

STORY ENGINEERING

MASTERING THE
6 CORE COMPETENCIES
OF SUCCESSFUL WRITING
LARRY BROOKS

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For Laura and Nelson

~~PRAISE FOR LARRY BROOKS AND STORY ENGINEERING~~

“Larry Brooks's *Story Engineering* is a brilliant instructional manual for fiction writers that covers what the author calls the ‘Six Competencies of Successful Storytelling.’ The author presents a story telling model that keeps the writer focused on creating a dynamic living and breathing story from concept to the ‘beat sheet’ plan, through story structure and writings scenes. It's a wonderful guide for the beginner and a great refresher for the pro. I guarantee this book will give you new ways to fire up your creativity.”

— Jim Frey, author of *How to Write a Damn Good Novel*, *How to Write a Damn Good Thriller*, and *Gift of the White Light*

“Larry Brooks' groundbreaking book offers both novelists and screen-writers a model for storytelling that is nothing short of brilliant in its simplicity, its depth, its originality and its universality. Following his unique process is guaranteed to elevate your writing to the highest professional level.”

— Michael Hauge, author of *Writing Screenplays That Sell*, and *Selling Your Story in 60 Seconds*

“Nobody on the planet teaches story structure better than Larry Brooks. Nobody.”

— Randy Ingermanson, author of *Writing Fiction For Dummies*

“A useful guide explaining how to transfer screenwriting techniques to the craft of novel-writing. Good for screenwriters, too, summarizing the essence of entertaining commercial storytelling with great clarity.”

— Christopher Vogler, author of *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*

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INTRODUCTION

As a bit of a cynic — a result of actually having worked in the writing business — I asked myself if the world really needs another book about writing. Another how-to from an author who, frankly, isn't exactly a household name. A quick Google search reveals there are 128,000,000 available resources on the subject of *how to write a book*. (It also provides 1,380,000 hits on my name, but even after five published novels I'm not kidding myself.)

Maybe 128,000,001 won't make that much difference either way.

Unless, perhaps, it offers something original, clarifying, and empowering for writers who are tired of hearing the same old thing delivered in the same old inaccessible, rhetoric-clouded way. A new twist on the old language about storytelling. Something that cuts across all genres and categories, from novels and screenplays to memoirs, articles, and even essays.

I understand guys like Dean Koontz and David Morrell and Stephen King doing it. My guess is (and here's the cynic in me) that it was their publisher's idea, hoping to cash in on the abundant name equity of those authors. Having read a bunch of these books myself, never once have I found a writing book or workshop that cuts to the core issues of the craft in a completely clear and accessible way (maybe can't be done, maybe writing will always remain an elusive avocation) and that actually delivers a development *model* and process based on accepted criteria for effective storytelling.

Or, more clearly stated: a writing book that shows storytellers what to write, where to put it, and why it works there without any of it being remotely formulaic.

Elusive or not, that's not asking too much.

Most writing books are aesthetically driven.

The trouble is, in their execution stories are every bit as engineering driven as they are artistic in nature. And *that* particular context of learning gets next to no coverage in the oeuvre of writing instruction.

Writing teachers of all types will eagerly tell you what needs to be done — “*your story needs heart ... we need to experience the journey of the hero ... you need pacing and crisp prose*” — but few offer anything about *how* you get it done and in what order it needs to happen, step by excruciating step. Mostly their instruction is about theories and aesthetic sensibilities, all valid, while delivering less than precise advice. Even Stephen King, an author whom I respect, suggests in his book *On Writing* that once you stumble upon the seed of an idea, you should just sit down and start writing a story about it. That the first draft is for you and the subsequent drafts are for someone else.

Right. Just take off with it and see where it takes you. As if what you'd write for yourself is somehow less critical or not subject to the harsh light of analysis or the standards of solid storytelling that apply to everyone else. As if making stories up without a clue *how* to write them well will

somehow satisfy your artistic jones.

Where *that* takes you is back to the drawing board.

But it doesn't have to be that way. Unless you are a master of the form, function, and criteria for successful storytelling — and King certainly is — this is a highly inefficient and, therefore, ineffective way to write your story. When it comes to storytelling, pain is optional. When it comes to *selling* your story, though, pain is inevitable ... but that's another book altogether.

