How to plot your romance novel

While every romance novel is about the relationship between two main characters, that is not the same thing as the plot. A strong plot is the difference between keeping your reader turning the pages and abandoning the book, and the tips below will help you write an effectively-plotted romance.

The protagonists need to have goals and complications that work against their togetherness. There are two main ways to figure out those goals and complications and approach the plotting of your book. One way is to outline before you begin writing and the other is to simply begin writing the first draft and see where it takes you. Some writers who do this do not even refer to this as the ‘first draft’ but instead as the ‘discovery draft’.

Both methods have advantages and disadvantages. Some writers find themselves bogged down by writing an outline; they are simply unable to become inspired and envision their story in the outline form. However, for writers who can produce an outline, the advantage is that the first draft tends to be more polished and complete. The discovery draft method may allow more creativity and flexibility and it may be the only way some writers can work, but it can also be easy to get bogged down in a meandering manuscript that goes nowhere. The next draft also tends to need a lot of work. Discovery draft writers should also note that it’s usually helpful to go ahead and write an outline anyway once the discovery draft is complete.

Whatever method is used, plotting principles remain the same. You should begin with a general sense of the length your novel should be, and that will be based on the sub-genre; a historical romance is generally going to be much longer than a category or series romance for example.

Familiarity with your sub-genre is important as well. It can be helpful to read several books in it and take notes on where major plot points occur and what they are. You may detect a pattern that will be helpful in structuring your own plot. Every plot needs elements of conflict. There should be smaller conflicts along the way to be dealt with and resolved as well as an overarching conflict that rises to a climax and a resolution at the end of your book.

Once you’ve determined a rough word or manuscript page count for your novel, you can begin to divide your novel into sections. The opening should comprise approximately the first quarter of your novel. Therefore, for an 80,000 word novel,
the opening will be about 20,000 words long. For a romance novel, here are the plot points a reader is going to expect in the opening:

- The characters need to meet.
- The characters’ goals that are separate from their romance need to be made clear.
- The main conflicts that keep the characters from their goals and their relationship should be established.

The middle section of the book will comprise a total of half the novel, so in an 80,000 word manuscript it will be roughly 40,000 words long. In the middle section, these plot points occur:

- The physical and/or emotional relationship between the characters intensifies.
- The characters reaffirm their dedication to their goals that are in conflict with the relationship. This occurs at approximately the midpoint of the whole novel.
- A dramatic turning point occurs that incites a crisis.

The final section of novel containing the conflict and resolution will occupy the final quarter of the novel:

- The climax includes what romance writers often call the ‘black moment’. This is when everything appears hopeless and the protagonists have lost everything.
- The resolution and reward should be short.

Within this structure, the different types of conflicts that arise will be grounded in the setting and type of novel. The characters may be kept apart by war, being in different social classes, misunderstandings and jealousy, machinations by other characters and more. Creating protagonists with opposing goals and desires can be useful because it gives each of them something they passionately want while setting up an automatic conflict between the two.
How to make your romance novel feel real

For something that is so important in our lives, it’s surprising how often love gets clichéd treatment in songs, books, movies and more. You can avoid these clichés and write about romance in a way that feels real using the tips below.

Avoid clichés

The first step in avoiding clichés is to recognise them, and you need only look around to see how many clichés we have surrounding romance. Some of them are ideas:

• You’ll never get over your first love.
• There is one perfect person out there for you.
• Love conquers all.

Some of them are situations:

• The man is a wild rake and the woman is a naive virgin who will tame him.
• The woman is either impossibly beautiful or believes herself to be plain but is described in a way that demonstrates that she is actually beautiful.
• The two are kept apart due to misunderstandings that could be easily cleared up if only everyone communicated a little bit more effectively.

Language surrounding romance can be clichéd as well. In particular, think about popular songs and how often the same words and sentiments are repeated.

Original vs. imitation

Start out by brainstorming a list of tired, overdone elements in all of these categories. List as many as you can think of. Not every cliché has to be avoided. The old plot of boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy wins girl back has endless variations. As you write down the many overused elements of romance novels, think about which ones are truly tired and need to be retired and which ones simply need to be freshened. The aim is not so much to eliminate everything that may have been done before but to pinpoint some of the potential pitfalls and consider ahead of time how they might be made to seem more original.

Why is originality so important? It isn’t so much for its own sake; it’s that avoiding imitation will lead to a novel that feels more real.

One way to ensure this originality is to focus on specifics instead of generalities.
The hero and heroine of the novel don’t just go on a picnic; they go on a picnic where she forgets to bring anything to drink and the meat is spoiled and they get lost trying to find their way back to the car but find out they went to the same elementary school yet somehow never met each other.

Real life inspiration

Another way to make a romance novel seem real is to base its incidents on real life. This doesn’t mean writing out the story of your own most romantic relationship although you can certainly use your experience to some degree. However, in addition to that, try observing couples around you. Take bits and pieces from what you observe and incorporate them into the story. Jot down tidbits of conversation you overhear. Think about your own romantic life and that of your friends and family. What kind of gestures, language and incidents do you observe that you might include in your novel? Even if you are not writing a contemporary romance, you can adapt those observations to the setting of your novel.

