



# Wired for Story: The Writer's Guide to Using Brain Science to Hook Readers from the Very First Sentence

By Lisa Cron

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Imagine knowing what the brain craves from every tale it encounters, what fuels the success of any great story, and what keeps readers transfixed. *Wired for Story* reveals these cognitive secrets--and it's a game-changer for anyone who has ever set pen to paper.

The vast majority of writing advice focuses on "writing well" as if it were the same as telling a great story. This is exactly where many aspiring writers fail--they strive for beautiful metaphors, authentic dialogue, and interesting characters, losing sight of the one thing that every engaging story must do: ignite the brain's hardwired desire to learn what happens next. When writers tap into the evolutionary purpose of story and electrify our curiosity, it triggers a delicious dopamine rush that tells us to pay attention. Without it, even the most perfect prose won't hold anyone's interest.

Backed by recent breakthroughs in neuroscience as well as examples from novels, screenplays, and short stories, *Wired for Story* offers a revolutionary look at story as the brain experiences it. Each chapter zeroes in on an aspect of the brain, its corresponding revelation about story, and the way to apply it to your storytelling right now.



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### Editorial Review

#### Review

As both a publishing veteran and a TV pro, Lisa Cron knows storytelling. In *Wired for Story* she shares her fascinating psychological approaches to the craft. Her fresh way of looking at the core essentials of writing has our neurons firing.

- Writer's Digest

... how can you craft a story compelling enough to keep readers turning the pages deep into the night? The answer lies in a new book linking writing to neuroscience, Lisa Cron's *Wired for Story: The Writer's Guide to Using Brain Science*.

- Arnie Cooper - Poets & Writers

Lisa Cron's *Wired for Story: The Writer's Guide to Using Brain Science to Hook Readers from the Very First Sentence* is relentlessly interesting because it reveals how our brains perceive and process stories and narratives. Ms. Cron walks the writer through the mental architecture of a story, patiently revealing what works and what doesn't and why. She writes with clarity and humor about elementary things every writer could profit from revisiting under her auspices. Who would have thought anyone could make the intricacies of brain science accessible?

- Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

“We all love a good story but most of us struggle to write them. Lisa Cron enlightens us as to how to get the job done in a savvy and engaging way.”

—Michael Gazzaniga, neuroscientist and director of the SAGE Center for the Study of Mind, University of California, Santa Barbara

“Story guru Lisa Cron unlocked my last novel for me over lunch, but if you can’t have her by your side when you’re wrestling your manuscript, the next best thing is this smart, funny, genius book about the myths, realities, and brass tacks of story. Packed with innovative tips and techniques, it’s as essential to any writer as a laptop, and much more fun.”

—Caroline Leavitt, author of *New York Times* best seller *Pictures of You*

“*Wired for Story* reveals that stories are not only a metaphor for human striving and survival, but they are also the means by which the brain ensures that we survive. Lisa Cron translates the latest neuroscience into a master guidebook for how to write engaging, meaningful, and moving stories.”

—Elizabeth Lyon, author of *Manuscript Makeover*

“As a story consultant for business executives as well as artists, I am always searching for ways to convey the skill set involved in constructing a story. *Wired for Story* presents basic principles for harnessing the natural power of the brain to recognize and create stories in a way that is inspiring and entirely helpful.”

—Murray Nossel, PhD, founder of Narativ Inc.

“Remember when Luke has to drop the bomb into the small vent on the Death Star? The story writer faces a similar challenge of penetrating the brain of the reader. This book gives the blueprints.”

—David Eagleman, neuroscientist at Baylor College of Medicine and author of *Incognito: The Secret Lives*

## of the Brain

### About the Author

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.

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I find that most people know what a story is until they sit down to write one.

—Flannery O'Connor

In the second it takes you to read this sentence, your senses are showering you with over 11,000,000 pieces of information. Your conscious mind is capable of registering about forty of them. And when it comes to actually paying attention? On a good day, you can process seven bits of data at a time. On a bad day, five.(1) On one of those days? More like minus three.

