



A FREE E-book Excerpt

ANATOMY OF A PREMISE LINE

HOW TO MASTER PREMISE AND STORY DEVELOPMENT
FOR WRITING SUCCESS

7 Steps to Busting
Writer's Block

JEFF LYONS



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Praise for Jeff Lyons'

Anatomy of a Premise Line

"Working with Jeff reminds me of a quote from Michelangelo, 'I saw an angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.' Jeff's tools have helped me develop solid premise and log lines, and to chisel my stories free from the stone. This book will help you do the same."

Michael Perri—Staff Writer, NBC's - *State of Affairs*

"After reading Jeff's terrific book I felt like rushing to my desk, new tools in hand, and fixing all my unsold screenplays. I highly recommend to anyone writing a screenplay or novel."

Nick Castle—Writer/Director, *Escape From New York*, *Hook*, *August Rush*, *Last Star Fighter*, *The Boy Who Could Fly*, *Tap*, *Dennis the Menace*

"There is no book like this in the marketplace. It will help writers, producers, and directors, and save everyone from wasted time writing drafts to find a story. I wish I had this book when I was in film school."

David Jeffery—Producer, Fox's - *Bones*, PBS's - *American Family*, *Lesson Plan*

"Story structure changed my writing life, and the magician who taught it to me was Jeff Lyons. Every writer on the planet needs coffee, chocolate, and this book!"

Caroline Leavitt—New York Times bestselling author *Is This Tomorrow*, *Pictures of You*



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The Myth of Writer's Block



REMEMBER

You have to first understand what's real and what's fabricated about the myth of writer's block, before you can really bust it!

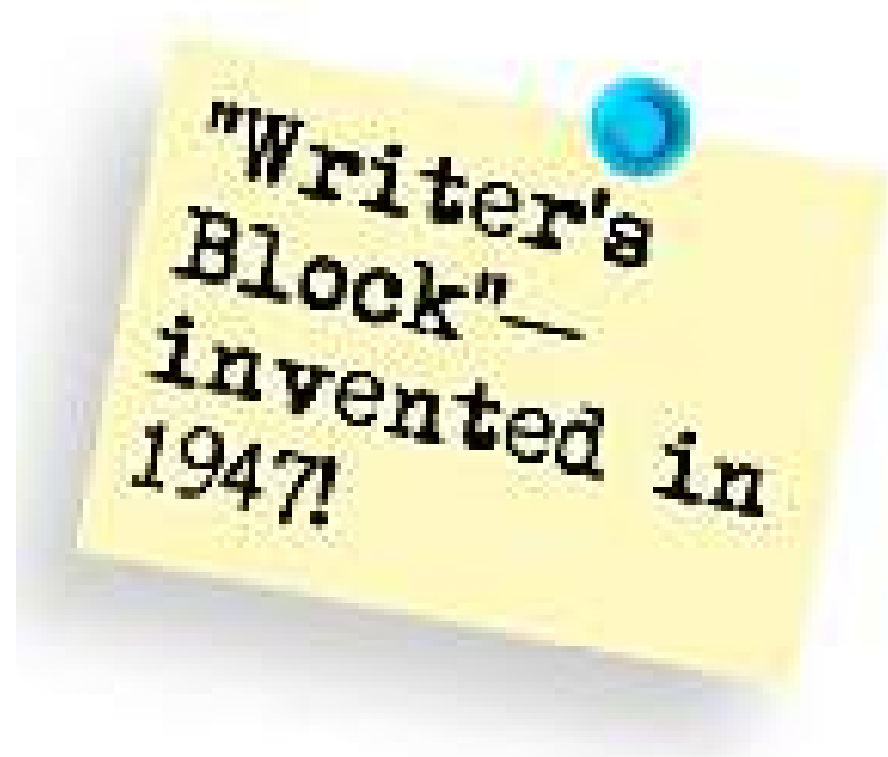
Now you have all the building blocks, foundation stones, tools, and techniques that you need to write a working story premise. But there's more to it (isn't there always?). You also need the discipline of writing. Sometimes your writing will flow easily, other times you'll wish you'd gone to dental school. With that in mind, I have decided to end the book with an iconic subject: writer's block.

