



Why every audience for your stories is from Missouri

If you ever wondered why Missouri is called the “Show-Me” state, the phrase is attributed to William D. Vandiver, who was a Congressional representative from 1897 to 1903. In a speech delivered in Philadelphia in 1899, Vandiver declared, “Frothy eloquence neither convinces nor satisfies me. I am from Missouri. You have got to show me.”



Lisa Cron

In her new book, *Story or Die*, Lisa Cron recalls Vandiver’s famous phrase in a section entitled, “Keep it Specific.” Frothy eloquence may have its place, Cron notes, but if you want your audience to see the people and places in your stories and *feel* the emotions of the narrative, you have to provide concrete, visual specifics along the way. Generalities simply won’t do – or as Cron puts it, “When it comes to specifics versus generalities, we humans are all Missourian.”

This section of the book stood out for me because I am constantly reminding aspiring storytellers to “show, don’t tell” and find the specifics that will bring to the story to life. So, I was delighted last week when Cron agreed to meet with me on Zoom to talk more about this particular ingredient of good stories. (Please scroll down for the full story.)

About Us

free-range thinking is written by Andy Goodman and edited by Kirsten Farrell. To read back issues, download free publications, and to learn more about our work, please visit www.thegoodmancenter.com.

To reach Andy directly, please call (323) 272-4737 or send an email to andy@thegoodmancenter.com.

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Farewell, Celia. Welcome, Kirsten.



Kirsten Farrell

After nearly 8 years as Associate Director for The Goodman Center — a job title that doesn't begin to cover all the responsibilities she handled or how much she contributed to our success — Celia Hoffman will be departing as of March 26. She has recently been studying organizational development in graduate school, and she has just been offered a wonderful opportunity to apply that expertise at Flexport, a global company with offices here in Los Angeles. To say that Celia will be missed is an understatement on the order of "2020 could have been better." Please join me in wishing her the very best in her new role.

At the same time, we're excited to welcome Kirsten Farrell as our new Operations Manager. Kirsten is a lifelong storyteller, performer and improviser. Upon moving to Los Angeles, she quickly found success in acting in commercials and went on to become a series regular on "10 Items or Less" on TBS. She has studied improvisation, or 'writing on your feet,' at the Groundlings Theatre and Upright Citizens Brigade. She currently improvises full-length plays in the style of classic writers like Shakespeare, Jane Austen,

and Tennessee Williams with Impro Theatre.

Here at The Goodman Center, Kirsten will co-facilitate workshops on storytelling, presentation design, and strategic communications. She is also currently a coach with CSH's "Speak Up!" program, where she trains people with lived experience of homelessness to tell their stories and advocate for permanent supportive housing. Please join me in welcoming Kirsten!

Why every audience for your stories is from Missouri (cont'd.)

Goodman: You've devoted an entire section of *Story or Die* to the role specifics play in storytelling. Why are they so critically important?

Cron: Because we live life in the specific! We think in story, we make sense of everything through narrative, and we're constantly wondering "How is this going to affect me *specifically*." With stories, if you can't see it, you can't feel it, and you can't visualize a generality.

Goodman: You write that people often think they're being specific when, in actuality, they aren't. Can you give us an example?

Cron: Here's one that just came to me yesterday: "When I was a teenager, I had a summer job." That sounds specific, doesn't it? But it's completely general! You could make it a little more specific by saying, "When I was 13, I worked at a summer job in the food service industry." That's better, but what the sentence actually should have been was, "My first summer job when I was 13 was at a frozen yogurt shop called Humphrey Yogurt." *That's* specific! It's like I wrote in the book: it's the difference between "pants" and "ankle-length bellbottoms with golden pom-poms."

Goodman: So, to be completely clear, what's your definition of "specifics."

Cron: A specific is something that you can see, and that has emotional content which evokes feelings that are directly relevant to a point you are making in your story.

Goodman: You also make the point that adding a bunch of specifics doesn't automatically create a compelling story – they have to be the *right kind* of specifics. How do we distinguish right from wrong here?

Cron: This goes back to the definition. The right kind of specific evokes emotions or an "aha moment" that leads to the point the story is making. The wrong kind is a detail that may be there, but if you pulled it out, it wouldn't make any difference to the meaning of the story.



Goodman: Moving beyond just “right” and “wrong,” is there a preferred kind of specific? Something to strive for?

Cron: Did you see Oprah’s interview with Meghan and Harry? Meghan told Oprah that a friend had sent her a picture of her and Harry at Royal Albert Hall, and how happy she looked in the photograph. But Meghan knew that the exact opposite was true. Yes, she looked totally happy, but that morning, she had told Harry that she didn’t want to live anymore. He didn’t want her to attend the event that night, but she felt she had to go because she didn’t want to be left alone. And Meghan said when she looked at the picture, she zoomed in and she saw their knuckles were white because there were holding hands so tightly. They were literally *just holding on*. That one specific detail, the white knuckles, tells the whole story. That’s what you’re looking for.

Goodman: Obviously, there’s so much more in *Story or Die* than what we’ve discussed here. What will your readers find in your new book that they didn’t find in *Wired for Story* (which we reviewed in our [May 2012 issue](#))?

Cron: *Story or Die* is very different. *Wired for Story* is mostly theory. This book dives more deeply into the neuroscience – because there simply is more now – and goes more into how we make sense of things to begin with. My goal was to help people see their target audience, understand why that audience isn’t doing what they want them to do, and then to discover the story that will lead to an internal change that lets them really hear your call to action.

(You can read more about *Story or Die* on Lisa Cron’s [website](#).)



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The Goodman Center | 251 S. Norton Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90004