King's approach — known as organic writing or, in some circles, *pantsing* (for seat-of-the-pants storytelling) — may actually work for some, but that's only if a) you know what you're doing to the extent that you don't need to plan out your story; b) you somehow stumble upon the proper structural sequence and intuitively meet all the criteria for the various essential components; and c) you're willing to complete the inevitable rewrites that come with writing without a story plan. And yet, this is the default approach for nearly every new writer and a startling percentage of established ones, published and nonpublished alike. Some actually *brag* about writing draft after draft after draft, as if there is some nobility in stumbling around the blank page looking for your story.

Imagine a golf professional recommending that the way to the PGA Tour is to pick up a club and start swinging away wildly, hoping that somehow, someday, you'll find your groove (and the green) and be able to drive the ball three hundred yards to the middle of the fairway, without ever paying attention to the accepted mechanics of how to swing the club.

That's the make-it-up-as-you-go approach.

Don't forget that we're talking about the goal of becoming a *professional* golfer, because being published is absolutely entering the professional ranks of writers.

If you've tried writing this way, and if you remain unpublished — or worse, *unfinished* — you may already recognize this sad truth. Many writers continue to cling to their organic ways, however, claiming that they “just can't do it” any other way.

We all select our fates based on the paths we choose.

Here's why this is nothing short of insane.

Those *published* writers who, like King, *just start writing* their stories from an initial idea do so using an informed sensibility about, and working knowledge of, *story architecture*. They get it; the process is both intuitive and instinctive to them, in much the same way a seasoned surgeon no longer needs to consult *Gray's Anatomy* (the book, not the TV show) before slicing into an abdomen. They just *know*. The story pours out of their head in the right order, with specific structural milestones solidly in place from the first draft. They understand *what* those milestones are, where they go, and why. What they organically create aligns with those principles, and subsequent drafts are actually upgrades rather than damage control.

Newer writers who don't understand those fundamentals, and who try to write the same way? Not s

much. It pours out of their head and basically spills all over the place.

Two words: a mess.

And it often gets even worse from there, because those same writers who don't *get it* intuitively usually don't even recognize it as a mess. They slap some postage on it and ship the manuscript off to an editor's slush pile somewhere.

Let me be clear: I'm not unequivocally stating that you must outline your stories ahead of time or in great detail. That's not the point, though in most cases it *is* a good idea. Frankly, the more you understand about the principles of story structure, the more prone you'll be to do it this way. When you do, you'll be applying the most powerful tool in story-telling from square one, instead of at draft number five.

How you write is totally your call.

But how your publishable story aligns with the Six Core Competencies of storytelling isn't your call, any more than you get to invent a new way to swing a golf club or take out a spleen. However you create your work, if you want to sell it, eventually it *will* need to align with these principles. The sooner this happens in the process, the better.

Without the right knowledge, without mastering a formidable list of basics that is rarely talked about coherently, most of us end up with a dream that never materializes. The less story planning writers do before they begin the drafting process, the deeper hole they dig for themselves. Too often they don't even recognize the pit they're in, so when the rejection slips arrive they don't have a clue as to why.

I'll tell you why, and I haven't even read their manuscripts. They were rejected because one or more of the Six Core Competencies was executed at a level that failed to inspire the agent, editor, or producer to offer a contract. A failure, even a mediocre execution, in any *one* of the core competencies will almost certainly kill your chances. Just as a faulty wing — one of the core competencies of flight — will send an airplane spiraling into the ground.

But here's the good news: The knowledge of how to understand and apply the Six Core Competencies of successful storytelling *is* out there. In fact, it's right here in your hands.

What screenwriters know that too many novelists don't.

Interestingly, there are many books on screenwriting that do what most novel-writing books don't — they show us what to write, when to write it, what follows what, what should go where, and why, and tell us the criteria for ensuring that our creative choices are effective ones. In other words, *how to get it done*. A blueprint and a process for something that is often considered — especially by those who write organically — to be a craft that defies blueprinting.

I assure you, those writers are wrong. And after the pile of drafts required to get their story into publishable shape, you can be sure that the screenwriter hired to adapt it to the screen will go about

the job quite differently. Because while organic writers are often loath to admit it, the very drafting process they advocate is ~~nothing other than a process of searching for and blueprinting their story~~, one iteration at a time, until they arrive at a solid sequential structure for it. Using a draft to find the story is no different than using a stack of 3×5 cards or yellow sticky notes ... they're all just different forms of *story planning*.

So, this book is intended to apply those same storytelling principles of screenwriting — though carefully adapted, revised, and put into nonscreenwriting language — for novelists and memoirists and anyone else who hasn't benefited from the rules of structure and principles of character development that apply to screenwriting. Rules, by the way, that actually set screenwriters *free* to create their stories efficiently, while we novelists wander a vast landscape of creative choices without a single road sign. This lack of form, function, and criteria is what makes writing and publishing a good novel so elusive.

