



EDITING ROMANCE NOVELS 201

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LESSON #1

The Basics

Can you feel the love tonight?

If not, then you're in the right place, because we're going to look at what it takes to help authors craft engaging romance novels that keep their audiences reading! This course is designed to be a one-stop-shop for editing romance. If you've never taken a fiction-editing course, you'll get a look at the basics before jumping into romance-centric information. If you've taken some, then consider Lesson 1 your refresher course.

For the next four lessons, we'll look at the different ways you can help your clients strengthen their romance novels. This is, essentially, a substantive editing course, as we'll be looking at the big-picture issues (namely characterization, plot, and "other"). Throughout this course, I'll reference several stories but will mostly focus on two novels: *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen and *A Worthy Pursuit* by Karen Witemeyer. I chose these novels for two reasons:

1. I wanted an example of classic literature (Austen) and contemporary literature (Witemeyer, though her story is a Western historical) to show how the elements of good romance endure.
2. Not everyone reads Western historical romance novels, but most people are familiar with *Pride and Prejudice*. So there's a good chance you'll understand at least one of my examples.

One last thing before we get started: as [The PEN Institute](#) is part of the [Christian Editor Network](#), we will be looking at romance novels that represent a Christian worldview (single men and single women coming together). The same writing/editing rules would apply to any other type of romance, but those are the examples I'll be using.

Now, let's get started! In this lesson we're going to look at/review the basics of good fiction:

- Point of View (POV)

- Showing vs. Telling
- Characterization
- Plot
- What Makes a Story a Romance?

Point of View

There are four main points of view (POV) an author can use when writing a novel:

First Person (I, we, us): The story is shown through the eyes and experiences of the narrator. The reader connects deeply with the narrator because everything is perceived as the narrator perceives it—if the narrator is afraid of dogs, the reader will feel that fear. Generally, there is only one POV character in first person, so the reader gains an intimate understanding of the person telling the story. But there’s no way of knowing what other characters are thinking or feeling unless those characters talk about it.

Second Person (you): In this POV, the narrator tells the main character—“you”—what to do (*You drove to the store so you could buy some milk.*). You rarely see this POV in novel-length fiction. It can be difficult to write well for hundreds of pages, and it can be difficult to read (as most people are used to reading in first or third person).

Third Person (he, she, they) Limited: The most frequently used in genre fiction, third person limited (TPL) shows the story from the viewpoints of specific characters, often changing POV’s between scenes or chapters. It’s not as intimate as the first person POV (*I ran across the room, anger flowing from my pores.*), but it does help the reader connect with one character at a time (*Beth ran across the room, anger flowing from her pores.*).

Third Person (he, she, they) Omniscient: Similar to TPL, this POV tells the story in the third person, but instead of showing each scene from one character’s perspective, third person omniscient (TPO) is really the story as told by an all-seeing, all-knowing narrator. TPO lets the reader see and know everything that’s going on throughout the book, but it lacks the intimacy of first person or even TPL.

Which POV Is the Right POV?

When it comes to romance novels, the preferred POV is third person limited with two POV characters—the hero and the heroine. This allows the reader to experience the story as the male and female leads experience the story, which helps them understand the two most important people in the book. ***When readers understand the characters, they sympathize with them; when readers sympathize with the characters, they keep reading to find out what will happen.***

Here’s an example of a scene from *A Worthy Pursuit*, written in third person limited. It starts in Charlotte’s POV (the heroine) but switches to Stone’s (the hero). In this scene, Stone has decided to start pursuing Charlotte. She’s hesitant to let her guard down around any man because of her past experiences. But Stone continues to prove himself trustworthy and honorable, and she can’t

deny her attraction to (and affection for) him. For reference, they're standing side by side watching a sunset. Stone has just put his arm around Charlotte:

Charlotte bit the inside of her cheek and, feeling as if she were leaping off a cliff, softened her posture. She leaned her hip slightly against his. Then her spine curved one vertebra at a time, until she matched the shape of his side.

