

The Writer's Guide to Using
Brain Science to Hook Readers
from the Very First Sentence



WIRED FOR STORY

Lisa Cron



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real life, it's bad form to put someone in an awkward situation—worse still, to then point the finger at him and make sure everyone notices.

After all, it's one thing to fail in private and quite another to fail on the page in plain view. Like if John graduates from a prestigious law school, then fails the bar. Twice. And he's thinking, *Well, at least no one knows but me*. Except when he's John F. Kennedy, Jr., and it's the headline of the *New York Post*, which actually read: "The Hunk Flunks." Failing in public is mortifying. But it sure triggers change, whether that means adopting an alias and moving to another state where you can pretend you're someone else, or doing as Kennedy did and rising to the challenge. (For the record, he stuck to it, passed the bar, and went on to win all six of his cases as a prosecutor for the Manhattan district attorney's office.)

Constantly upping the ante gets the protagonist in shape, which is crucial, since the final hurdle he'll have to sail over will be impossibly high. Thus the more you put him through before he gets there, the better. After all, as Emily Dickinson points out, "A wounded deer leaps the highest."⁸ If you want your protagonist to be up to the test when he gets to that last hurrah, you've got to toughen him up along the way.

Keeping in mind that your reader must know what your protagonist's plan is before you begin to dash it, here's a crash course on how to torture your protagonist—for his own good, naturally.

Eleven Do's and Don'ts for Undermining Your Characters' Best-Laid Plans

1. **Don't let your characters admit anything they aren't forced to, *even* to themselves.** Remember when you were a kid, and someone was trying to get you to do something you didn't want to do? You'd yell, "Oh yeah? Make me!" Well, in a story, when it comes to admitting anything, *ever*, that's your characters' mantra. No one in your story should ever divulge anything they

aren't forced to—either by a gun to the head or, far more likely, circumstances beyond their control. Information is currency. It has to be earned. No one gives it away for free—and everything has a price. Your protagonist needs a compelling reason to admit anything. It either gains him something or keeps something bad from happening. It's never neutral.

2. **Do allow your protagonist to have secrets—but not to keep them.** We keep secrets for one reason: because we are afraid of what will happen—that is, change—if they're divulged. But that doesn't make it easy. A secret is “the result of a struggle between competing parties in the brain. One part of the brain wants to reveal something, and another part does not want to,” writes neuroscientist David Eagleman in *Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain*.⁹ In fact, turns out it's unhealthy to keep a secret, both mentally and physically. According to psychologist James Pennebaker, “the act of *not* discussing or confiding the event with another may be more damaging than having experienced the event per se.”¹⁰

Thus, given how painful it can be to torture your protagonist, it's comforting to know that ultimately forcing her to divulge her secret will actually be a kindness. You don't want her to have a heart attack from the stress of keeping it in, do you? So no matter how fervently she may want to keep her secrets close to the vest, you can't allow it. In fact, the more the protagonist wants to keep mum, the more the story will try to make her sing.

And one more thing: don't keep her secret a secret from us—let the reader in. We love being insiders. Our delight comes from knowing what the protagonist is holding back and why; we revel in the tension between what she's saying and what we know she's really thinking.

3. **Do ensure that everything the protagonist does to remedy the situation only makes it worse.** This is otherwise known as the irony factor. Remember what we said about the decision in one scene triggering the action in the next? This is how it plays out, ever upping the stakes, forcing the protagonist to reevaluate the situation with each turn of the screw.

There are myriad ways to up the ante. For instance, April is secretly in love with Gary, so she applies for a job at his firm to get to know him better. She's hired, and in Gary's department, no less. But when she shows up for work all decked out in a new outfit she can't really afford, she discovers she's actually gotten Gary's job. He, it turns out, has been promoted and is being transferred to the London office. (Or worse, he's been fired, because her experience was so much stronger than his.)

Sometimes the irony stems from the fact that the plan works brilliantly and the protagonist gets *exactly* what she's after, only to discover it's actually the last thing she'd ever want. In which case, Gary instantly falls for April, sweeping her into his arms, murmuring that he loves her almost as much as playing *World of Warcraft* until dawn, which he'd do every night if only his mom would stop banging on the wall.

4. **Do make sure everything that can go wrong does.** But don't let your protagonist in on your agenda. Let him start out believing all he has to do is ask, and voilà! All the riches in the world will be delivered by FedEx before nine the next morning. It's not that he's delusional; it's human nature. As we know, in order to conserve precious energy, anytime the brain can do less, it will,¹¹ and we follow suit. In the beginning, no one ever spends more than the minimum effort required to solve a problem. But honestly, can you remember the last time the smallest amount of effort solved *anything*? In fact, it's practically guaranteed to make things worse, and hopefully in ways

the protagonist never imagined. That's why we cringe in movies when the hero breathes a sigh of relief and says, "Well, at least nothing *else* can go wrong." Because we know that can mean only one thing: now something *really* bad is going to happen—and usually it's something that makes everything up to that moment seem like a cakewalk.

