

Course Title: Writing the Novel from Back to Front
Course Code: NVL 09 W
Instructor: Caroline Leavitt
Spring 2016

Course Summary:

Many beginning writers start writing their novels with an eye to just getting words on the page, as many as possible, not stopping to think about structure until they have hit those magic words, “the end.” Others feel they need to “follow their pen” and then, when they have 350 or so pages, look those pages over to see “what is there” and how it might shape into a novel. This, alas, wastes time, and can lead to bonafide heartbreak. This course looks at things very differently. John Irving doesn’t write a line until he knows the ending of his novel, among other things, and neither do I. Structure is the spine of your novel, and if that spine is not strong and in place, none of the “flesh” of character, dialogue, setting, etc. will hold onto it. I believe that in order to know where you are going, you must know where you want to end up. Once you know that, you can figure out how every step of your novel should lead to that final point.

This course will emphasize why mapping out your story, using the end and beginning points as lynchpins is so important, all the while realizing that students might still be in beginning stages. Writers will begin by figuring out their premise, which will lead them into figuring out a possible end of their novel, which gives us a shape to work with. Each week, we will work within either the first or last chapter to write out a key scene for such crucial moments as the inciting incident, a scene that reveals the moral problem, or a scene that reveals the character’s self-revelation and change. By the end of the class, through the writing exercises, students will have written their premise, 8 key scenes of 1-3 pages each, and a brief 2-page synopsis, and they will have the writing techniques to go on to tackle their novel.

Students will be put into small groups (all groups have the same assignments) and work with this group throughout the class, reading and critiquing one another’s assignments. Students will produce 1 to 3 pages of work per week in either their last or first chapter as indicated in the syllabus, along with reading and discussion exercises.

Please see course page for fuller description and additional details.

Grades Options and Requirements:

For those of you who are taking this course for a grade, the breakdown is as follows. Please note that you can change your grading status at any point before the final class meeting (Friday of the last week of class) by contacting the Stanford Continuing Studies department.

Writing exercises (weeks 2-5) 20%
Full-length workshop piece (weeks 6-10) 40%
Classroom participation 40%

Attitude: Please note that what this means is that rudeness and nastiness to other students or to myself will not be tolerated. I want this class to be a safe place for everyone.

Please Note: If you require proof that you completed a Continuing Studies course for any reason (for example, employer reimbursement), you must choose either the Letter Grade or credit/No Credit Option. Courses taken for NGR will not appear on official transcripts or grade reports.

Required Materials:

The Anatomy of Story Structure by John Truby
Wired for Story by Lisa Cron

My Presence Online:

I am almost always available online, either in class or via my email. Each week begins on a Monday and ends on a Friday. Assignments are due by Thursday night, midnight Pacific Time. You can use the weekends for commenting on other assignments and answering discussion questions if you like. Please note that once a week is completed, I will not go back to the previous week, in order to keep the class progressing. Of course, life sometimes gets in the way, so if you need extra time for a good reason, please let me know, and I can make arrangements.

In addition, we will have Zoom video chats to go over the material and talk about writing, every Tuesday at 9 Eastern Time, which is 6 Pacific Time. All chats will be recorded for those who can't make it.

Weekly Reading and Discussion Questions:

Each week, I will have you read something from either text and will post discussion questions, which you may respond to. The discussion questions are not mandatory.

Weekly Assignments:

Your assignments are the craft of the class, and they are mandatory. You must critique all the students in your group each week.

Assignment Lengths:

You may submit 1 to 3 pages, or up to 750 words, each week. A single page is 150 words.

Tentative Weekly Outline:

Week One

Lecture: Finding Your Premise and Why Start at the End?

To Read This Week: *The Anatomy of Story Structure* (Ignore the last section on audience appeal. I'll explain why we don't care about that—at least not yet.) Pages 16-36 on premise.

Writing Assignment: I always believe that writing is a journey, that it is not, as Doctorov said, like driving in the dark with only headlights. You also need a map. And that map is your premise. Before we get to the end point of your novel (week two), we need to find the all-important premise. Read some of the premises on page 21 on, and then write one of your own for your novel in progress.

Week Two

Lecture: The End Point

To Read This Week: *Wired for Story* by Lisa Cron, pages 84-102;

Plot Is a Verb. <http://bashapirobooks.com/blog/2013/05/plot-is-a-verb>

Writing Assignment: Week One showed you the main character and the premise of your novel, but this week we want to focus on where your character is going to end up. How they will change, and why. I would like to see a key scene from the last chapter of your novel, where we see a definite character change.

Discussion Points: Get thee to a bookstore or a bookshelf, and read the last page of any two novels. Could you guess the beginning by the end? Why or why not?

