

# THE *Genius* BEHIND STORY GENIUS

TEN WRITING INSIGHTS  
FROM BRAIN SCIENCE GURU  
LISA CRON.

BY K. L. ROMO

I HAD ALREADY WRITTEN a hard-earned 20,000 words of my current fiction manuscript when my critique partner told me about a new how-to book that would forever change how I approach novel-writing: *Story Genius: How to Use Brain Science to Go Beyond Outlining and Write a Riveting Novel* by Lisa Cron. After that recommendation, I figured I'd buy it and see what she had to say. After all, no one could force me to rewrite my 20,000 words if I didn't want to. So on Aug. 25, 2016, 16 days after its release, I clicked the "buy" button on Amazon.

After I started reading and doing the step-by-step exercises, it was clear that I *would* want to rewrite. Actually,

*overhaul* would be a better word.

*Story Genius* forced me to confront all the things I didn't know about my novel: about my characters, their motivations, where my story was going, and what the point was.

"What the reader's brain is designed to crave in every story it hears is inside intel on how to best navigate the unpredictable, scary, beautiful world we live in," says Cron. "Story, in other words, is not about what happens on the surface but what goes on beneath it."

Writers must give readers what they're looking for – "insight into what people do when push comes to shove, and most importantly, why," she says.

## WHY STORY GENIUS IS DIFFERENT

In her previous book, *Wired For Story*, Cron explored the many connections between brain science and good writing. *Wired* explained what the brain craves in stories and why, but Cron realized it didn't tell writers where to start the process – or how to actually build the story.

In *Story Genius*, Cron decided to teach writers how to use the theories she discusses in *Wired* to write a great story. According to Cron, "it's a fully prescriptive how-to guide that takes writers, step-by-step, through the process of creating a novel, beginning with the first glimmer of an intriguing idea."

I had the opportunity to pick Lisa Cron's brain about *Story Genius* and its unique methodology. Here's what we discussed:

## 1 DEFINING A STORY

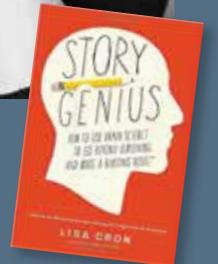
A story is "how a protagonist overcomes a defining misbelief. It's about an internal change, NOT an external change," says Cron. Meaning our protagonist must enter the story already needing to change internally. "Every protagonist steps onto page one of your novel *already* wanting something, and that desire will drive their story-long agenda, but she must overcome her misbelief in order to have a shot at getting it," she says.

## 2 WHAT'S YOUR POINT?

You must consider your story's point before you pick up the pen. "All stories make a point, beginning on page one. The point is what holds everything together and supplies the underlying story logic. You must know what your point is before you begin writing," says Cron.

## 3 FINDING THE BEGINNING

*Story Genius* debunks the myth that page one is the beginning of any story. In truth, all stories really begin *in media res* – in the middle. "Every protagonist must overcome a longstanding misbelief about human nature in order to have a shot at getting what she wants," Cron says, but the protagonist's defining misbelief has already been formed long *before* the story starts, almost always very early in her life. The first



page of the novel is actually the beginning of the *second half* of the story: When the plot forces the protagonist to go after something she's desired for quite some time, but in order to gain what she wants, she must face, question, and overcome her misbelief.

## 4 SELECTING THE PROTAGONIST

Cron believes story is built around how our protagonist "solves one problem that grows, escalates, and complicates from beginning to end – think cause-and-effect trajectory." The protagonist is the reader's portal into the story – the reader's avatar. Even in stories with multiple POV characters, one almost always emerges as what Cron calls the "alpha-protagonist."

## 5 FLESHING OUT THE PROTAGONIST

Writers, from newbies to MFA students, are surprised when they discover they've been pursuing the wrong things – exciting plots and beautiful writing. "The biggest and best surprise new writers have is that by digging down into who their protagonist is before the story starts, they're able to not only create a fully fleshed out character who *needs* to change, but the plot, too, begins to organically appear," Cron says.

## 6 PUT DOWN THE PLOTLINE

Most writers believe they need to sketch out a rough plot before writing, but, again, the process really hinges on character. “The plot is created second, and its goal is to force your protagonist to go after what she wants, but in order to get it, she must confront her misbelief,” says Cron. “Everything that happens in your story will get its meaning and emotional weight from one thing: how it affects your protagonist *internally* in pursuit of her goal.” The plot exists in service of the protagonist’s internal journey; thus, writers must create their protagonist’s story-specific past before they can go forward into the story present.

## 7 DIGGING INTO THE PAST

Cron instructs her students never to prepare a general character bio for their protagonist but to instead detail specific past events in her life that will contribute to how she handles what happens in the story. Writers aren’t just digging up random, action-oriented backstory in this process; they should instead examine how a protagonist’s misbelief has grown, escalated, and complicated as it guided her from its inception to the moment our plot kicks in. “Our subjective past experience is the decoder ring we use to make sense of what’s happening in the present. It’s the one thing we never do leave home without. To write forward without creating your protagonist’s decoder ring (which means writing about their story-specific past experiences *in scene form*) is like shoving them onto the page with amnesia,” Cron says. Then, because you’ve already written quite a bit about your protagonist’s story-specific past before ever starting the first chapter, you will be able to easily determine the point at which your story truly begins.