Until now.

Why this book?

Because neither a killer idea nor a Shakespearean flair for words will get you published without a command of these six core principles of dramatic storytelling.

This book is for writers who have taken all the workshops and read all the how-to books (or, perhaps even more timely, for those who are on Day One of their writing journey), and still don't understand what's wrong with their writing, and why it doesn't attract an agent or sell to a publisher.

Don't get me wrong, writing a great story will still be hard, even if you do it in accordance with this model. This model won't write the novel for you. Consider our golf analogy: If you had the same expert instruction and training as a golf pro, chances are you'd still find yourself, at best, vying for the club championship instead of a tour card.

Such is the quest for greatness, regardless of the game.

This book is the culmination of over twenty years of developing and teaching writing workshops, and writing novels and screenplays. The model presented here — *The Six Core Competencies of Successful Writing* — is completely of my own creation, yet it is based on the sum total of everything we know about what makes stories work.

You may have heard some of this before if you've spent any time at all studying the craft of storytelling. The truth is the truth; I didn't invent it. But I bet you haven't had it presented, organized, and put into a context, even a language, that suddenly makes the process quite this clear and accessible.

That's why I wrote this book. Thousands have taken my writing workshops, and while some people pick at a few nits — ardent seat-of-the-pants writers don't give up their mantle easily — and more than a few arrive with grave doubts, most attendees leave as excited believers, a bit shocked to learn there really is a blueprint for a story, and that it rarely materially changes. Even if you only apply a

fraction of this — and you'll end up doing it your own way anyhow — I guarantee you'll be more efficient and effective as a storyteller. Many times people have told me — and this is the highest praise I can imagine hearing after a workshop — that this is the clearest and most empowering thing they've ever heard about writing, in some cases after up to thirty years of workshops. They ask me, “Why the hell hasn't anyone put it together like this? Why don't you write this stuff as a book?”

Having regularly heard such validation, and having applied the Six Core Competencies myself, I began to believe that there was something of value here for writers who are looking to quantify, analyze, calculate, and blueprint the writing muse — to plan their stories using proven principles, or at least write them organically from an informed context of that understanding — and do it without the slightest compromise to their creativity or to the delight in making up stories.

I loathe formulaic writing as much as the next guy.

What you're about to learn isn't formulaic. And if it is, well, you can break the news to decades of mystery, thriller, romance, and adventure stories that didn't seem to think so. Is designing and building an office tower formulaic? Is flying an airplane formulaic? Is doing open-heart surgery formulaic? If they are, it's what makes them *work*. I prefer to think of these things as *process and criteria-driven skills* — or core competencies. And in this sense storytelling at a publishable level is no different.

Here's another analogy. Human beings bring only a handful of facial features to the blueprint of how we look — two eyes, two eyebrows, a nose, a mouth, a pair of cheekbones, and two ears, all pasted onto a somewhat oval-to-round face. That particular blueprint doesn't often vary much, either. Interestingly enough, this is about the same number of essential storytelling parts and milestones that each and every story needs to showcase in order to be successful.

Now, consider this: With only these eleven variables to work with, ask yourself how often you see two people who look *exactly* alike. In a crowd of ten thousand faces, you would be able to differentiate each and every one of them, other than a set of twins or two in attendance.

Where we humans are concerned, the miracle of originality resides in the Creator, who applies an engineering-driven process — eleven variables — to an artistic outcome.

Where *art* is concerned, there is something to be learned from that.

We get to play God with our stories.

And just like the Big Author in the Sky, we have a finite set of tools to work with, and an expectation of a format, as to how they are assembled. If nature can deliver billions upon billions of versions of an eleven-element blueprint with hardly any duplication, we storytellers shouldn't begin to label this same level of story blueprinting as a formulaic undertaking.

A story is only formulaic if you allow it to be. It has nothing to do with abiding by the principles of solid storytelling and the handful of elements, parts, and milestones that comprise it.

Do you even know what they are? You'd be shocked at the number of writers who have been laboring at this for decades who don't. Give me a few hours of your time with this book, and you will

After years of reading and critiquing unpublished and rejected manuscripts from aspiring writers, I began to see patterns. Those patterns, or the lack of them, aligned perfectly with the standards defined within the Six Core Competencies model, which validated this approach as a viable process for writing a novel, screenplay, play, short story, memoir, article, or essay.

