

Tobi's Down and Dirty Guide to Writing Romance
WV Conference 2021
Find this handout at: <http://tobidoyle.com/workshop/>

Romance definition from Romance Writers of America:

Two basic elements comprise every romance novel: a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending.

A Central Love Story: The main plot centers on individuals falling in love and struggling to make the relationship work. A writer can include as many subplots as he/she wants as long as the love story is the main focus of the novel.

An Emotionally Satisfying and Optimistic Ending: In a romance, the lovers who risk and struggle for each other and their relationship are rewarded with emotional justice and unconditional love.

Subgenres:

Contemporary Romance: Romance novels that are set from 50 years prior to the present that focus primarily on the romantic relationship. 1980s to now are contemporary.

Erotic Romance: Romance novels in which strong, often explicit, sexual interaction is an inherent part of the love story, character growth and relationship development and could not be removed without damaging the storyline. These novels may contain elements of other romance subgenres (such as paranormal, historical, etc.).

Historical Romance: Romance novels that are set 50 years prior to present day.

Paranormal Romance: Romance novels in which fantasy worlds or paranormal or science fiction elements are an integral part of the plot.

Romance with Spiritual Elements: Romance novels in which spiritual beliefs are an inherent part of the love story, character growth or relationship development, and could not be removed without damaging the storyline. These novels may be set in the context of any religious or spiritual belief system of any culture.

Romantic Suspense: Romance novels in which suspense, mystery, or thriller elements constitute an integral part of the plot.

Young Adult Romance: Romance novels in which young adult life is an integral part of the plot.

Genre Promises and Readers' Expectations:

- The HEA/HFN ending is a must. (Happily Ever After/Happy For Now)
- Love interests MEET within the first 25%.
- 1st set of likable people are the love interests
- Love interests spend time together. Stuck together for some logical reason.
- Midpoint of the book, we see the characters are perfect for each other IF they grow emotionally into the people they are supposed to be.
- Characters must change to earn their HEA.
- Romancing the Beat by Gwen Hayes is a fabulous resource for the genre beats/arc.

How to create a romance that meets editors', publishers', and readers' expectations:

1. Build Characters Using Goals, Motivations, and Conflicts

- Start with emotional wounds. What does the character fear and believe?
- Create GMCs that will force the character to face their fears and beliefs.
 - External goals are tangible.
 - Internal goals are emotional AND the character may not be aware they even
 - Think about conflicts in terms of death... physical, emotional, career, spiritual, etc
- Make the love interests wounds and GMCs intersect.
- Example of intersecting wounds:
 - Protagonist Paige's wound is that she's been treated differently by her parents and four older brothers her entire life partly because of her petite size and gender. She's also just witnessed a murder. Her fears include being rejected, looking vulnerable, not being believed, and failure. Her belief is that if she tries harder, her parents/family will treat her equally.
 - Protagonist Riley was abandoned with his younger brother when they were 5 and 7 at a family cabin. They ran out of food and when a hunter discovered them the cabin was surrounded by bears. His grandparents lied about his parents' abandonment to prevent them from being arrested. These toxic relationships left Riley with the belief that some people are broken, but he can fix them and that leaving people who need you is selfish and disloyal. He fears being a magnet for negativity and those who are toxic.
- Bonus points for if you can get the protagonists external goals to be contrary. (We love to up the conflict.)
 - Paige's external goal: not to be killed by the murderer. Motivation: loss of life. Conflict: The guy has a gun and is chasing her and keeps chasing her.
 - Riley's external goal: Protect Paige. Motivation: There's a guy with a gun chasing her. Conflict: He doesn't want to get involved in a toxic relationship/situation ever again BUT he can't just leave her, and he's got the perfect place for her to hide.
- Let's talk internal goals. What do our characters really want/need? Chances are it's not to find love (and honestly, it should be something meatier). They may not know that they want it either. Sometimes we're oblivious to what we really want.
 - Paige's internal goal is to be treated equally by her family. Her motivation is that it hurts every time they treat her as incapable. The conflict is her family doesn't see the dysfunction, and she's scared that if she brings it up, they'll reject her.
 - Riley's internal goal is to avoid toxic relationships. Motivation: he seems to find women in jeopardy and stays to help, but the relationship always ends up toxic. Conflict: He likes Paige, but she's a woman in jeopardy.
 - Note about internal GMCs, this is where in a romance we expect to see growth of the character. Riley isn't ready to love and trust Paige until he deals with his past. Likewise, Paige needs to trust that Riley isn't like her brothers, and she needs to address her family dysfunction to be able to trust.
- Does this story need an antagonist? Yes, it does. Stories THRIVE on conflict. Never avoid the chance of throwing more in there!!!

