point, and storyline that springs from that paragraph and continue to develop them.

-Build your cache of potential scenes by combing through those 3 turning points from ch7 and find any lies or things they’ve hidden. These things will surface in your story and escalate tension.

-What external obstacles have you already planted in the past that will keep your protag from their current goal, or help them attain it? Add them to your idea list.

**Chapter 13 - Story Logic: Making Sure Each ‘What’ Has a ‘Why’**

Test the logic of existing plot points and bring them to life by asking why? and you’ll also uncover more of the what.

-Why does my plot need it to happen?

-Logically why *can* it happen? Is it actually possible?

-Why would it happen, given your protag’s inner struggle?

Scan your Idea List and Scene Cards and hunt for plot points where the logic is fuzzy. Explore them using the why test. Begin a scene card for those when you can.

Fill in the blanks in your plot with new plot points. Or in areas that are super general and need more specifics, create new plot points.

As you think on this remember that your protag wants 2 things: to achieve his desire and remain true to his misbelief.

Keep making things get worse, get harder.

Now that you’re thinking about your scenes and story, you’re realizing how short or long it might be. And you know the timeline, one day or two years. Get your timeline nailed down and recognize how long it might be word count wise.

To move the plot forward you need to begin to layer in subplots and secondary characters. Everything is intertwined, and everything affect everything else, and you have to understand that connection.

Sketch out the scope of your story, what is the time frame and how big is your stage? Consider the external plot and internal struggle. Keep asking why.

**Chapter 14 - The Secret to Layering: Subplots, Storylines, and Secondary Characters**

1 main storyline becomes flat and predictable. You need secondary characters who’ll serve your story and their own agenda, and develop relevant backstory for them so you can see the world from their point of view in each scene.

When you create subplots, remember, everything is there on a need to know basis. Every subplot must spin off the main storyline, to help make sense of the plot.

Where to get your subplots:

-External events that were set into motion before the novel began, and that have impending consequences that will affect the protagonist’s quest

-Secondary characters (basically anyone other than the protag)

Sometimes it’s easier to assign a subplot a character’s name, instead of the topic it covers.

Look over your idea list and scene cards and identify anything you think might be a potential (external) subplot. Ask, why will this matter to my protag, given their quest? Create scenes from the potential subplots. Explore and test possibilities.

All your secondary characters think they’re the main character and have their own agenda, realizations, and often their own arc. When you create them and their agenda, keep in mind how they’ll help facilitate your protag’s story.

Create a bio for each significant secondary character, keeping it story specific.

Ask yourself, how will this character’s agenda fit into the story I’m going to tell? This character will either challenge or reaffirm your protag’s misbelief. Write down what they might open your protag’s eyes to.

Start developing some characters and see if anything leaps out to you as scene potential.

Are there characters who shaped your protag’s past, ones who won’t appear on page except in flashbacks and backstory? Make a list of them and write a quick story-specific bio.

Use backstory to help supply meaning to the present. For everyone who has shared history with your protag and helps with the protag’s story (has story relevance), flesh it out.

Once done, move general things to your ideas list, and more specific things to your scene cards.

**Chapter 15 - Writing Forward: Stories Grow in Spirals**

How to play your cards right and get your story straight:

Each scene must force your protag to make a difficult decision that’s part of an escalating cause-and-effect trajectory. Plunge us into action but give us enough insight into your protag to understand what the action means to them.

There are examples of scene cards within the chapter.

Fill out your own scenes, #1-#5, filling in any gaps.

Now write those scenes, and rewrite your opening scene if you need to.

Change is constant. Think of your story as written in clay, not stone, able to be remolded to fit new things you figure out, new scenes you need to add or ones you need to alter. One change in the beginning will cause change through the rest of the story.

How to make the things you know (how your protag sees the world, how they feel, how they make sense of what’s happening in the moment) visible to the reader:

-Your protag must draw a strategic conclusion from everything they notice. However, they can’t notice or comment on anything unless they then draw a strategic conclusion that affects what they’re doing or how they interpret what’s happening.

-You must get emotion onto every page. Don’t tell the reader they felt sad, happy, etc, tell them why. Emotion comes from how the character makes sense of what’s happening. Put the reader in your protag’s skin as they struggle so it evokes the same emotion in the reader. That feeling will be subtle, nuanced, and layered.

-You must stay in your protag’s subjective mind-set- story isn’t just about what happens but what it costs your protag internally to make the decisions that drive the external action. Make sure how your protag sees the world is on every page. If your protag does something out of character, there needs to be a credible ‘why’ beforehand.

As you approach each scene, gather everything you know about your protag and their subjective worldview at the moment. What’re they most worried about? How will that affect their judgment in this scene? Be sure you’ve thought about each layer, each ticking clock.

Final Thoughts:

If a random idea sweeps you away and you forget everything in this book, remember to ask ‘why’ of everything until you get it down to a specific, and ask ‘and so?’ of everything to make sure the reader needs to know it and that it drives the story forward. What will happen as a result? What is the point?

Change the worldview of your reader. The only way to change how someone thinks about something is to first change how they feel about it.

Good luck!