Let the journey begin.

Open your mind and park your doubt (and your organically driven cynicism) until you find yourself in the thick of this journey, which not only shows you how to approach the craft of storytelling, but why organic, nonstructured approaches are chaotic, inefficient, and ineffective.

And even if you continue to prefer to write by the seat of your pants, you'll benefit from having a criteria-based checklist of elements to shoot for as you go.

There is no getting around this truth. Successful stories written in an organic fashion end up covering the *exact* same ground, meeting precisely the same criteria and eliciting the same enthusiastic reader response, as do successful books written from a story *plan*. Because both end up aligning with the principles of the Six Core Competencies.

And the ones that don't — story plan or not — end up in a drawer somewhere.

The Six Core Competencies approach starts with the criteria and the architecture of storytelling — *the engineering and design* of a story — and uses it as the basis for narrative. Organic writing starts with narrative and an idea — not necessarily in that order — and uses them as a process to discover and apply (or stumble upon) the criteria and the architecture.

Either way, you can get there ... *if and when* you bring the Six Core Competencies to the task. And not a moment before.

Even if you call them something else.

One more thing before we launch.

You should know that my first published novel, *Darkness Bound*, sold to a major New York publisher on the very first submission, with virtually no changes or rewrites required, and that it went on to be *USA Today* bestseller. How? Certainly not because I'm the next Stephen King, a fact history has proven to be true. Rather, because it was designed and written according to the principles of the Six Core Competencies. And, because of the efficiency they imparted to the process, it took only eight weeks to write.

The same was true to a slightly more liberal extent with my four other published novels. The longest rewrite to the polished first drafts I submitted to any of those editors, at their behest, took less than an hour to implement. One of them, *Bait and Switch*, was named by *Publishers Weekly* as the lead

entry on their *Best Books of 2004 — Mass Market* list, after a starred review and an Editor's Choice nod.

Formulaic? I don't think so. Easy? Not on your life. Just *doable*, with the right set of principles and tools.

PART ONE

WHAT ARE THE SIX CORE COMPETENCIES ... AND WHY SHOULD I CARE?

THE POWER OF A FRESH STORYTELLING MODEL

You can go your whole career as a writer without someone asking you to define the essence of *story*. What it means. What it *is*. What it isn't. For many writers this is a good thing. Because their answer just might come up short. Your first goal as a writer is to not be counted among this group.

You absolutely need to know, at the very core of your being, what a story is and what it isn't. And everything in between.

There are many ways to define *story*. Story is character. Story is conflict. Story is narrative tension. Story is thematic resonance. Story is plot.

Trouble is, all of these are partially correct, while none of them, when viewed as isolated definitions, are *completely* correct. Even if you combine a few of them, they still fall short of expressing the *essence* of a great story. Without that essence, what you have is a kitchen table full of ingredients waiting for a recipe that allows them to become a delicious sum in excess of their individual parts. That turns your story into a literary feast.

Even the most delicious of ingredients require blending and cooking — stirring, whipping, baking, boiling, frying, and sometimes marinating — before they qualify as edible, much less delectable. So is with the building blocks of stories, as well.

Many writers just sit down and write without a recipe. A story may or may not emerge, and that lucky writer may or may not be cognizant of the presence of the various structural elements and storytelling presence — the recipe — required.

Some writers give these issues due diligence through some form of *story planning*, be it notes on a cocktail napkin or yellow sticky notes on a wall, or through a full-blown outline. Some even do it in their heads.

Either way, it's all just a search for a story that springs from the seed of an initial idea. And in that search, whether we realize it or not, or even if we care to admit it or not, our success depends on those dramatic principles, a set of story elements, the presence of smooth functionality, and an effective process, all of which melts together into a literary stew that defines the core essence of *story*.

What seems to be lacking — until now, at least — is a defined process that embraces all the requisite elements and underlying principles of a good story. A development model that is as much a functioning set of tools as it is the context from which we write.

Just as an engineer relies on an architecturally sound blueprint to build a structure that will bear weight and resist the elements — a vision and a plan based on proven physics and structural dynamics — writers can benefit from approaching the craft of storytelling armed with a keen command of the literary equivalent. It's unthinkable that an engineer and an architect would meet at the construction

site one day and just start digging holes and pouring concrete. Even with a shared vision or an artist's rendering of the end product, it just wouldn't work. In addition to a detailed blueprint, in the real world both parties bring a contextual awareness of an informed planning process based on an in-depth understanding of the physics and principles that reside at the core of their craft.