- Antagonists NEED the same attention to Internal/External GMCs and wound or they will be clichéd Bond villains. We need our villains to be strong, otherwise our hero's victory isn't satisfying.
- In this situation, a federal marshal's family is being threatened unless he kills the judge. Unfortunately, now Paige is a witness, and he doesn't want to go to jail.
- Finally, check your GMC's. Are they logical? Believable? Strong enough to create a complete story around? Keep working until the answer is yes to all three questions.

Protagonist One: Paige

Wound: Treated differently by her parents.	Fear: being rejected, looking vulnerable, failure, not being believed	Belief: If she tries harder, her parents/family will love her equally
External Goal: not to be killed by the murderer	External Motivation: loss of life	External Conflict: He's got a gun and keeps finding her
Internal Goal: to be treated equally by her parents	Internal Motivation: It hurts every time they treat her as incapable of doing something	Internal Conflict: her family doesn't see the dysfunction, and she's scared that maybe if she brings it up, they'll reject her.

Protagonist 2: Riley

Wound: Abandoned by parents/betrayed by grandparents.	Fear: being a magnet for negativity and those that are toxic	Belief: Some people are broken, and he can fix them. Also, leaving people who need you is selfish and disloyal.
External Goal: Protect Paige	External Motivation: A gunman is chasing her	External Conflict: He doesn't want to get involved in a toxic relationship/situation ever again BUT he can't just leave her, and he's got the perfect place for her to hide.
Internal Goal: Avoid toxic relationships	Internal Motivation: he seems to find women in jeopardy and stays to help, but the relationship always ends up toxic.	Internal Conflict: He likes Paige, but she's a woman in jeopardy.

Antagonist Name: Murderer

Wound: Dad abandoned family he's helped with family since he was 12.	Fear: poverty, shame, losing his sister	Belief: I am the only person who can keep the family afloat
External Goal: Kill Judge and witness	External Motivation: Doesn't want to go to jail.	External Conflict: Paige and now Riley are witnesses
Internal Goal: Keep the family together	Internal Motivation: This is his job/responsibility	Internal Conflict: His sister owes a lot of money (gambling) to people who are threatening her life and their mom's life unless he kills the judge.

2. Write Opening Scenes that wow!

- Start with action or a hook to draw readers in.
- Make your protagonists LIKEABLE. Donna MacMean's other HEA list (but don't dump in a list, SHOW us)
 - We like characters with *humanistic* traits. (Save the Cat phenomenon)
 - We care about characters we feel sorry for. (empathy)
 - We like to *admire* the character.
 - For a list of these traits, check out Donna's website:
<https://www.donnamacmeans.com/extras-rooting-interests-for-writers.php>
- End the scene with a question that drives the readers to turn the page.

3. Transformative Character Arcs: Things happen because people change. People change because things happen.—Jennifer Crusie

- Start with the lie the character has been telling themselves based on their wound. Give them opportunities to prove and disprove that lie. Have them LEARN and CHANGE.
 - We don't like change. Our characters, likewise, will be resistant to change even in the face of logic.
 - Opening scene, character is perfectly happy living with their lie intact.
 - Lie may be challenged, but character is resistant to change.
 - Use the conflict between the characters to force the character to face their belief/lie and prove or disprove it.
 - Midpoint, character has a sense of what it would be like to not believe the lie.
 - Dark moment... should have believed the lie.
 - Climax...it was a lie!
 - Resolution...character completely transformed and living a new life (left to deal with a myriad of other misbeliefs and wounds).
 - Great article and more in depth here: <https://bit.ly/2RLW1MB>
 - I HIGHLY recommend Michael Hauge's video on transformative characters:
<https://youtu.be/9LyeXd6eyPE>
- End with the character having healed their wound and living happily ever after.
- The challenges the character face must be believable (do psychology research as needed). Readers are living vicariously through the characters to solve their own problems.