I do this because the belief in this thing is almost universal, and the amount of wasted effort writers expend trying to solve it, heal it, break it, and be free of it is depressing, when considered against what other things writers could be doing instead—like writing. People buy books, take classes, hire therapists, run in circles, and chase their tails all in the hopes of avoiding or resolving one of the biggest flimflams in creative writing. So, read this chapter and be prepared to walk away from writer's block once and for all.

Writer's block—we've all been there. We've all suffered. And we've all been duped. What would you say if I told you writer's block is a fiction? What would you say if I told you that writer's block was a complete boondoggle foisted upon writers for decades?

Would you feel shocked? Would you feel had? Or would you defend a strongly held, personal belief that writer's block is real because you've been there—too many times?

Sadly, most writers I know fall into this last category. Myself among them, until I realized the truth: writer's block isn't real. The man we have to thank for the pernicious idea that we writers have a special neurosis all our own is a long-dead psychoanalyst named Edmund Bergler. He first coined the phrase "writer's block" in 1947, as only one example of what he called "unconscious masochism." The psychoanalytic analysis of writer's block is impenetrable in its own right, but that the term's origins came from the world of psychoanalysis—the Holy Grail for the neurosis model of emotional upset—should be the first red flag as to its illegitimacy.



Writer's block is a lot like racism. Race is a myth; it does not exist. It is a socio-economic construct, not a biological fact. We are literally all the same race: human. That is not wishy-washy liberalism; that is what science tells us. But, the experience of race is another matter entirely. Race may be a fabrication, but racism is a real and destructive thing. And so it is with writer's block; it does not really exist, but the experience of the thing gives it a substance it does not possess.

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- You have a blank mind and no ideas come whatsoever; the well is dry.
- You have written yourself into a dead end and can't get out.
- You're afraid of making a mistake, fear of failing.
- You're afraid of being judged by others for what you write.
- You're distracted and torn by other issues besides your writing.
- You're pressured to produce deadlines and fulfill the expectations of others.
- Your brain is at fault; under stress, the brain goes into "fight-flight" and is not creative.
- And the list goes on . . .

"But wait," you say incredulously, "I've experienced it! Writer's block is real. It exists; it is the Great Satan!" Well, yes, writers can get clogged up, but that blockage is so easily handled and so uncomplicated that many writers will be shocked at the simplicity of what is really going on. It turns out that writer's block is 99.9 percent smoke and .1 percent substance. The .1 percent part is the only part you can do anything about.



Anxiety, fear of failure, stress, etc. are not writer's block. They are life blocks that may need to be addressed, but they are not writer's block, because they do not originate from the writing or creative process. This is a key distinction that everyone misses, when they discuss this problem. Even so-called blockages due to character development problems, plotting problems, or story structure issues are not writer's block. They are part of the writing process that every writer has to deal with when they write any story. These things might slow you down, and you will have to work through them—you always have to work through them—because they are always present to one degree or another. They are part of writing, not part of being blocked.

And so it bears repeating: it is only when you are so clogged with creative ideas, and you don't trust your ability to choose what's next, that your writing drags to a halt and gets stuck. It's not because you can't pay the bills, it's not because your lover left you, it's not because your mother dropped you on your head at 18 months, and it's not because you're afraid of what other writers might think. Those may all be problems that may or may not haunt you as a human being, but they are not creative-process problems, they are life problems affecting everything in your life—including your writing. But, isn't all that the same as writer's block? Blocked is blocked—right? What does it matter what you call it? *It matters a lot!*

