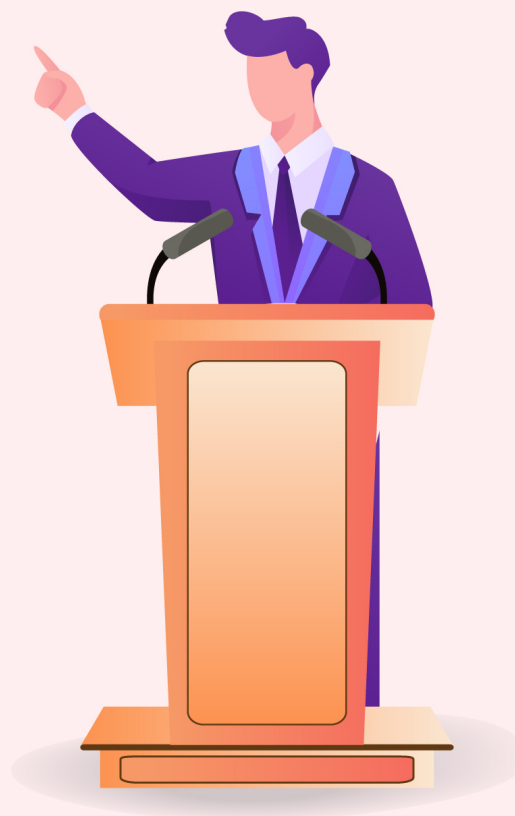


# SUMMARY

## THE SCIENCE OF STORYTELLING

WILL STORR



# **Summary of “The Science of Storytelling” by Will Storr**

Written by Alyssa Burnette

If you’ve ever wanted to learn what makes a truly great storyteller and how you can become one yourself, *The Science of Storytelling* can take you on a journey behind the scenes.

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# QuickRead

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# Introduction

Stories are everywhere we look. From the plot of the latest TV drama to the hook of an inane commercial, every form of media is trying to hook your attention by crafting a story that will get you engaged. And because we're constantly bombarded by new demands on our attention, our expectations of stories have changed. So far from being easily entertained or eager to engage with a potential plot line, modern readers have placed new demands on stories. We want something to reach out and grab our attention because we're now reluctant to give it away. We want something so compelling that it makes us care, something so interesting that it's worth ignoring our responsibilities or another form of stimulation. And for budding storytellers, that means you've got your work cut out for you!

But that doesn't mean that creating a compelling story is impossible or even that it's a secret possessed only by a chosen few. In fact, there's actually a science to storytelling and a means of understanding how the human brain responds to a well-told story. So, through this summary, we'll learn:

- How to create a “perfect” story
- Why we want to root for the underdog and
- What our favorite childhood films have in common with political propaganda

# We're Hardwired to Enjoy Stories

What if we're all just characters in a video game? It's a question that gets asked a lot in discussion boards or question games and it pinpoints a unique aspect of the human existence: our desire to understand reality.

That's because reality can be both deeply personal and highly subjective; the nature of the human brain is such that our reality is colored by what we think we see. And if you've ever scared yourself whilst walking down a dark alley at night by mistaking a bush for a shadowy figure, you know how true this is! Even though that figure didn't exist on the plane of objective reality, for a moment, it did for us because our brains concocted a story based on the information before us.

Our brains tell us other stories that impact our reality as well, with the most notable example being the story of our own lives. And although "you are the hero of your own story" might sound like an inspirational quote, it's actually a neuroscientific truth! Because your brain is tasked with helping you navigate your own life, it casts you as the hero of your very own life narrative and bases reality off that casting call. It might even stretch the bounds of objective reality in order to realign it with that perception, like allowing you to believe that, because you work hard, it was okay for you to steal from your boss, for example. That simple but universal flaw of human perception is what motivates average people to justify their bad decisions and causes convicts to insist that they're innocent (even when they've been proven guilty) or to identify themselves as having above average levels of kindness and empathy (even when they're convicted murderers or rapists),

Our brains are also driven to other elements of stories like the desire to create a linear narrative by ordering our memories into cause and effect sequences which help us to understand that this thing happened because something else happened first. This understanding of cause and effect means that your brain knows you're not the only character in your life story. Although it may cast you as the central figure, your brain is driven to identify and connect with other characters by understanding how they

think and how their lives function in relation to yours. And in fact, the urge to understand others is so powerful, our brains even ascribe relatable human characteristics to inanimate objects. That's why we often instinctively say, "Ouch!" when we drop an object, as though we're assuming it can feel pain. And because we're so intrigued by the minds of others, we love engaging with stories even more than participating in our own.