4. Tropes—not a dirty word, not a cliché.

- Tropes are time-tested scenarios or plot devices that appear again and again in stories that draw the reader in. You should twist them and make them your own.
- Mindy Klasky has an amazing list of tropes on her website here: <https://bit.ly/3vADMbo>
 - Examples: Enemies to lovers, fake relationship
 - If you want to write for Harlequin category romance, double and triple your tropes.
Example: One Night With Consequences, Enemies to Lovers, Brother's Best Friend.
 - They are comfort reads and automatic one-buys (or avoids) for readers.
 - Avoids aren't necessarily bad. I'd rather have a reader NOT buy my book because they don't enjoy enemies to lovers, then buy my book and write a critical review.

- Tropes, like stereotypes, can be harmful. Be mindful and willing to twist your trope. For example, the “miraculous cure” trope is unwanted among disabled readers. The fat girl gets skinny and gets revenge is also hurtful.

5. Structure—not formulaic.

- All commercial fiction has structure. It’s the foundation the story is built within.
- All commercial fiction has readers’ expectations, and therefore expectations from publishers and editors.
- Different story structures exist, use the one that suits your story and style of writing.
- Structure helps with pacing. But you can have a perfect structure and a boring book.
- If you are a pantser, you’ll be looking at structure after you’ve written your novel and are ready to revise. If you’re a plotter, you’ll use structure to identify the main scenes that should be included.
- Types of Structure: There are MANY. I’ve added resources at the end.
 - Gwen Hayes Romancing the Beat:
 - Set up
 - Each character is introduced in their “normal” life.
 - Meet cute
 - One character says no way to the possible relationship
 - They are stuck together
 - Falling in love
 - Other character says no way to the possible relationship
 - Inkling this could work, deepening desire
 - Midpoint of LOVE plot thrust
 - Retreating from Love
 - Inkling of doubt that grows
 - Retreat, shields up, break up
 - Fighting for love
 - Dark night of the soul
 - Wake-up/catharsis
 - What whole-hearted looks like
 - Epilogue
 - Michael Hauge 6 stage Plot Structure (can be downloaded here: <https://bit.ly/3wIhqoF>)
 - Stage 1: Setup (fully in identity)
 - Turning pt1/Opportunity
 - Stage 2: New situation (glimpses essence)
 - Turning pt2/Change of plans
 - End of Act 1
 - Stage 3 Progress (vacillates between identity and essence)
 - Turning point 3: Midpoint and point of no return
 - Stage 4 Complications and Higher Stakes (moves steadily into essence)
 - Turning pt4 Major Setback
 - End of Act 2
 - Stage 5: Final Push—retreat to identity, then returns fully to essence
 - Turning pt5: Climax
 - Stage 6 Aftermath (transformed existence)

- Writing in a subgenre requires weaving in the “B” story. For example, romantic suspense requires its own plot line besides the romance arc.

Up the Emotions!

- The purpose of the story is to elicit emotion.
 - Use your dialogue cues to show emotion and help with pacing.
 - He slammed the book on the table and sneered. “You said you’d be home by ten.”
 - Use internal and external dialogue to let the reader know what the protagonist is thinking, or if they are lying. “It’s good to see you, Aunt Marge.” Jeff kept the “leaving” to himself as he opened the door for her.
 - Balance exposition and dialogue.
 - Use setting to enhance emotions. Take the character back to the place they hate to fight their demons. Use weather, clothing, the family dinner table to enhance the emotion in the scene where appropriate.
- Every scene must have a purpose, either to move the external or internal plot forward.
- Use literary devices when appropriate to increase emotion. A list can be found here:
<https://literarydevices.net/> It’s easier to do this in revisions, but literary devices highlight the area and can increase emotion.

Conflict, Conflict, Conflict!