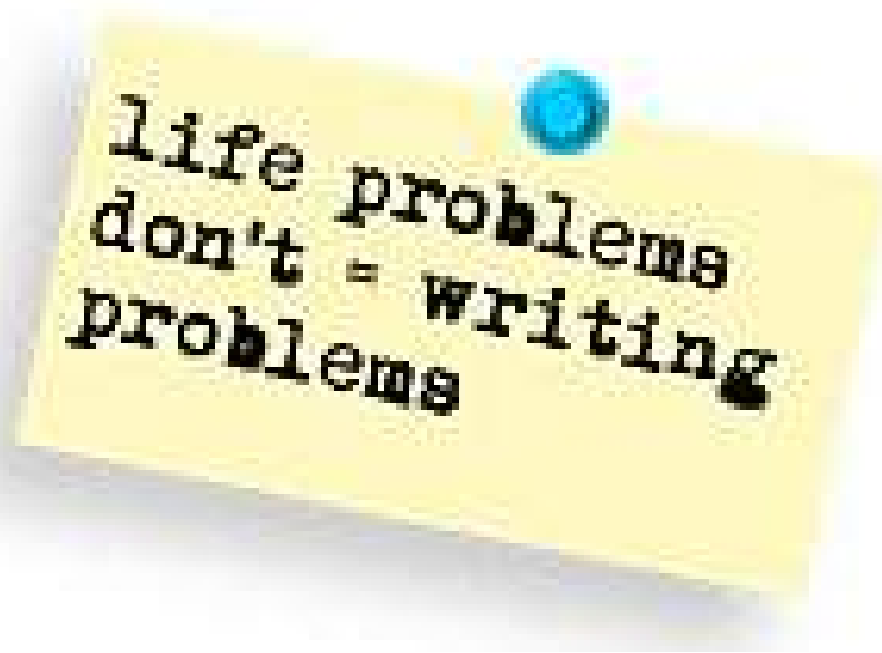
The conventional view of writer's block is that it manifests when a writer (screenwriter, novelist, whoever) feels stuck, unable to write, bereft of ideas, and left hanging in the wind by the creative process—helpless and hopeless. The form it takes is universally recognizable, and for those who have drunk the Kool-Aid, as we have seen above, the causes of writer's block are as legion as the devils of Hell.

Our writing culture identifies creative void, fear, stress, and neurological and physiological complications as the causes of writer's block. In short: writer's block is multifaceted, multicausal, and multi-problematic. What is a writer to do with something so diffuse, nondescript, and scattered?

Unfortunately, this phenomenon has taken on a life of its own, so much so that what is actually a clear and definable problem has been turned into a multi-headed Siren that will lure you onto the rocks of process interruptus. Don't buy into it! Instead, consider the simple logic of a reasoned argument. And the list goes on . . .

The Only Reason Writers Get Blocked

The “argument” is not so much an argument, as it is a simple statement of fact; there is only one cause for so-called writer's block: *you have too many ideas in your head, and the creative pipeline is so full you don't know where to begin or what to write.* You are so full of things to say that you can't say anything at all. *You don't trust your ability to make the right creative choice!* That's it. That's all there is to it. All the other “reasons” that I mentioned earlier are manifestations of problems that have nothing to do with the writing or creative process. They may impact writing, but they are not related to, or sourced from writing.



If your life is in chaos or stalled out, so will be your writing. But, if your writing is stalled out, your life will be unaffected, unless your life is so out of balance that all you do is write, so when that is not working, nothing else is working. Again, this isn't a writing problem; this is a life problem. And this is where so many people get tied up into knots. For example, if you get hit by a car and can't write for six months, is that writer's block? No, it's a major medical problem, i.e., a life problem. You can call it writer's block, but your doctor will have a much longer medical name for it. Figuring out which is which (writing vs. life) is hard when all the advice you're getting on this issue is muddled with psychobabble, New Age bubblegum metaphysics, and generic self-help mumbo jumbo.

It is critical that you learn how to distinguish between life problems affecting everything, including your writing, and creative-process problems affecting your writing but not the rest of your life—before you tackle any blockage. One is personal pathology, or life circumstance, and needs to be handled outside of your writing process (like therapy or surgery); it's bigger than just your writing. The other is sourced from your creative process, not a car wreck or your cranky inner child.