A movement along her waist arrested her. His fingers. Stretching. Adjusting their hold. Charlotte held her breath. His arm bowed more deeply around her, fitting her snugly against him. His eyes remained on the sunset, though. His lips fixed in an almost-smile.

Relaxing her breath, she slowly ... ever so slowly ... allowed her head to fall against his shoulder.

~

Stone closed his throat against the shout of victory that surged up from his lungs the moment Charlotte's head finally nestled against his shoulder. The woman was as skittish as an unbroke mare, but never had he received a sweeter reward for his patience.

You can see that there's some separation between the reader and the characters, but by limiting the POV to just Charlotte and Stone, the reader can experience the moment the same way the characters do.

What If an Author Wants to Break the Rules?

“Learn the rules like a pro, so you can break them like an artist” (Pablo Picasso).

Has anyone ever written a romance novel from two different first person POV characters? Yes. Has there ever been a romance novel with more than two POVs? Yes. Can your author do either of those?

It depends.

This is the advice I give to my clients, especially new clients who have never been published (or have never been published in the romance genre): If the author can write a solid, engaging romance novel in third person limited with two POVs but the story *needs* to break the rules for specific purposes, then I'll read through the manuscript and let the writer know if he or she can make the unique POV work. If, however, the author is trying to do something different for the sake of being different, or if she doesn't want to change the POV because it will take too long to switch the story, then I always recommend switching from a nonconventional POV to a conventional POV.

Why?

Because my job is to help my client get her book published, and in the romance genre she will increase her chances of getting noticed, read, and published by writing in third person limited with two POVs. After she's proven herself to be a capable writer and has built an audience, then she can experiment with unconventional POVs.

Showing vs. Telling

Telling is when the writer explains what's happening instead of letting the reader "see" it for herself. Showing is when the writer describes what's happening as the character experiences it.

Example:

Telling: I sped along the highway as my dog sat happily beside me.

Showing: I stepped on the accelerator and rolled down the windows. My beagle stuck his nose through the window, the wind flapping his ears as he wagged his tail.

Both of these explain that the character is driving quickly with her dog. One tells the reader what to think. The other shows what's happening and lets the reader figure it out.

Why Is It Important?

It's the difference between listening to someone tell a story and experiencing it for yourself. When an author *tells* a scene, the reader essentially listens as a narrator explains what happened. When an author *shows* a scene, the reader experiences it through the point of view of the main character. ***If the reader doesn't experience the scene with the character, she won't connect with the character.*** When readers don't connect with the characters, they are more likely to stop reading. (Sounds familiar, doesn't it?)

How Do You Fix It?

Help your author by watching for "telling" words—these are words that announce that something is being told.

- Emotions: happy, sad, excited, depressed, etc.
- Senses: heard, felt, saw, smelled, tasted
- Adverbs (-ly words): quickly, happily, slowly, noisily, etc.
- Thoughts: thought, wondered, considered, etc.

When you see this happen (e.g., *She wondered, would she ever be happy?* or *He looked sad.*), point it out to your author. If needed, offer some suggestions on how to convert a *told* scene into a *shown* scene.

Characterization

Romance is a character-driven genre, so having complex, relatable characters is vital. We'll talk more about this in the next lesson, but for now we'll look at the two key elements of good

characters: backstory and GMC.

Backstory

Backstory is everything that happened to the characters before when the novel starts. It's all of the things that motivate, inspire, scare, hinder, and drive the characters. Characters must have rich, fully-developed backstories that never make it into the novel.

That's right—as the editor, you shouldn't be reading the characters' backstories your author created. As Stephen King said in *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, “The most important things to remember about back story are that (a) everyone has a history and (b) most of it isn't very interesting.”

Such is the case for most characters. Their backstories are important but uninteresting. Authors need to create them, though, to create relatable, believable GMCs.

Goals-Motivations-Conflict (GMCs)

What exactly *is* a GMC?