- The consequences for not reaching the goal should be some kind of death. Physical, emotional, career, spiritual, societal, whatever you can think of that would be the worst possible thing to happen and it requires a significant change in the protagonist to succeed.
 - The consequences should be stated so the reader understands how dire the situation is for the protagonists/antagonists.
- Urgency must be a factor, otherwise who cares?
- Allow your villain to win at least once. If the villain fails at each attempt, they’re incompetent and not worthy of your hero.
- Each scene must move the internal or external plot forward. Yes, I repeated this line because it’s so important.
- The characters need a superb reason for not getting together. We know they’re going to have an HEA, it’s a promise, but you’ve got to make it appear that there is NO WAY they’ll ever remain together.
 - Examples: current partner (that’s yucky, don’t use in romance), social taboo, lifestyle differences, character flaws, opposing interests, initial dislike, magical curse

Tension and Sexual Tension

- Sweet versus Steamy Romance:
 - Sweet typically starts with emotional intimacy and moves to physical intimacy.
 - Steamy typically starts with physical intimacy and moves to emotional intimacy.
 - Erotica (not romance) uses physical intimacy for self-discovery.
- Building sexual tension is important for all types of romance novels.
 - There needs to be an obvious attraction.
 - We need internal thoughts about the actions/reactions.
 - Emotional vulnerability is terrifying. Use it to increase the sexual tension.

- Typically, humans move from prolonged eye gaze to physical nearness, then accidental or intentional brushing of hands. Kisses can be sweet, a surprise, steamy, but the character's actions, reactions, thoughts, must be on the page.
- The ultimate goal is complete emotional intimacy and trust between the characters.
- Consent is necessary in romance fiction today. You can definitely make it sexy and really add to the sexual tension!

HEAs and HFNs

- The Happy-For-Now is great for younger couples, like college students.
- HFN works great for a couple that don't believe in marriage.
- HEAs DO NOT require marriage or children to be satisfying.
- All love interests must be alive for an HEA/HFN. (Titanic and The Notebook are stories with romantic elements, but NOT a romance.)
- Readers love epilogues, peek into couple in the future to see they are still together.

Where to Find What's Hot Right Now:

- #MSWL #Romance on Twitter—but beware, it's an echo chamber.
- MSWL <https://mswishlist.com/mswl/romance> (also an echo chamber).
- Amazon's Best Seller Romance, check both paid and free.
 - Vikings and Cowboys???

Where Do I find an Agent and Do I Need One?

- If you've decided to Indie Publish, you don't need an agent ☺
- If you've written a book that fits the market, you can submit to some publishers without an agent. The link in the resources for Romance Publishers includes publishers that don't require an agent and some that do.
- If you're interested in writing for Harlequin, check out their submission guidelines AND READ THE BOOKS FROM THE LINE YOU CHOOSE. Write for Harlequin info is here: <https://bit.ly/3wNV1q9> Seriously, read the line you choose before submitting to make sure you're a good fit.
- Finding an agent...
 - I highly recommend reading this Writer Beware Article: <https://bit.ly/2Tn7EK5>
 - Find an agent that LOVES your work, this takes time.
 - Start with <https://querytracker.net/>
 - Find agents for your genre/subgenre, and then go to their website and see what they really want, what they are publishing. Check out their Twitter feed. Are you still a good fit? If so, query away ☺
 - #PitMad, 4 times a year on Twitter, can help you find an agent, but be careful, because scam artists are out there, too.

Things we didn't discuss because of time:

Themes, Settings, Narrative Style, Pacing, and much more. Romance Writers of America offers many workshops through their chapters and you don't need to be a member to take the workshops. You can find a list of their workshops here: <https://bit.ly/34rNKju>

Resources:

Emotional Wound Thesaurus by Angela Ackerman and Becca Puglisi (Book)

Romance Publishers: <https://www.bryndonovan.com/2021/01/19/romance-publishers-a-list/>

Craft Strong Character Arcs: <https://www.well-storied.com/blog/craft-strong-character-arcs>

STRUCTURE RESOURCES:

Romancing the Beat by Gwen Hayes (Book)

Michael Hauge on Transformative Characters: <https://youtu.be/9LyeXd6eyPE>

Michael Hauge Screenplay Structure in Six Minutes. https://youtu.be/tQTmlA_ve2s

How to Use the Hero's Journey to Structure a Novel by Reedsy <https://youtu.be/3jQDdq8HREc>

6 Ways to Structure Your Novel by Janice Hardy <https://bit.ly/3fS1CsF>

The Snowflake Method for Designing a Novel by Randy Ingermanson <https://bit.ly/3p2cgsa>

How to Write your Novel Using the Save the Cat! Beat Sheet by Jessica Brody <https://bit.ly/3fSMR8R>

Story Genius by Lisa Cron <https://bit.ly/3hXFhN0>

I recommend Story Genius by Lisa Cron, the book, but you can find her talks on YouTube about the brain science behind story.