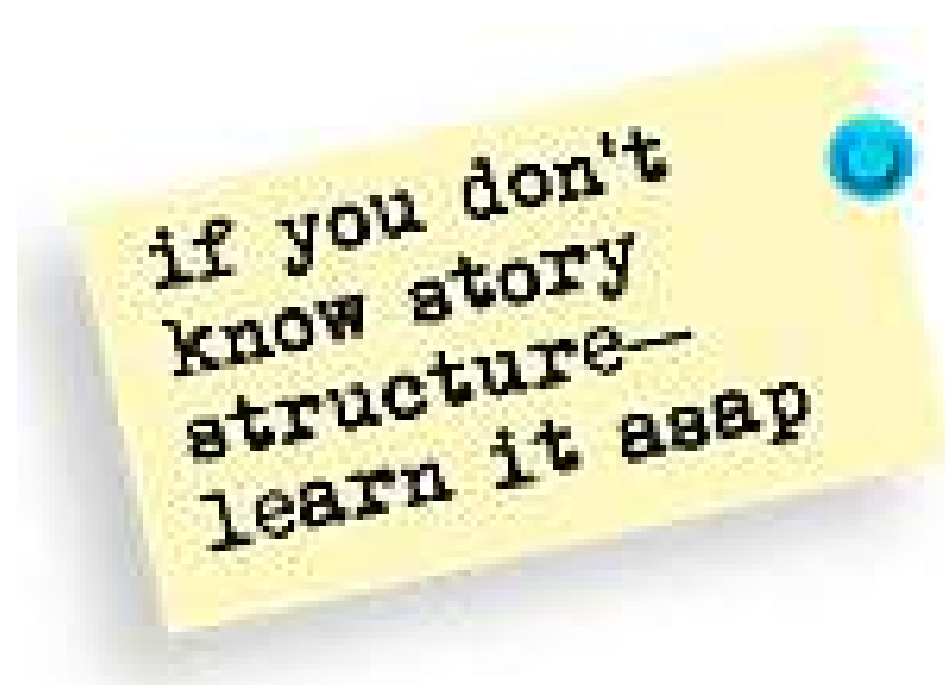
Writer's block is a writing problem—therefore you have to look to writing for a solution—not Yoga, a therapist, or Tarot cards.

The Only Solution to Writer's Block

Any lasting solution to writer's block must lend itself to real freedom, not airy-fairy workarounds. To that end, consider these scenarios:

- When a professional musician is on stage and the pipes get stuck, the music doesn't come, and he/she can't deliver (and it happens) what do they do? Throw their hands up and walk off stage? Hardly.
- What does a professional actor do when the cameras are rolling, or the audience is watching, and the juice is gone? The character leaves them, and they can't deliver! Do they run off to their trailer in a snit or walk off stage? Well . . . sometimes.
- When a professional athlete is exhausted, spent, and at the end of their physical limits, how do they safely get to the finish line, sink that putt, or swing that bat, when every fiber of their being wants them to shut down and stop? Do they crumble in a heap and give up? Rarely.
- When blocked, professionals know what to do and they do it seamlessly. They don't take a Yoga class, they don't write in their journal, they don't doodle, or take long car rides into the countryside—they fall back on craft skill and technique. The musician has skill and technique and this saves them. The actor has skill and technique and it is always there for them. The athlete has muscle memory and technique that are second nature. Once they tap this resource (craft), the juices flow and they are "back"—blockage removed. That's how professionals deal with "musician block," "actor block," or "athlete block."

So, what should a writer do? The same thing! Fall back on craft. For writers that means story structure. As we have established throughout this book, story structure is part of storytelling craft skill. It is the airbag that catches you when you fall. You learned this in chapters three, four, and five. The Invisible Structure is always there if you have a story, it is always available, because story structure doesn't depend on you. It is there for you to depend upon it. Story structure is your lifeline for premise development and for curing writing blocks.



The 7-Step Process— Busting Writer's Block



REMEMBER

This process works every time, without fail; trust your ability to free yourself; never give your power away to any problem!

What follows are the concrete steps of the solution, illustrating how craft and technique are the writer's salvation, not handcuffs of constriction or limitation. This process will always work to get you unblocked. I use it with all my clients. I use it myself.

STEP 1:

Figure out if you are dealing with a life problem or a creative-process problem. Remember, life problems can affect your writing, but they are not writer's block. They need to be handled, but you're dealing with something bigger than just being creatively blocked. This process won't help you with that. Go get other help—talk to a friend, call your mother, get therapy. When dealing with serious life problems, not writing might be the healing thing to do. You may need to take a break and focus on your divorce, your illness, or whatever. If, however, you're clear this is a creative problem and not a bigger life issue, then move to the next step; you're in the right place.

