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 writing your novel from back to front, all the while realizing that students might still be in beginning stages, and that things (plot, character, etc.) might change as you are writing. Students will produce 1 to 3 pages of work per week for the first 5 weeks, (up to 750 words), along with reading and discussion exercises, such as mapping out essential plot points, outlining psychological and moral needs, and others. In the final four weeks, we will workshop two or three students each week, up to 5,000 words of his or her last chapter. By the end of the course, students will have a synopsis, techniques to map out their novels (including knowing how to use reveals, reversals and moral choices), and a last chapter that they can work backwards from.

Please see course page for additional details.

**Strongly suggested materials:**

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

Reading assignments and discussion questions are optional. However, these books are invaluable tools for any writer, and I encourage all students to read them cover to cover. Please note that the page numbers for the Truby book are from the hardcover copy, and the page numbers for the Lisa Cron Book are from the paperback. I have labeled the reading so you can easily find it no matter which edition you use.

**My Presence Online:**
I am almost always available online, either in class or via email. Each week begins on a Monday and ends on a Friday. Assignments are due by Thursday night at 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. Once we move into workshop, I will have individual Zoom chats with those being workshopped. 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. This is not mandatory. Please note that the page numbers for the Truby book are from the hardcover copy, and the page numbers for the Lisa Cron Book are from the paperback. I have labeled the reading so you can easily find it no matter which edition you use.

**Weekly Assignments:**
Your assignments are the craft of the class, and they are mandatory. You must critique two students per week, and all students who are being workshopped.

**Assignment Lengths:**
For the first 5 weeks, you can submit 1 to 3 pages, or up to 750 words. A single page is 150 words. Weeks 6 through 10 are given over to workshopping two to three students each week. Workshopped students may submit up to 5,000 words. I will also assign optional reading, discussion and reading questions and assignments for those students who are not being workshopped. (Note: workshopped students may also do these assignments if they choose, but because of the workload, they might want to just tuck them into their writers’ toolbox instead.)

**Grades:**
For those of you who are taking this course for a letter 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 office.

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

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.

**Week One. September 21**
**Lecture:** Why Start at the End?
**To Read this Week:**
Wired for story by Lisa Cron: page 84-102
Plot is a Verb. http://bashapirobooks.com/blog/2013/05/plot-is-a-verb

**Writing Assignment:** I would like you to state the beginning of your novel and the end, in a way that shows character change. Examples: Cowardly Bob gets drafted and becomes a war hero. Since we will be workshopping your ending, the 750 words of your novel can come from anywhere else in your story.

**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 Two. September 28**
**Lecture:** Figuring out Character by Means of Moral vs. Psychological Needs.
**To Read This Week:**
The Anatomy of Story by John Truby, Moral Argument, pages 108-144
**Writing Assignment:** Please state the moral and psychological needs of two characters who change through the novel. I would also like to see up to 750 words showing a character with a 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 Three. October 5**
**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. Page 272-275 in the hardback edition
Wired for story: page 84-102
**Writing Assignment:** Up to 750 words revealing the character ghost
**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 Four. October 12**
**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:** Up to 750 words showing a reveal or a reversal
**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 Five. October 19**
**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 of Story Structure, pages 39-55
Writing Assignment: A one to two page synopsis that comes out of your seven steps. This is very difficult, so don’t panic. And because it’s so difficult, I’m not assigning any other writing to do.
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 Six. October 26
BEGINNING OF WORKSHOP.
Lecture: Why the first chapter is the most important
We will all focus on two or three students this week
To read this week: Wired for Story by Lisa Cron. Chapter 1: How to Hook the Reader, page 6-22
Writing Assignment: Up to 750 words of your first chapter
Discussion Points: What openings of novels or movies have stayed with you--and why?

Week Seven. November 2
WORKSHOP WEEK.
Lecture: Story-world and how to create it
Writing Assignment: Up to 750 words showing your story-world.
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 Eight. November 9
WORKSHOP WEEK
Lecture: A few notes on theme
To read this week: The Anatomy of Story by John Truby, Finding the Theme Line, pages 110-113 in the hardback edition
Writing Assignment: Up to 750 words showing your theme
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 Nine. November 16
WORKSHOP WEEK
Lecture: Crafting a Never-Ending Story
Writing Assignment: Since everyone is going to be workshopping their ending, I’d like instead, for you to take a classic fairytale, and change the ending to a never ending one. For example, Cinderella ends “happily ever after.” But how could you hint at a continuing story? (Perhaps, as she enters the castle, she sees all the prince’s empty wine bottles!)

To Read This Week:
Wired for Story by Lisa Cron, Chapter Ten: The Road from Setup to Payoff, pages 185-199

Discussion Points: What kinds of endings of novels do you respond to the most, and why? Have you ever felt cheated by an ending? And on the other hand, has there ever been an ending you simply could not stop thinking about? Why do you think that was?

November 23rd, Thanksgiving week. No class.

Week Ten. November 30
WORKSHOP WEEK
Lecture: Seizing on the subplot
To read this week: The Anatomy of Story by John Truby. Subplot, pages 281-281 in the hardback edition
Wired for Story by Lisa Cron. Subplots, pages 204-214
Writing Assignment: Up to 750 words of pages showing your subplot
Discussion Points: If your life were a book, what would be the subplots?