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 is different from others in that there is no major workshop, but instead weekly writing assignments that are all mandatory. Instructor feedback will be limited to a paragraph per week on a 750-word selection—or more when needed. Feedback with be constructive and meant to help you push forward. The class 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 these crucial moments in a novel: the inciting incident, the moral problem, the character’s ghost, the theme, a subplot character, reveals and reversals, a character’s self revelation and change and the story world. By the end of the class, through the writing exercises, students will have written their premise, 8 key scenes of 1-3 pages each, a brief 2-page synopsis and they will have the writing techniques to go on and complete 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 (which is 750 words) in either their last or first chapter as indicated in the syllabus, along with reading and discussion exercises. Writers must critique each member of their group each week. I, of course, will be critiquing everyone. I will post directions in class for how to critique, and writers must write at least a 5-sentence critique.

We will also be reading two craft books, Wired for story by Lisa Cron, and The Anatomy of Story by John Truby.
Also, every other week, we will have “office hours” or a 45-minute video chat focusing on the craft issue of each week. I will record these so people who cannot attend can still watch them.

Please see course page for fuller description and additional details.

**Required materials:**
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The Anatomy of Story Structure by John Truby
Wired for Story by Lisa Cron

I have listed the chapter and the chapter heading since not all of you will be reading the same editions.

**Grade 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 60%
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.

**Tentative Zoom Schedule Weekly**

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

*Please note that the Zoom schedule is subject to change. The live video sessions are recorded. Student attendance is optional.

**Tentative Weekly Outline:**

**Week One**
Lecture: Finding your premise and why start at the end?
To read this week: John Truby, The Anatomy of story (Ignore the last section on audience appeal. I’ll explain why we don’t care about that—at least not yet.) Chapter Two. 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 in Chapter Two, and then write one of your own for your novel in progress.

Week 2
Lecture: The End point. What makes a satisfying ending?
To Read this Week:
Wired for story by Lisa Cron: Chapter 10: The road from setup to payoff. Whole chapter.
Writing Assignment: Week 1 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.

Week Three.
Lecture: Figuring out Character by Means of Moral vs. Psychological Needs. What are moral arguments and why do they matter?
To Read This Week:
The Anatomy of Story by John Truby, Chapter Five, Moral Argument, pages 108-144 (whole chapter)
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.

Week Four.
Lecture: Why and how character scars (or the ghost) drive the plot
To read this week:
Truby: Chapter 8: Plot. Go to section Ghost and Story World Page 272-275 (End with Tootsie plot summation.)
Wired for story: Chapter 5: Digging up your Protagonists Issue page 84-102 (Whole chapter.)
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.
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, Thematic Revelation is the subhead. Read to the end of the chapter.
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.

Week Six
Lecture: Story-world and how to create it, and why story world is so much more than just the setting.
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 storyworld will change from your first chapter to your last.

Week Seven
Lecture: Theme
To read this week: The Anatomy of Story by John Truby, Chapter 5 Moral Argument. Finding the Theme line in the designing principle, pages 110-113 (stop after Citizen Kane breakdown.)
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.

Week Eight. Subplot
Lecture: Seizing on the subplot
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.

Week Nine. The Opening pages
Lecture: Why the first chapter is so important and how it acts as a microcosm to the whole novel.
To read this week: Wired for Story by Lisa Cron. Chapter 1: How to Hook the Reader, Whole chapter.
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, which is the inciting incident, the event that starts the character’s journey. 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.

Week Ten
Lecture: The Seven Steps of Story Structure and writing a synopsis
Introduction: John Truby’s Seven Steps.
To read this week: John Truby, The Anatomy of Story Structure: Chapter 3, The Seven Key Steps
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.