# Everybody Loves a Flawed Character

Even if our brains have a natural bias to our own faults, when we interact with others' stories, we crave characters who are made relatable through their flaws. And although it may be a subconscious process, when we explore life through the lens of an imperfect character, we're given a safe space to explore our own flaws in relation to the world. This is vital because our flaws are often deeply rooted in our sense of personal identity, cultural values, or the worldview with which we were raised. These elements can also vary greatly depending on our culture or generation and our personal flaws may stem from twisted perceptions of the world which were impressed upon us in early life.

For example, if you grew up in Victorian England, the value of conformity and decorum might be drilled into you by your society and family. But if you grew up in America during the Gold Rush, your core values would center around individuality and the importance of seeking your fortune. But no matter what our worldview and core beliefs are, they often solidify and become a part of us and we spend most of our adult lives clinging to them. Because of this, we often struggle greatly when encountering worldviews that differ from our own, as neuroscientist Sarah Gimbel proved when she conducted a study that involved showing people evidence which stood in stark contrast to their deeply held political opinions. Brain scans of the people confronted with this material showed their physiological and psychological reactions were, in fact, similar to that of someone being threatened by a bear in the wild!

And because we tend to cling to our belief systems, no matter how flawed, we're naturally very responsive to characters who do the same. Even if our judgment is impaired when it comes to identifying our own flaws, we're usually spot-on at pinpointing those of others. This means that flawed characters often serve as literary mirrors, allowing us a safe space in which to vicariously explore the constructs of society and morality. Although we may not be conscious of it, we're especially drawn to flawed characters for



precisely this reason. We want to watch them learn and grow and succeed. And we also enjoy watching them pursue meaningful and realistic goals.

For example, a recent examination of the New York Times bestsellers list concluded that novels which made the list included twice as many goal-oriented words like “do,” “want,” and “need” as opposed to their less-popular counterparts. That’s why, if you want to craft the next best-selling novel, choosing your character’s flaws and goals is one of your most important tasks!

## Character First, Plot Later

“What’s it about?” That’s the first question we usually ask when someone mentions a book to us and this predisposition to focus on plots often gives writers the impression that a good plot is of primary importance. And while a compelling plot is definitely a must-have on your recipe for crafting a good novel, authors have to be careful that they don’t sacrifice character development in favor of the plot. Because the truth is, a compelling plot should actually be driven by a character with a highly original personality, backstory, and worldview. And because those elements of your character will affect every aspect of her story, a good plot will follow naturally!

So, let’s take a look at what goes into creating a character that people want to read about. For one thing, as we mentioned earlier, flawed characters are vital. But when we talk about flaws, we’re primarily addressing the character’s “theory of control,” or how she believes she must act in order for her world to stay stable. This shouldn’t require a lot of effort or imagination because we all have a theory of control that’s intimately linked with our worldview. It might comprise elements like our identity, our core values, or the way we believe we should behave. And that theory of control can be challenged by situations which require us to respond in a way that’s contrary to our standards for ourselves.

So, begin by developing your character’s theory of control and then move on to fleshing out their personality. But remember that, just like you, your character’s personality isn’t limited to surface details like her favorite color or flavor of ice cream. It’s comprised of five main categories that everyone possesses: neuroticism, openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and extraversion. People exist on the high and low ends of the spectrum for each of these traits and where your character falls on these scales will help you determine her individual personality as well as her potential occupation, life circumstances, and situational responses.

And lastly, when creating a realistically flawed character, make sure she's susceptible to misunderstanding others as literally every human is in real life. Because we've all been there-- we've all thought someone was waving at us when the gesture was really for someone behind us or assumed someone was flirting with us when they definitely weren't. And though these are relatively innocuous, we're also prone to more serious misperceptions like unfairly accusing our partners of something or misreading someone else's intentions. We've all been wrong about at least one of these things before, so if your character consistently understands everyone with perfect clarity and has a personal life with no screw-ups, readers won't respond to her because we crave that connection of human fallibility.

## Who is Your Character, Really?

You know those stories that open in the middle of the action, leaving you to wonder who everyone is and what's going on? Those are my favorite types of stories to read because they generate suspense from the first sentence. And whether you're writing a psychological thriller or a cozy romcom, you can employ this same technique. Because every story, no matter what it's about, needs a little bit of suspense; that's what keeps us reading! The element of suspense, even when employed in very light doses, keeps us engaged because it taps into our desire to understand others. If a story opens by making us question who a character is, why they're doing what they're doing, and how they got in this situation, we're instantly hooked!

Readers are also drawn to situations which reveal the nature of a person's moral character. We want to know, for example, if your character is selfish or sacrificial, if they're motivated to "do the right thing" in any given situation or if they see ethics in shades of grey. Studies show that gossip takes up almost two-thirds of human conversation, which indicates that we spend a tremendous portion of our lives thinking about and discussing the actions of others. So, cater to your readers' natural instincts and give us a rich backstory of emotional complexities for us to puzzle through! One great way to do this is by putting your characters in situations that test their sense of identity or their core beliefs. The suspense and conflict between the story's overall plot and the "inner plot" of your character's mind will draw readers in and invite them to invest in your protagonist's emotional development.