STEP 2:

Tell yourself the truth: this block is a good thing. You have so much flowing you can't think straight. Be grateful and thank the writing gods. Really, take some time and think about and feel that gratitude. This isn't psychobabble. You are not just “turning that frown upside-down”—this is a critical shift of your mental-emotional state that is essential to move forward. The shift that occurs is one of going from victim to owner. You own your process, you are accountable for what happens next. This is not something that is happening to you; you are generating the block yourself because you have so much trying to get out, and you haven't created the proper conduit for the creative ideas to flow. This simple act of owning your personal responsibility for this situation cannot be understated. Nothing changes until you do. So, change your mindset. This blockage is a good thing.

STEP 3:

Filled with gratitude, solid in your personal responsibility, or at least no longer feeling suicidal, look to your story's structure. Take a piece of paper and map it out as best you can. Write down your story's Invisible and Visible Structure components as best you know them: moral component, chain of desire, main antagonist, focal relationship, midpoint stakes, protagonist stakes, doom moment, final resolution, and the protagonist's evolution-de-evolution. Define these pieces and work with them until you have the big picture solid in your head. Even if you know all these steps, do this anyway. If you have been through the first two parts of this book, then you know what I'm talking about. Do your homework on this and break out your story. Maybe you've been away from this process for a long time and haven't kept up on the ideas and concepts? Do your homework and go back to part one and review. If this is all news to you and you are reading about story structure for the first time, get educated; stop where you are and walk away from this, because it won't work. You have to know your story's structure to break through the blockage. Do it now.

STEP 4:

Assess the output of step three. You are blocked. You are blocked at a certain point in your development process. Think about where you're stuck in your story and look at the list of structure steps you just completed. Where does the point where you're stuck fall in the list of structure components? Which step does it relate to most closely? Get your bearings for the spot in your story where your clog is stuck. If you are just starting your story and the page is blank, the begin at the beginning and build your premise line. This will always get you off the blockage. If you are well into your story and you are stuck, then look to the structure notes you created in step three.

Find where you are stuck. You have to have the source of the clog to break it up. Circle this on your list of structure elements with a big, black magic marker. This is what you bring into step five.

STEP 5:

Filled with gratitude, solid in your personal responsibility, or at least no longer feeling suicidal, look to your story's structure. Take a piece of paper and map it out as best you can. Write down your story's Invisible and Visible Structure components as best you know them: moral component, chain of desire, main antagonist, focal relationship, midpoint stakes, protagonist stakes, doom moment, final resolution, and the protagonist's evolution-de-evolution. Define these pieces and work with them until you have the big picture solid in your head. Even if you know all these steps, do this anyway. If you have been through the first two parts of this book, then you know what I'm talking about. Do your homework on this and break out your story. Maybe you've been away from this process for a long time and haven't kept up on the ideas and concepts?

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STEP 7:

Drink lots of coffee. You're unblocked, so you need caffeine! This is a serious step, by the way.



REMEMBER

Trust in your story's structure to break the logjam and bust the myth of writer's block.

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This process always works. Writer's block is 99.9 percent smoke and .1 percent fact. So, don't fall for all the hype about writer's block; that only feeds the monster. If you are blocked, it is a good thing, because it means you have ideas and creativity ready to flow. Use this process, trust in your story's structure to break the logjam—and bust the myth of writer's block.

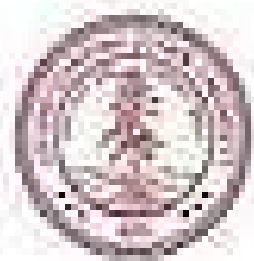
And I leave you with this final gem: my mantra. You have seen it in this book before, but I repeat it here because it is not just clever marketing spin, it is a life lesson:

Listen to everyone. Try everything. Follow no one—you are your own story guru.

Tattoo this into your forehead, chip it into the sidewalk where other writers will see it, but above all learn to trust it, because when you live this life lesson you will be a true free spirit, and the artist you've always imagined yourself to be.

Now, go be brilliant.

Partial list of Jeff Lyons' Clients



About the Author

Jeff Lyons has more than 25 years' experience in the film/TV and publishing industries. He is currently a freelance writer and story editor at Kensington Entertainment, Burbank California. Jeff has also worked as a developmental editor and story consultant for key print-on-demand publishers, including: Amazon's Createspace and Author Solutions. Jeff is a regular contributor to *Script Magazine*, *Writers Digest Magazine*, and *The Writer Magazine*. He is the founder of Storygeeks, a professional services company offering story development, training and editorial services to writers, and the creator of The Storyteller's Toolbox, a website devoted to providing affordable video training, webinars, and other storytelling resources for fiction authors, screenwriters, and nonfiction writers.