Making sure that your protagonists’ actions and the ways in which they express their feelings for one another is character-driven is important as well. When something is character-driven, it seems to arise naturally from who the characters are. If your characters are well-developed, they will often come to seem like people you know so well that you can predict their actions. Avoid contriving a plot that you force your characters to take part in and let your characters take the lead instead. When your characters are well-developed, the actions they choose will seem almost inevitable, and they will also seem real to your readers.

Details make the difference

Get your details right. For historical romances, do your research thoroughly to ensure that readers familiar with your setting will not be thrust out of the story by inaccuracies. If possible, have an expert or two in the time period you are writing about review your novel. For contemporary romances, read your dialogue out loud to ensure your characters are speaking in a way that feels natural.

Convincing your readers that your characters and the relationship that is at stake in your novel are all real is essential for writing a successful romance novel.
5 great tips for making your romance novel irresistible

There’s no formula for writing a successful romance or any other type of fiction, but there are things you can do that will make readers want to snap up your novel and read more. Below are five tips for penning a page-turning, unforgettable love story.

• Borrow from the best. Think about some of the great fictional lovers. These should be a mix of classics like Catherine and Heathcliff from Wuthering Heights as well as contemporary such as your favourite Jennifer Crusie or Nora Roberts characters. Consider what makes them and their situations so compelling and how you can model your own characters and situation after them.

• Make it your own. Once you’ve thought about the fictional works you can use as models, think about how to tell the story that only you can tell. Draw on your own background and interests for the situation; perhaps you love a particular historical period or horseback riding or a certain vacation spot. As you create a compelling setting and situation, do the same for your characters. Be sure that they are not unbelievably perfect but flawed in realistic ways.

• Be consistent. What kind of a romance are you trying to write? Is it a fat historical novel filled with intrigue and sex, a slim ironic chicklit book set in a large city or a sweet and not at all explicit book about two people falling in love? Keep your tone, your characters’ reactions and the degree of explicitness appropriate to the novel throughout.

• Build suspense. Your readers will keep turning pages if you make the outcome for your characters truly difficult for them to surmount and leave your readers in suspense as to whether the lovers will end up together or not. Set up a series of believable obstacles but not so many that it is unrealistic or that your readers become fed up and disengage. The so-called rule of threes can be a helpful formula here; characters should try to solve their conflicts three times and only succeed on the third try.

• Reward your readers. Most of us read romances for the wish fulfillment. That doesn’t mean a romance can never be sad or nothing bad must happen in your book, but your reader expects and deserves a big emotional payoff, and you must deliver it.
Creating loveable flaws in your characters

One of the things you hear over and over is that your characters need to be likeable, and your readers should be able to identify with them. In order to create characters who are both realistic and likeable, they need to be flawed.

Characters who lack flaws are not likeable. Think about it: We’ve all had that relative, friend, classmate or coworker who was simply too perfect, and we didn’t respond to them with great affection. We feel things more akin to envy or annoyance in the presence of such a person, and sometimes we even start to look for them to fail just to prove to ourselves that they are as human as we are. In fiction, a reader will feel all of these emotions plus a sense of disbelief toward a too-perfect hero or heroine. Therefore, it’s important to create flaws in your characters that don’t go so far as to make your characters unpleasant but do make them sympathetic. Below are some ways you can do just that.

• Show the reason for the flaw. Perhaps your protagonist is stingy about handing out praise because he was raised by parents who were the same way. Maybe your main character won’t let people get close to her because she was badly hurt in a love affair when she was younger. If you can show that flaws are less failures of character and more about the types of scars life leaves on all of us, your readers will feel more empathy for the character.

• Make the flaw seem reasonable to the character. It’s often said that villains don’t think of themselves as villains; they imagine that they are doing the right thing. By the same token, your character may believe that always being brutally honest with people is the best way to keep the air clear or that she is not a know-it-all but is showing other people the error of their ways. By demonstrating how the flaw makes sense to the character, the character becomes more sympathetic even when the reasoning behind the flaw is misguided.

• Make the flaw both a strength and a weakness depending on the circumstances. Being quick-thinking can be a wonderful trait in some circumstances and professions, but impulsiveness and expecting instant results can also backfire in other situations. The same can be true of being plain spoken, trusting or any number of other traits. A classic example is Sherlock Holmes, a character whose famous smarts make him a whiz at solving crimes but not so great at dealing with people.

• Let your character make mistakes. Your character can be right most of the time, but he or she has to do things wrong some of the time as well. This can be particularly useful if your character is someone in a position of influence who has to make decisions that influence a lot of people. Leaders are as flawed as anyone else and get things wrong, and when they do, the consequences are much greater.
• Trust your characters. Think about the flaws of your friends and loved ones; do you hate them because of those flaws? Of course you don’t. You may even think more fondly of them knowing the foibles and weaknesses in their characters. If you have created strong, realistic characters that your audience can identify with, their flaws will be part of what readers love about them.

Flaws for your characters may be something that you plan out ahead of time, but it’s even more likely that they will reveal themselves along the way as you get to know your characters better. Certain flaws just arise naturally out of certain personality types; your quiet, contemplative character may be painfully shy while your character who makes things happen may sometimes be callous to the feelings of others. Having a sympathetic eye for humanity in general can help you create flawed, realistic and loveable characters.