Goal: **what** a character wants to achieve

Motivation: **why** a character wants to achieve it

Conflict: **what** prevents a character from achieving it

Without goals, characters turn into beings wandering across the stage for no apparent reason, which leaves the audience to wonder what's going on. Goals can be tangible/external (get a job, buy a house, move to another country) or indistinct/internal (mature, become Christlike, find peace). ***Characters need goals that compel them to live and act in the ways they do.***

Just as all characters need goals, they also need motivation—what drives them toward their goals? Character motivations not only explain why the characters act in certain ways but also help the reader relate to them.

For example, people may not care that Stacey insists on having a king-sized bed. It may even become annoying if she's determined to buy one and the reader doesn't understand why. When it's revealed, however, that she's one of six daughters from a poor family and always had to share a double mattress with one of her sisters, it strengthens her goal and motivation, and it helps the reader empathize with her situation.

Goals and motivations are important, but without conflict Stacey can walk into Art Van and buy a bed. The end. ***Conflict increases tension, forces the character into new situations, and—most important—keeps the story going.*** Perhaps Stacey can't find a bed that she likes. When she does, it doesn't fit in her bedroom. She finds a bigger place to live, but she can't afford it. Conflict, conflict, conflict. Now her goal and motivation are challenged: Will she give up her dream, or will her struggle force her to redefine it?

If you're editing a romance novel and the characters aren't holding your attention, or maybe they feel stereotypical or flat, there's a good chance the author hasn't fully created a strong backstory to support the hero's and heroine's GMCs. Ask your author to supply any information he or she has on their characters so you can see what the author is trying to achieve, then suggest edits that will help him or her achieve it.

Plot

I'm a firm believer in the three-act story structure. It provides all of the elements necessary to create an engaging novel. We'll dive deeper into romance-specific plots during Lesson 3, but for now we'll cover the basics.

A three-act story needs six things: an inciting incident, three acts, and two transitional elements (door one and door two). These are the most basic definitions of each:

The Inciting Incident

The inciting incident is the incident, circumstance, or situation that sets the story in motion. It's what separates backstory from the story.

As we discussed earlier, backstory is everything that's happened to the main character since birth. It's the family upbringing, education, work history, and friendships that inspire how the character responds to the situations in his life; it's what inspires the character's goals, motivations, and conflicts (GMCs). It also influences how the character will respond to the inciting incident.

The inciting incident requires two specific characteristics:

1. It must be out of the ordinary/unexpected.
2. It requires a response.

Going to the grocery store isn't an inciting incident. Going to a grocery store where a robbery occurs *is* an inciting incident. The robbery is both out of the ordinary and unexpected. It also requires the character to do something—to either surrender to the thief or stand up to him.

An inciting incident can occur in the book or before the book starts. There's no right or wrong answer. Both options work if written properly.

Act I (Beginning)

The reader won't care about the characters if she doesn't know them and understand them. Likewise, she won't care about the characters' struggles if she doesn't understand why they're struggling and why the struggle is important (and unavoidable). All those introductions need to happen in the first act.

As an editor, here's what to look for:

- Introduction to the main characters: The reader should have an idea of their ages, appearances, and either work or personal situations (depending on how/where the novel starts).
- Introduction to the setting: the location, time period, and season.
- Introduction to goals and motivations: The reader should see what's important to the characters and their plans.

The First Door

The first door marks the transition between the first and second acts. It happens after the inciting incident, after the introduction, and after the reader has invested in the characters and their lives. This is the point where one of the main characters has to make a decision, but this is a *life-altering decision*. This door gives the character two options: Go back to normal life and hope for the best or pick the option that will forever change his or her life.

Act II (Middle)

This will be the longest portion of the novel. There aren't any length or style requirements, but this is where the story happens—goals are pursued, motivations change, new goals arise, conflicts abound.

The Second Door

Every character comes to the point where he or she needs to make one more decision. As with the inciting incident and the first door, this decision will define him or her, but it is also a different kind of decision. At this point, the main character can no longer go back—the plot is in motion, and there's no way to avoid it. This decision is usually between good or bad, right or wrong, easy or difficult. This second door comes at the end of act two and leads the characters (and reader) into the final, concluding act.