## 8 THIS IS NOT PRE-WRITING

“Creating their protagonist’s story-specific past is *not* pre-writing. Not only does the plot begin to appear during this process, but everything [the writer

## WHAT I’VE LEARNED USING *STORY GENIUS*

My print copy of *Story Genius* now has so many dog-eared pages, bookmarks, and sticky-notes that it seems I’ve been using it for years. Following the process has sharpened my understanding of story – and, more importantly, how to write a good one. I’ve learned that:

- There is no story without backstory. Everyone has a past, and as a writer, you must know who your characters are before you even write the first scene.
- The law of cause-and-effect is at the heart of every story. What one character does or believes shapes how she sees the world as well as what her next actions will be.
- I can still be a pantsler while blueprinting my story.
- Every scene requires you to know what your character goes into a scene believing and why. You must know what her goal in the scene is and what she expects will happen. Then you must determine what actually happens in addition to what she’s learned from it.
- The questions “what if?” and “why do I care?” are the powerful sparks that get the flame of your story going and help you decide what the point of your story will be. Do those flames warm your cold and soggy feet, char those weenies on a stick to fill a hungry belly, or signal planes flying overhead that you need a rescue?
- One of the most important questions a writer can ask about their characters and their actions is *Why? Why? Why?* You’ve got to know the answers!

## USING *STORY GENIUS* WITH WRITING SOFTWARE

What if you want to use Cron’s method with writing software, such as Scrivener? Gwen Hernandez, author of *Scrivener for Dummies* (and military romantic suspense novels) and a Scrivener instructor, says not to worry: “Scrivener can accommodate just about any writing method or process. It’s just a matter of creating folders and files to suit your needs.”

In fact, Hernandez has already created a *Story Genius* template that can be used when creating a new project in Scrivener. And don’t worry if you’ve already created a Scrivener project – you can import files or move them from the current project to the new one. Hernandez says, “It’s simple to open both the current and the new project, and drag files from one binder to the other. There’s also a ‘File>Import>Scrivener Project’ option that’s a quick way to bring over everything from the old to the new.”

You can find Hernandez’s *Story Genius* template for Scrivener at her website, [gwenhernandez.com](http://gwenhernandez.com). You can also create your own *Story Genius* project template in Scrivener.

has] uncovered is then laced into every page of their novel, in the form of dialogue, flashbacks, snippets of memory that the protagonist urgently uses to make sense of what’s happening and what the hell to do about it,” says Cron.

## 9 CONSIDER YOUR SECONDARY CHARACTER’S AGENDAS

“Every character steps onto page one with a pre-existing overarching agenda, which they try to move forward in every scene in which they appear,” Cron explains. “The goal is to create all secondary characters, *and their agenda*, with one purpose in mind: to help facilitate the protagonist’s story. They’re there to serve your protagonist’s struggle, and so everything they do is geared to either help her, hinder her, or often, both.”

## 10 ‘PANTSLERS’ VERSUS ‘PLOTTERS’

The *Story Genius* method is not a formula but a way to discover why characters do what they do. Thus, it’s useful to *all* writers, pantsers and plotters alike. According to Cron, “*Story Genius* gives plotters a way to break free from the external shell of the story, which almost always results in novels that are flat and formulaic, and it gives pantsers a way to stop writing in the dark, which almost always results in novels that are nothing but a bunch of things that happen.”

For more information about Lisa Cron or *Story Genius*, visit [wiredforstory.com](http://wiredforstory.com). You can also learn more about the *Story Genius* Workshop Cron teaches with Jennie Nash at [authoraccelerator.com/story-genius](http://authoraccelerator.com/story-genius). [W](#)

K.L. Romo writes about life on the fringe: teetering dangerously on the edge is more interesting than standing safely in the middle. She is passionate about women’s issues, loves noisy clocks and fuzzy blankets, but HATES the word normal. Her historical novel, *Life Before*, is about two women separated by a century who discover they’ve shared a soul. Web: [KLRomo.com](http://KLRomo.com) or @klromo.



JENNIE NASH

## LEARNING IN REAL TIME

One of the things that makes *Story Genius* unique is that readers can see each of the book’s lessons unfold step-by-step in real time via author and book coach Jennie Nash’s real-life examples, which are detailed throughout the book as she applies Cron’s method to her own novel-in-progress. “[Nash] developed her novel from scratch on the pages of *Story*

*Genius*... Watching the process unfold is

invaluable because writers can see firsthand exactly how a writer starts by digging into the story *before* page one of the novel, and how everything else organically builds from there,” Cron says. In other words: *Story Genius* doesn’t just *tell*, it *shows*.

Cron also provides a template for “Scene Cards,” which aim to help the writer both flesh out what will happen plot-wise in each scene, and, more importantly, *why* what happens matters to the protagonist – and what she realizes as a result. “Your protagonist will emerge from every scene changed in some way: They’ll have picked up some fresh inside-intel, and their plan for achieving their agenda will have been recalibrated – a little or a lot,” Cron says. These Scene Cards are designed to help writers blueprint their novels from beginning to end, but they are not intended to be all filled out at once, nor are they meant to serve as an outline. It’s a gradual, sequential process that encourages the writer to consider a moment’s purpose and residual effects *before* writing each scene.

So, if you want to get to know your characters intimately – know what makes them tick and why – and create a plot that forces your characters to change internally and act based on who they are, check out the *Story Genius* method. Your characters and readers will be glad you did.