And yet, you're not only making your way in a complex world just fine, you're preparing to write a story about someone navigating a world of your creation. So how important can any of those other 10,999,960 bits of information really be?

Very, as it turns out—which is why, although we don't register them consciously, our brain is busy noting, analyzing, and deciding whether they're something irrelevant (like the fact that the sky is still blue) or something we need to pay attention to (like the sound of a horn blaring as we meander across the street, lost in thought about the hunky guy who just moved in next door).

What's your brain's criterion for either leaving you in peace to daydream or demanding your immediate and total attention? It's simple. Your brain, along with every other living organism down to the humble amoeba, has one main goal: survival. Your subconscious brain—which neuroscientists refer to as the adaptive or cognitive unconscious—is a finely tuned instrument, instantly aware of what matters, what doesn't, why, and, hopefully, what you should do about it.(2) It knows you don't have the time to think, "Gee, what's that loud noise? Oh, it's a horn honking; it must be coming from that great big SUV that's barreling straight at me. The driver was probably texting and didn't notice me until it was too late to stop. Maybe I should get out of the—"

Splat.

And so, to keep us from ending up as road kill, our brain devised a method of sifting through and interpreting all that information much, much faster than our slowpoke conscious mind is capable of. Although for most other animals that sort of innate reflex is where evolution called it a day, thus relegating their reactions to what neuroscientists aptly refer to as zombie systems, we humans got a little something extra.(3) Our brain developed a way to consciously navigate information so that, provided we have the time, we can decide on our own what to do next.

Story.

Here's how neuroscientist Antonio Damasio sums it up: "The problem of how to make all this wisdom understandable, transmissible, persuasive, enforceable—in a word, of how to make it stick—was faced and a solution found. Storytelling was the solution—storytelling is something brains do, naturally and implicitly. . . . [I]t should be no surprise that it pervades the entire fabric of human societies and cultures."(4)

We think in story. It's hardwired in our brain. It's how we make strategic sense of the otherwise overwhelming world around us. Simply put, the brain constantly seeks meaning from all the input thrown at it, yanks out what's important for our survival on a need-to-know basis, and tells us a story about it, based on

what it knows of our past experience with it, how we feel about it, and how it might affect us. Rather than recording everything on a first come, first served basis, our brain casts us as “the protagonist” and then edits our experience with cinema-like precision, creating logical interrelations, mapping connections between memories, ideas, and events for future reference.(5)

Story is the language of experience, whether it’s ours, someone else’s, or that of fictional characters. Other people’s stories are as important as the stories we tell ourselves. Because if all we ever had to go on was our own experience, we wouldn’t make it out of onesies.

Now for the really important question—what does all this mean for us writers? It means that we can now decode what the brain (aka the reader) is really looking for in every story, beginning with the two key concepts that underlie all the cognitive secrets in this book:

1. Neuroscientists believe the reason our already overloaded brain devotes so much precious time and space to allowing us to get lost in a story is that without stories, we’d be toast. Stories allow us to simulate intense experiences without actually having to live through them. This was a matter of life and death back in the Stone Age, when if you waited for experience to teach you that the rustling in the bushes was actually a lion looking for lunch, you’d end up the main course. It’s even more crucial now, because once we mastered the physical world, our brain evolved to tackle something far trickier: the social realm. Story evolved as a way to explore our own mind and the minds of others, as a sort of dress rehearsal for the future.(6) As a result, story helps us survive not only in the life-and-death physical sense but also in a life-well-lived social sense.