Act III (End)

The end! This is where conflicts are overcome or resolved. Goals are met. And, in romance, *they live happily ever after*.

While a happy ending isn't required in all genres, it's a **must** for romance novels. That is, after all, the pay off! Regardless of what GMCs the characters started with, at some point in the story, the romance becomes central to the characters' lives, and romance readers will expect to see it happily resolved at the end.

What Makes a Novel a Romance Novel?

Several years ago, I met a novelist who had self-published a romance novel. It wasn't selling well and she couldn't figure out why, so I asked about the book. It's the story of a young woman struggling with her faith—she's not sure what she believes about God or why she should believe in Him. Oh, and she meets a boy.

Can you see the problem?

In the romance genre, the romance MUST be a central theme in the story (it doesn't have to be the main theme, but it must become part of it). If you can take it out of the book and still have a novel, it's not a romance. It's a novel with a romantic thread.

The novelist I met had a good book. She'd written a coming-of-age-type story and thrown in some romance, but she was marketing and selling it as a romance. It didn't work. The romantic thread wasn't an integral part of the story, and die-hard romance readers picked up on that.

A Worthy Pursuit provides an excellent example of how romance entered the story and became inseparable from the plot. The book begins with Stone Hammond trying to find and retrieve ten-year-old Lily Dorchester for her grandfather. Stone has been told that Charlotte Atherton kidnapped Lily after her mother died, and the grandfather wants to bring the child home. When Stone finds them, however, he discovers that Charlotte is Lily's legal guardian, and Lily's mother was adamant that her daughter not go back to her grandfather. Stone's mission is clear—to find out the truth about Lily's guardianship and keep her safe.

That doesn't sound much like a romance, does it?

It's not. Stone was never pursuing romance, but Charlotte changed his mind. Not because *she* was looking for romance (she wasn't—she only wanted to keep Lily safe), but because they met, they had chemistry, and the romance wove its way into the story. By the end of the novel, protecting Lily is still Stone's main objective, but he can no longer separate it from his desire to protect and care for Charlotte.

The romance became a central theme of the story. If you took it out—if Stone didn't care about Charlotte and disregarded her well-being—there wouldn't be much of a story left. Neither character was looking for love in *A Worthy Pursuit*, but by the end, they couldn't separate love from their GMCs, which is why the novel is classified as historical romance.

To further prove this point, I encourage you to see the movie *Penelope* (starring Christina Ricci and James McAvoy). In that movie, Penelope's goal is to find a husband. Due to an ancient curse, she was born with the nose and ears of a pig, and the only way to break the curse is to find love with “one who will accept her as one of their own.”

Even though the main plot goal is for Penelope to find a husband to break the curse, the main theme of the story is acceptance—who will accept Penelope as she is? Yes, she falls in love with someone, but if you take that thread out of the movie, there's still a great story left. That is a coming-of-age-type movie with a strong romantic thread.

It's important to understand the difference between a romance novel and a novel with a romantic thread because it will influence how you edit the manuscript. It will also influence how your client pitches the story to agents and publishers.

That's it for this first lesson—a quick recap of fiction basics and what to look for! In Lesson 2 we'll take a closer look at characters. Until then, here's an assignment for you to work on.



LESSON #1 ASSIGNMENT

To receive a certificate of completion for this course, you'll need to complete the appropriate number of assignments for each lesson. This lesson has only one assignment.

Pick up your favorite romance novel. Find these elements in each:

- Inciting Incident
- Door #1
- Door #2
- Hero's GMC
- Heroine's GMC

If you're not yet a romance reader but are taking this course to learn how to edit romance, then welcome! And get ready to start reading romance because the best way to learn what works is to find someone who's doing it well and see how they do it. For the next four weeks, pick up a Karen Witemeyer book and read it (my personal favorites are *Short Straw Bride*, *No Other Will Do*, and *A Worthy Pursuit*). Look for the elements we discuss each week, and send me a weekly summary of what you found.