Week Three

Lecture: Figuring Out Character by Means of Moral vs. Psychological Needs

To Read This Week:

The Anatomy of Story Structure by John Truby, Moral Argument, pages 108-144

Writing Assignment: You know your ending, and now you must work back to your beginning. But to do this, you need to know the moral and psychological needs of your main characters—the how and why of their change through the novel. I would like to see a key scene from your last chapter, up to 750 words, showing a character acting on or against their moral or psychological need.

Discussion Points:

What recent novel have you read that had a strong moral argument? Did it play out the way you expected? Why or why not? What did that moral argument add to the story?

Week Four

Lecture: Why and How Character Scars (or the Ghost) Drive the Plot

To Read This Week: Truby: *Ghost and Story World* in the Chapter on Plot, pages 272-275; *Wired for Story*, pages 84-102

Writing Assignment: You know your ending. You now know something about the moral and psychological needs of your main character, and now we can deepen that by talking about the ghost—something from the character's past that drives them. I

would like to see a key scene, up to 750 words, revealing the character ghost, which almost always occurs in the first chapter.

Discussion Points: Think about a flawed character from film or in a novel. What's the scar and how does it propel the character?

Think about your own ghost and how you deal with it. You don't have to reveal anything private, but can you talk about how it influences your

Week Five

Lecture: Reveals and Reversals and Why You Need Them

To Read This Week: *The Anatomy of Story* by John Truby, Chapter 8 Plot, Revelation Sequence

Writing Assignment: You now have a basic idea of how your character is going to change, and why. But what keeps a novel moving are these reveals and reversals of expectation. So let's try some out. I would like to see up to 750 words of a key scene showing a reveal or a reversal in your last chapter that will lead to the end point you have already discovered.

Discussion Points: Can you talk about a reveal or reversal in your own life? How did it change what you wanted to do next?

Week Six

Lecture: Story-World and How to Create It

To Read This Week: *The Anatomy of Story Structure* by John Truby, Chapter 6, Story-World, pages 145-219

Writing Assignment: Characters don't exist in a vacuum. Their world, the town they live in, the place they want to live in, all impacts their choice, and to make your story work, you want to also see that story world change as the character changes. For example, if your character ends up living on a farm alone, and he begins the story living in the city with a wife and two kids, we want to know what happened. Why did he move and choose to be solitary? What forces were at play? I would like to see a key scene of up to 750 words showing your story-world in your last chapter and its impact on your character. Please also tell us how the story-world will change from your first chapter to your last.

Discussion Points: Which novel (or film) have you read or seen recently that had a vivid story-world that worked really well with the story? Can you analyze why it did?

Week Seven

Lecture: Theme

To Read This Week: *The Anatomy of Story Structure* by John Truby, Finding the Theme, pages 110-113

Writing Assignment: The theme is really just another way of asking—Why does writing this novel matter so much to you personally? What is it that you are trying to figure out in the writing? Every novel should have a question it is asking and answering—can you be part of a community if the community doesn't want you? Can love conquer all?

Knowing why the story matters to you will give it a more profound layer. I would like to see a key scene from either your first or last chapter, up to 750, words showing a bit of your theme in action.

Discussion Points: One way to think about theme can be with the “themes”—problems that keep cropping up in your life. For example, if you are working at a job you hate, your theme might be that life is hard and we must do what we have to do to survive. But if you are working at a job you love for little money, your theme might be that if you do what you love, you’ll be happy and that’s more important than money. What’s your theme in life?

Week Eight. Subplot

Lecture: Seizing on the Subplot

To Read This Week: *The Anatomy of Story Structure* by John Truby. Subplot, pages 281-281; *Wired for Story* by Lisa Cron. Subplots, pages 204-214

Writing Assignment: We’ve covered our main character’s journey, but how should the other characters fit into the main story? I’d like to see a key scene in your last chapter up to 750 words of pages showing another character impacting your main character.

Discussion Points: If your life were a book, what would be the subplots?

Week Nine

Lecture: The Seven Steps of Story Structure and Writing a Synopsis

Introduction: John Truby’s Seven Steps

To Read This Week: *The Anatomy of Story Structure* by John Truby, Chapter 3, The Seven Key Steps of Story Structure, pages 39-55

Writing Assignment: You now know enough about story to craft a kind of outline. I would like to see a one- to three-page synopsis that comes out of your seven steps. This is very difficult, so don’t panic.

Discussion Points: Truby’s seven steps are fluid and can be tinkered with. Do you think any of these steps can be done away with, or would you add steps?

Week Ten. The Opening Pages

Lecture: Why the First Chapter Is So Important

To Read This Week: *Wired for Story* by Lisa Cron, Chapter 1, How to Hook the Reader, pages 6-22

Writing Assignment: We’ve worked our way back to the beginning. We know the character’s journey and we know how he or she is going to be changed. But we need to see the seeds of that change right from the start. So I’d like to see the first key scene of your first chapter. Then we’ll compare it to your last pages that you did in week one, and see how the first and last chapter reflect and inform each other.

Discussion Points: What openings of novels or movies have stayed with you—and why?