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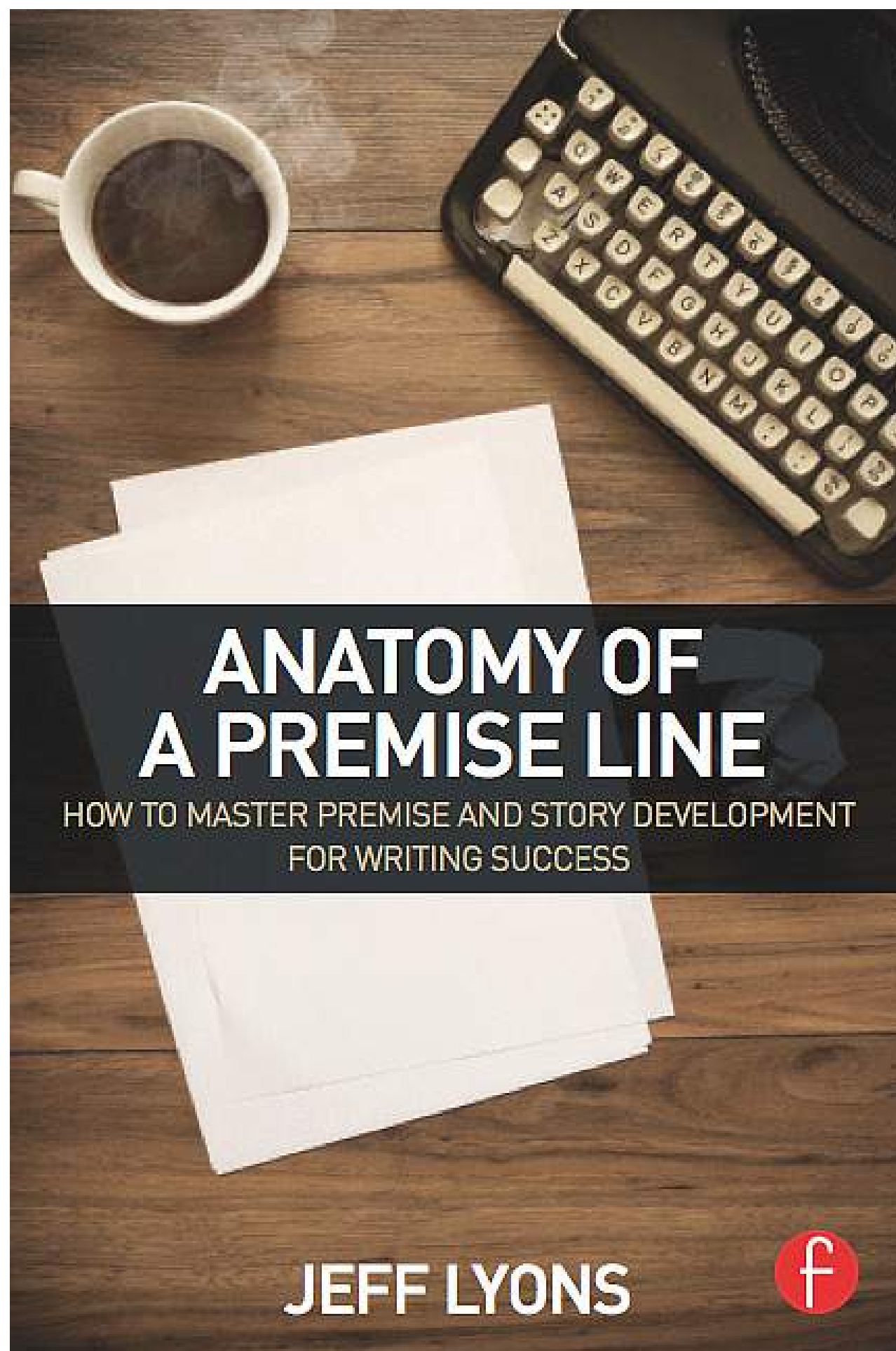
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