

Story Genius Novel Writing Method Worksheet

The words and ideas provided in this worksheet belong exclusively to Lisa Cron and are excerpted from her book *Story Genius*. I used quotation marks whenever they would not interfere with the convenience of the checklist. This is in no way my own invention and is merely a tool I use personally to apply the *Story Genius* method. For the maximum impact, I suggest reading the book concurrently or prior to completing this worksheet for your novel.

The What If (Ch. 3)

- ☐ Write about the instant you got your idea for your novel. Try your best to remember the very moment you first stumbled on your idea.
- ☐ Write about why you care about this story idea.
- ☐ What point will your story make in a few brief lines? (As Cron says, “reduce it to its essence.”)
- ☐ Now write your what if: Your story idea phrased in the form of a few sentences beginning with the phrase “What if...” Keep revising until it is as specific as you can get it, “with context, conflict, and a hint of surprise. In essence: something that will make your point.”

The Who (Ch. 4)

- ☐ Write a sketch of who your protagonist is BEFORE your novel begins. Answer these questions:
 - Who is this person on the inside?
 - Where are they in their life, specifically?
 - What do they believe?
 - What do they want?

The Why (Ch. 5)

- ☐ Write a paragraph about what your character wants at the beginning of the story. “Be as specific as possible...if you can’t close your eyes and envision it, it’s not there yet.”
- ☐ Write a paragraph explaining why your protagonist wants what she wants. What will getting it mean to her (even if she’s wrong about this, what does she THINK getting it will mean)?
- ☐ Define your protagonist’s misbelief: “write down what she wants, and what the fear is that’s keeping her from achieving it” and also consider, given your protagonist’s misbelief, “what does she think the very worst thing that could happen would be?”

The Worldview (Ch. 6)

- ☐ Sketch the “origin scene” in your protagonist’s life when she acquired her misbelief.
- ☐ Now, sketch out what your heroine went into this origin scene believing. In other words, before her misbelief, what did she believe?
- ☐ Now write out a fully fledged scene describing when your protagonist’s misbelief took root in her brain.

What Next: Cause and Effect (Ch. 7)

- ☐ Identify three turning point scenes where your heroine's misbelief was further cemented in her brain.
- ☐ Write each of the three scenes, fully fleshed out. These scenes will not be physically in your novel, but show up in part via flashbacks or snippets of memory.

The When (Ch. 8)

- ☐ Free write about your plot and then make a list from that of all the ideas you have about the problems your character will run in to (related of course to the main problem of the story).
- ☐ Run your list of potential problems through Test 1: Can the problem sustain the entire novel from the first page to the last? (Sub-questions: Can the problem build? Is there a real-world, specific, impending consequence that this escalating problem will give my protagonist no choice but to face? Is there a clear-cut deadline, a ticking clock counting down to that consequence?) Ruthlessly cut (or revise) the ones that don't make it.
- ☐ Run your remaining problems through Test 2: Is the problem capable of forcing your protagonist to make the inner change that your novel is actually about? (Sub-questions: Will the problem's impending consequence force the protagonist to struggle with her misbelief? Regardless of whether or not the protagonist achieves her goal, will the approaching consequence cost her something big, emotionally speaking?) Tweak as needed until you have "one overarching plot problem that leaps over every hurdle and meets both tests."
- ☐ Sketch "the ticks that will lead you to your opening scene. Your goal is to find the tick that catapults your protagonist into unavoidable action." That will be your opening scene.

The Opening (Ch. 9)

- ☐ Create a Scene Card for your opening scene
- ☐ Write out your opening scene using the Scene Card

The Ending (or AHA! Scene) (Ch. 10)

- ☐ To find this scene, answer these three questions:
 - At the end, will your protagonist achieve her external goal?
 - What will change for your protagonist internally?
 - What will happen externally in this scene that forces your protagonist to confront, and hopefully overcome, her misbelief?
- ☐ Create a Scene Card for the aha! moment.
- ☐ Write out the aha! scene using your Scene Card.

Blueprinting Your Novel (Ch. 11)

- ☐ Set up your folders (digital or otherwise). Include folders for:
 - Key characters
 - Rules of the world
 - Idea list
 - Random scene cards
 - Scene cards in development
 - Scenes
- ☐ Print or write or otherwise create extra (blank) Scene Cards if needed.

Setting Up the Plot (Ch. 12)

- ☐ Write your novel overview based on everything you've written so far (like a much more detailed version of your "what-if").
- ☐ List out every potential plot point that jumps out at you from this list (put them in your Idea List)
 - Fill out Scene Cards for each plot point (but don't worry about filling them out completely—just fill out what you know for sure right now).
- ☐ Go through your three turning point scenes and look for any potential conflicts (consider especially any secrets or lies your heroine told herself or others that might resurface at some point).
 - Fill out Scene Cards for the plot points that work (as much as you can fill out) and add any maybes to your idea folder.
- ☐ Answer this question: What external obstacles have you already planted in the past that will keep your protagonist from her current goal—or conversely help her attain it?
 - Fill out Scene Cards for the plot points that work (as much as you can fill out) and add any maybes to your idea folder.

Each "What" Has a "Why" (Ch. 13)

- ☐ Check your Idea List and Scene Cards in CHRONOLOGICAL order looking for spots where the logic or the logistics (in other words the specifics) are vague or unclear. For each plot point, ask these three "Why" questions, adding to your notes as you gain insight and ideas:
 - Why does my plot need it to happen?
 - Logistically, why can it happen? In other words, is it actually possible?
 - Why would it happen, given your protagonist's inner struggle?
- ☐ Check your cause-and-effect trajectory for areas that "don't have any clear plot points at all? Think: the sections that you've summed up in general but that lack any specifics." As you brainstorm what could happen next, always test it against specifics (is it logical, given what you already know about your characters/world etc...?) and ask "why?"
- ☐ Plan out the scope of your story: "What is the time frame and how big is your stage? Consider the external plot and the internal struggle."

Layering: Subplots, etc... (Ch. 14)

- ☐ Identify anything on your Idea List or Scene Cards that might be a potential subplot.
- ☐ Spend a little time fleshing them out and brainstorm, asking why and checking for the logic behind it. Be sure to ask: "Why will this matter to my protagonist, given her quest?"
- ☐ Pick a character to develop. Keep in mind "your goal is to create a character who'll either challenge or reaffirm your protagonist's misbelief."
 - Answer this question: "What, in general, might this character open my protagonist's eyes to?"
 - Create a character bio (just a sketch). Keep it focused on a cause-and-effect trajectory that connects with your protagonist's cause-and-effect trajectory. Remember also to focus on external and internal struggles for this character.

Layering: Subplots, etc... (Ch. 14) continued...

- ☐ Create a bio for every secondary character in your story.
 - As you jot down the bio/their own plot, look for details that have scene potential for your story.
- ☐ Write out quick story specific bios for each character who is important to but not present in your story.
- ☐ Comb through each bio: “if any of them have shared history with your protagonist, see if you can begin to flesh it out.” Make a list of “moments when what happened between the protagonist and the character in question has story relevance.”
 - Transfer incomplete ideas to your Idea List and start Scene Cards for the others.

Writing the Novel (Ch. 15)

- ☐ Complete your Scene Cards for scenes 2-5.
- ☐ Write scenes 2-5.
- ☐ Revise your opening scene.
- ☐ Continue writing each scene. For each one, “gather everything you know about your protagonist and their subjective worldview at the moment.”
 - What are they most worried about?
 - How will that affect their judgement in this scene?
 - Be sure you’ve thought of each layer, each ticking clock.”