Renowned cognitive scientist and Harvard professor Steven Pinker explains our need for story this way:

Fictional narratives supply us with a mental catalogue of the fatal conundrums we might face someday and the outcomes of strategies we could deploy in them. What are the options if I were to suspect that my uncle killed my father, took his position, and married my mother? If my hapless older brother got no respect in the family, are there circumstances that might lead him to betray me? What’s the worst that could happen if I were seduced by a client while my wife and daughter were away for the weekend? What’s the worst that could happen if I had an affair to spice up my boring life as the wife of a country doctor? How can I avoid a suicidal confrontation with raiders who want my land today without looking like a coward and thereby ceding it to them tomorrow? The answers are to be found in any bookstore or any video store. The cliché that life imitates art is true because the function of some kinds of art is for life to imitate it.(7)

2. Not only do we crave story, but we have very specific hardwired expectations for every story we read, even though—and here’s the kicker—chances are next to nil that the average reader could tell you what those expectations are. If pressed, she’d be far more likely to refer to the magic of story, that certain *je ne sais quoi* that can’t be quantified. And who could blame her? The real answer is rather counterintuitive: our expectations have everything to do with the story’s ability to provide information on how we might safely navigate this earthly plane. To that end, we run them through our own very sophisticated subconscious sense of what a story is supposed to do: plunk someone with a clear goal into an increasingly difficult situation they then have to navigate. When a story meets our brain’s criteria, we relax and slip into the protagonist’s skin, eager to experience what his or her struggle feels like, without having to leave the comfort of home.

All this is incredibly useful for writers because it neatly defines what a story is—and what it’s not. In this chapter, that’s exactly what we’ll examine: the four elements that make up what a story is; what we, as readers, are wired to expect when we dive into the first page of a book and try it on for size; and why even the most lyrical, beautiful writing by itself is as inviting as a big bowl of wax fruit.

## Users Review

**From reader reviews:**

**Michael Campbell:**

Have you spare time for any day? What do you do when you have a lot more or little spare time? Yep, you can choose the suitable activity for spend your time. Any person spent their spare time to take a go walking, shopping, or went to the actual Mall. How about open or perhaps read a book eligible *Wired for Story: The Writer's Guide to Using Brain Science to Hook Readers from the Very First Sentence*? Maybe it is to become best activity for you. You understand beside you can spend your time along with your favorite's book, you can more intelligent than before. Do you agree with their opinion or you have other opinion?

**Robert Hicks:**

The book *Wired for Story: The Writer's Guide to Using Brain Science to Hook Readers from the Very First Sentence* can give more knowledge and information about everything you want. So why must we leave the great thing like a book *Wired for Story: The Writer's Guide to Using Brain Science to Hook Readers from the Very First Sentence*? A number of you have a different opinion about guide. But one aim in which book can give many data for us. It is absolutely appropriate. Right now, try to closer using your book. Knowledge or information that you take for that, you are able to give for each other; you could share all of these. Book *Wired for Story: The Writer's Guide to Using Brain Science to Hook Readers from the Very First Sentence* has simple shape nevertheless, you know: it has great and big function for you. You can appearance the enormous world by open and read a guide. So it is very wonderful.

**Doreen Williams:**

This *Wired for Story: The Writer's Guide to Using Brain Science to Hook Readers from the Very First Sentence* usually are reliable for you who want to become a successful person, why. The key reason why of this *Wired for Story: The Writer's Guide to Using Brain Science to Hook Readers from the Very First Sentence* can be among the great books you must have is usually giving you more than just simple looking at food but feed an individual with information that perhaps will shock your earlier knowledge. This book is actually handy, you can bring it everywhere and whenever your conditions in e-book and printed types. Beside that this *Wired for Story: The Writer's Guide to Using Brain Science to Hook Readers from the Very First Sentence* giving you an enormous of experience like rich vocabulary, giving you test of critical thinking that we realize it useful in your day exercise. So, let's have it and revel in reading.

**Leroy Ange:**

Hey guys, do you really wants to finds a new book to study? May be the book with the subject *Wired for Story: The Writer's Guide to Using Brain Science to Hook Readers from the Very First Sentence* suitable to you? Often the book was written by well-known writer in this era. The actual book untitled *Wired for Story: The Writer's Guide to Using Brain Science to Hook Readers from the Very First Sentence* is one of several books in which everyone read now. That book was inspired many men and women in the world. When you read this guide you will enter the new dimensions that you ever know previous to. The author explained their idea in the simple way, so all of people can easily to comprehend the core of this publication. This book will give you a great deal of information about this world now. To help you see the represented of the world within this book.

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