5. **Do let your characters start out risking a dollar but end up betting the farm.** Another interesting facet of the escalating trouble that follows most protagonists is that although they begin by merely betting a lowly dollar, they tend to cower, whine, and fret more about that single dollar than they do at the end, when betting the entire farm. For instance, in the 1986 John Hughes classic *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, Ferris's sidekick, Cameron, has never stood up to his father—a man who, according to Cam, loves his vintage Ferrari more than life itself. Which is why he never drives it. But because Cam is a wimp—he can't stand up to anyone—he lets Ferris talk him into cutting school and taking the car out for a spin. Ferris assures Cam that afterward they'll simply run the car in reverse to get rid of the couple of miles they'll put on the odometer. Cam wails and moans but hasn't the gumption to say no.

Naturally, instead of a quick spin, they end up driving around all day, racking up far more mileage than Cam ever dreamed, not to mention putting the car in constant danger of being dinged, lost, or stolen. Cam begins by whining, but as the day progresses, and he finds himself in situations that force him to toughen up, he realizes he has far more grit than he thought—and that keeping such a magnificent car enshrined in a glass garage rather than taking your chances driving it is, at best, foolish (as is lavishing more attention on a car you don't drive than on your son). Thus at long last, Cam finally gets mad at his dad.

Even so, Cam is a bit panicked when at the end of the day they discover, not surprisingly, that putting a car up on blocks and wedging the gas pedal down with the transmission in reverse doesn't, in fact, take the mileage off. Furious, Cam finally unleashes his pent-up anger by kicking the front of the car, denting it. Realizing he's now ready to stand up to his dad, with a satisfied smile he leans on the car, accidentally knocking it off the blocks. With the engine racing, the second the tires hit the ground and gain traction the car crashes through the garage's glass wall and sails out, plummeting into the ravine below.

Which brings us to the fabled Aesop, who said, "Men often bear little grievances with less courage than they do large misfortunes." And so, having learned to stand up for himself throughout the day, rather than accepting Ferris's offer to take the blame for the wrecked Ferrari, Cam digs deep and finds the courage to tell his father what happened. He is far less fearful of telling him the truth—with the car in pieces at the bottom of the hill—than he was that morning, when the worst thing he thought he'd have to confess was that they'd put ten miles on the odometer.

6. **Don't forget that there is no such thing as a free lunch—unless, of course, it's poisoned.** This is another way of saying everything must be earned, which means that nothing can come to your protagonist easily—after all, the reader's goal is to experience how he reacts when things go wrong. As Steven Pinker points out, stories can help us "expand the range of options in life by testing, in small increments, how closely one can approach the brink of disaster without falling over it."¹² This means the protagonist has to work for everything he gets, often in ways he didn't anticipate (read: that are much harder than anything he would have signed on for). The only time

things come easily is when they are the opposite of what is actually best for him.

For instance, in *It's a Wonderful Life*, out of the blue the villainous Potter summons George into his office and, in a deceptively soothing voice, offers him the opportunity of a lifetime: a job with an outsized salary—which would be an instant way out of his nickel-and-dime existence. George even considers it for a minute. But being far smarter than that simp Snow White (even the *birds* knew better than to take that apple), he knows a poisonous spider when he sees one. He is well aware that if he takes what Potter is offering him, it will cost him big time.

7. **Do encourage your characters to lie.** While in real life, we don't want people to lie to us, in a story, characters who lie are the ones who catch our interest. A provocative lie can make even the most bland character intriguing because we then think, *Hmmm, I wonder why she lied. What's she got to hide? Maybe she's not so bland after all.*

This, of course, means you need to let us know the character *is* in fact lying. If we don't know it's a lie, how can we anticipate what will happen when the truth is discovered? Because like secrets, lies, once told, must eventually be exposed. In fact, a big part of what keeps the reader turning pages is imagining the lie's possible consequences.

Are there times when a lie doesn't get found out? Of course. But never "just because." Rather, the reason the lie is left unexposed must tell us something important about the characters. And sometimes the fact that the protagonist gets away with something *is* the story. For example, in Patricia Highsmith's brilliant novel *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, the protagonist, an amoral young man named Tom Ripley, is soon a murderer. Since there are five Ripley novels in all, it's not

giving anything away to say Tom does not, in fact, get found out—which means he lies all the way through. Thus the thrill of the novel comes from his fear that his lies *will* be exposed, juxtaposed with our anticipation of how and why they *won't*. This is a perfect example of screenwriter Norman Krasna's maxim "Surprise 'em with what they expect."¹³

This brings us to the one person in a story who must not lie, no matter what: you, the writer. Yet writers lie all the time, often because they don't want the reader to "figure it out" yet, as we discussed in chapter 6. The trouble is, the reader has implicit trust in you, so when she discovers you lied to her, she starts wondering what *else* in your story might not be true, and she begins to suspect everything.