But like an architect's vision that yields an engineer's blueprint, the resulting product may or may not always be everyone's cup of tea, even if it's structurally sound. That's the *art* of it. Standing up against a stiff wind is one thing, making the cover of *Architectural Digest* is quite another.

Writing is no different. We build our stories on a foundation of structurally sound principles. But from there we depend on something less definable and teachable to elevate our work. To raise it to something that publishers will buy and readers will consume and embrace. What the writer creates from these principles and the development model that puts them into play is no less aesthetically challenging or artfully endowed than the work of a writer who, perhaps because of ignorance or the overt rejection of such a tool chest, labors over a manuscript for years in search of the very same fundamental literary physics.

In other words, we can work hard or we can work smart. Hopefully both. A killer story development model doesn't take the hard work out of writing, but in any case it infuses the process with a heavy dose of *smart*.

THE PHYSICS OF STORYTELLING

There are many theories and principles floating around in the vast oeuvre of writing instruction. The list of things a writer needs to understand and execute is long and complex, but that list can be grouped into six separate yet dependent categories. And in doing so the fog that shrouds the storytelling challenge begins to lift.

I call them the *Six Core Competencies*. When applied to the story development process, you end up with an approach that is based on nothing short of what is, in essence, *story engineering*.

It works for writers for the very same reasons it works for the folks who build stadiums and skyscrapers. It's based on natural law. On timetested, proven truths. For builders, that's physics. For writers, that's the Six Core Competencies. In no way does using these compromise the experience of the writer or the value of the end product. The Six Core Competencies create a story development model that leaves nothing out of the writing equation, except perhaps the need for an abundant number of drafts.

Execute them all at a professional level and you may find yourself in the hunt for a publishing contract. The model can't infuse your work with artful genius — that continues to defy quantification or definitive criteria — but it will get you into the game and make you competitive with authors who are already publishing. Demonstrating your command of the Six Core Competencies is your ante in the world of publishing. From there, like a tryout for a major league team crowded with other hopefuls who are in full command of the basics of their game, you need to bring something magic that sets you apart from the crowd.

Leave out one of these Six Core Competencies, or execute any one at a less-than-professional level and you will be sent back to the playground.

With this model in hand, at least you'll know what to shoot for. And, what is expected of you by those who represent and publish your work.

A STORY DEVELOPMENT MODEL

The Six Core Competencies comprise the first storytelling *model* I have seen that brings all of the necessary components and skill sets of successful storytelling under one approach. That drives toward the core essence of *story* in a comprehensive and methodical way, over and above simply being a collection of *things* that a writer must know. This development model provides checklists and criteria for any story.

Here's the truth: With some isolated, and therefore irrelevant, exceptions, *every* published novel or produced screenplay delivers on *each* of the Six Core Competencies described in this model, at least to some degree. Even if the author doesn't recognize it, or happened to back into them after multiple drafts. And even then, the *really* successful ones take them to a level of integration that defies definition. That becomes *artful*.

Which leads us to another truth: Leave one out, or execute one poorly, and you won't sell your story.

THE SEARCH FOR STORY

Since the very first story was set to parchment, writers have used the *drafting* process — creating version after version of their story, adding to it and revising it as they go — to discover and explore these same Six Core Competencies. Intuitively they know they aren't done until they've covered these bases, even if the bases themselves reside outside of their awareness and understanding. They just keep writing until it feels right, which puts the entire proposition at risk. Because too often these writers don't even know what it feels like. If they don't intuitively grasp them, or if they are in denial or if they abandon the story before they're all in place, they never really find the story at all. At least not to the degree necessary to make it work.

Imagine the power and efficiency of understanding the necessary components and skill sets *ahead of time*. I'm not talking about story planning, per se, but rather arriving at the keyboard *armed* with that awareness and understanding of the principles required to empower your story to greatness.

Why do some prolific writers — think Stephen King or Arthur C. Clarke or Nora Roberts — seem to spill stories out of their heads that embrace the Six Core Competencies in such a way that their revision process is all about *adding* value and polish and nuance, rather than fixing major holes and out-of-rhythm narrative exposition? The answer is that they *get it*. They inherently, at the very core of their talent, understand the natural laws of a well-told story, and the Six Core Competencies that come to bear on the process of putting them onto the page.

Sadly, this is not the case for the majority of writers, who aren't even aware of the standards they need to reach. They settle for less than the requisite six.

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