## Let us Read Between the Lines

Think about your favorite story or poem. Are there any small details that stick out to you, like the color of a cup or the name of a street? Chances are, you remember quite a few of the little details like these and that's because we're hardwired to absorb the minutiae of the stories we engage with even after we've forgotten the major details of their plots. Why? Quite simply, it's because our brains love to fill in the gaps in information. In fact, a recent study tested this by showing some participants three pictures of a person's body parts while showing only one or two pictures to other participants. After interviewing their participants, researchers found that those who had seen three pictures were more intrigued and eager to see a picture of the whole person.

This same concept applies to storytelling because you can tease readers with little details that pique their curiosity and motivate them to keep learning about your characters. One great way to generate interest is through crafting skillful dialogue. As a plot device, dialogue works on two levels by offering information which develops the plot and giving your readers a backstage pass to your character's inner thoughts, emotions, and backstory. A perfect example of effective dialogue can be seen in the film *Brokeback Mountain*, which depicts the love affair between two cowboys, Jack and Ennis. When, in a particularly emotional moment, Jack tells Ennis, "I wish I knew how to quit you," viewers are able to see how the line says one thing outwardly but strains with tension and longing under the surface.

Descriptions of your character's environment can also be effective in their ability to offer us secret glimpses of a character's inner world. Moments that might not be explicitly narrated by a character, like a shot of something they'd prefer to keep hidden from others or glimpses of the decor in their homes can tell us a lot about them without the need for excess descriptions. This ties into the cardinal storytelling rule, "Show, don't tell!" and can help you to create a smooth and evocative world for your readers.

# Most Good Stories Are About a Change in Status

So, now that we've looked at all the key elements of a compelling story, let's take a look at what you can do to keep people hooked to the very end. Although every story is different in its own way, compelling plots often have a single common denominator: their concentration on a shift in status. Whether that involves a character's struggle to reach a goal, a heartwarming rags-to-riches tale, or the quest to depose an unjust ruler, most good stories involve some form of change in a character's status. Just like dialogue taps into our desire to understand the lives and motivations of others, the plot device of status change resonates with our inherent preoccupation to determine our place in the world. In fact, studies show that status is so important to us that our physical and mental health is deeply impacted by our perception of the status allotted to us by others. So, it stands to reason that if something is this important to us, we're definitely compelled to read about it.

And just as we enjoy working toward our own goals, we want to feel connected to a character's pursuit of their goals. Our desire to be included in someone else's struggle is actually one of the primary contributing motives in our enjoyment of video games! Because we're programmed to seek goal-oriented tasks, video games hold a unique power to engage us through their combination of character-driven plots and tasks that earn us a higher status. However, a good story doesn't have to have a video game's interactive component in order to be effective. By simply creating an engaging plot driven by flawed characters who are motivated to change their status, you can keep your readers hooked till the final page.

# The Pen Really is Mightier Than the Sword

Stories have a unique power to shape our worldview. You know that if you ever watched Disney movies as a child and came to expect that your life really would be a fairytale, that you would find your one true love, and that you too could have enchanted adventures. But if you really think about it, all stories-- ranging from fairytales to thrillers-- are a form of propaganda in the sense that they seek to teach us something or impact our worldview in some way. By depicting some characters as “right” and others as “wrong,” stories have the power to influence our sense of morality and consequence.

Children’s stories are a great place to spot this in action. For example, in the picture book *Mr. Nosey*, a character who’s a little too invested in everybody’s business is ostracized for his nosy behavior until he learns to change and is reinitiated into the community. This, of course, teaches children that nosiness is a negative trait and that they should avoid this if they want to be accepted. And just as they have the power to teach lessons about personal morality and individual status, stories also have the power to change the course of history by instigating social change. Stories like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, for example, had a significant impact on white people’s perception of slavery. By arousing sympathy in readers and raising their awareness of injustice, fictional slave narratives motivated more people to join the abolition movement.

Even though we might not personally experience slavery or being ostracized for nosy behavior, these stories are effective because they transport us to another world that allows us to experience and interact with issues in our imagination. By losing ourselves in a story, we unwittingly open ourselves up to a new world of exploration, personal discovery, and connections with others.

## Final Summary

The human brain is drawn to stories, but most of all, we crave stories about flawed characters with realistic and relatable human experiences. If you want to write a compelling story that people will engage with, it's best to start by crafting a unique and fully developed character and allow your plot to flow naturally as a result of that character's struggles. Additional elements like strong dialogue and descriptions that rely on showing rather than telling are also key for creating a story that will hook your readers' interest. And last but not least, remember to identify the status change that is integral to your plot's core.





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