8. **Do bring in the threat of a clear, present, and escalating danger—not a vague facsimile thereof.** Everyone knows you need a force of opposition. Without one, the protagonist has nothing to play against, making it damn near impossible for him prove his worth, no matter how hard he tries. Which is why the force of opposition must be well defined—and *present*. It can't be a nebulous threat that never really materializes, or an antagonist, no matter how potentially dastardly, who merely hovers meaningfully on the edge of the action but never actually *does* anything.

To that end, there is one accessory that no antagonist should leave home without: a ticking clock. Nothing focuses the mind—not to mention the actions of the protagonist—better than a rapidly approaching deadline. This not only keeps the protagonist on track, but keeps the writer on track as well, by constantly reminding her that as much as she'd love to send the protagonist off on a soul-searching weekend in Tuscany, unless he finds Uncle Milt's will by midnight, all will be lost when the wrecking crew arrives at dawn.

Of course, the force of opposition doesn't have to be a person. It can be conceptual, like the straitjacket of strict social conformity, the dehumanization of unchecked technology, or the tyranny of the letter of the law. But—and it's a big but—it can't *stay* conceptual because, as we know, concepts are abstract; they don't affect us, either literally or emotionally. What *does* affect us is a concept made specific and thus concrete. This means the concept needs to be *personified* by specific characters who try to force the protagonist to bend to their will.

For instance, Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is about how the demand for social conformity straitjackets those bent on following their own drummer and, if that doesn't work, lobotomizes them. In the story, which takes place in a mental hospital, these things play out literally, spurred by an antagonist aptly named Nurse Ratched. Although she's the one who wreaks havoc on the lives of the men in her care, she is merely the personification of the theme, which she nevertheless embodies with ruthless gusto.

9. **Do make sure your villain has a good side.** We already know that, as counterintuitive as it seems, the villain has to have a good side, however fleeting and minuscule. After all, no one is all bad. Or, if they are, they rarely see themselves that way. The majority of history's bloodthirsty, despicable despots, not to mention elected officials, thought they were doing a good thing, often in the name of God and country. But even more to the point, black-and-white characters—whether all bad or all good—are tedious, not to mention impossible to relate to. In fact, sometimes a totally good character is even more off-putting than a bad guy.

Think about it—that ruggedly handsome guy in the office who does everything right all the time, has a perfect family

life, and a desk that's never messy—don't you secretly wonder what's buried in his basement? Not out of envy (probably), but because no one could really be that "perfect." Just as the protagonist needs a flaw, so the antagonist needs a positive trait.

What's more, a character who's 100 percent bad isn't likely to change, which renders him one-note. When it comes to "what you see is what you get," what you tend to get is bored. Whereas a villain with a couple of good qualities just might be redeemable, instilling suspense. Not that your bad guy has to *be* redeemed, mind you, but both he—and the story—are far more intriguing if the possibility is open.

10. **Do expose your characters' flaws, demons, and insecurities.**

Stories are about people who are uncomfortable, and as we know, nothing makes us more uncomfortable than change. Or, as Thomas Carlyle said, "By nature man hates change; seldom will he quit his old home till it has actually fallen around his ears."¹⁴

This means that a story is often about watching someone's house fall around their ears, beam by beam. After all, premises that begin, "I wonder what would happen if . . ." rarely postulate, "a happy, well-adjusted woman was contentedly married to a wonderful, happy man and had a great career and two equally happy, well-adjusted kids." Why? Besides the fact that "perfection" is not actually possible (and thank god for that), things that are not falling apart are dull (unless, of course, it's *your* house, in which case dull is good).

Thus it's your job to dismantle all the places where your protagonist seeks sanctuary and to actively force him out into the cold. Writers tend to be softies, so when the going gets rough, they give their protagonist the benefit of the doubt. But a hero only becomes a hero by doing something heroic, which translates to rising to the occasion, against all odds, and

confronting one's own inner demons in the process. It's up to you to keep your protagonist on track by making sure each external twist brings him face to face with something about himself that he'd probably rather not see.

11. **Do expose *your* demons.** There's another, trickier reason writers sometimes shield their protagonists and let them duck the really thorny questions. Rather than protecting the protagonist, sometimes it's the *writer* who's uncomfortable with the issue the protagonist faces. By allowing the protagonist to sidestep it, the writer, too, gets to avoid it. Because just as you "out" your characters, so will they out you. After all, if you make them do things propriety frowns on, you're revealing that you're no stranger to the uncivilized side of life yourself—that is, all those things we do and think when we're pretty sure no one else is looking. This, of course, is precisely what the reader comes for. We all know what polite society looks like—no one needs to explain it to us; we get it. But beneath our very together, confident public persona, most of us are pretty much raging messes. Story tends to be about the raging mess inside, the one we struggle to keep under wraps as we valiantly try to make sense of our world. This is often the arena the *real* story unfolds in, and what causes the reader to marvel in relieved recognition, *Me too! I thought I was the only one!* And so, to both the writer *and* the protagonist, Plutarch offers this sage advice: "It must needs be that those who aim at great deeds should also suffer greatly."¹⁵ Often in public.

Or, to put it a bit more philosophically, there's Jung: "One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious."¹⁶

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