



EDITING ROMANCE NOVELS 201

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LESSON #3

Plot

Once your author has created relatable, flawed, interesting characters, it's time for them to do something! It's not enough for two people to wander around falling in love and pursuing each other. They have to have lives—work, friends, responsibilities. All of those things make up the plot, and those pieces will get thrown out of whack when the romance starts brewing.

Just like characterization, there are plot devices that are specific to the romance genre. There are also different ways to handle common plot elements to make them work in a romance. This week we're going to discuss:

- The Meet Cute
- Conflict
- Four-Part Story Structure
- Pacing
- HEA (Happily Ever After)

The Meet Cute

At some point in every story, the hero and heroine need to meet. This isn't just any introduction, though. This is the start of their relationship—this is the introduction that will interfere with their GMCs and start weaving that thread of romance into their lives.

They need a “meet cute.”

The meet cute is when the hero (whom I will now refer to as *B* for boy) and heroine (*G* for girl) meet for the first time *on the page*. It's possible that *B* and *G* grew up together or that they had met sometime in the past, but their meet cute is when the reader sees them together for the first

time in the context of the story (i.e., if the author shows B and G together in a prologue, that is *not* the meet cute).

Like the inciting incident (refer to Lesson 1), the meet cute can't just be two people passing on the street. Something out of the ordinary has to happen. As Gwen Hayes says, "Sparks should fly" (*Romancing the Beat*, 31).

For Elizabeth Bennett and Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, it's an introduction at a dance (not an everyday occasion) where she overhears him say some unflattering things about her—not the best first impression. For Charlotte and Stone in *A Worthy Pursuit*, it's when Charlotte's friend drags an unconscious Stone back to her house and asks if he should "take care" of the stranger—talk about an unusual circumstance!

In *P&P*, the reader is aware of the characters but has not yet seen them together; in *Pursuit*, there have been scenes from each character's POV, but they have not yet met. In both stories, the meet cute is the first time the characters appear on the page together.

Why Does It Matter?

The meet cute matters because it sets the tone for the story. The reader will see only one character's reaction to it, but it should lay a solid foundation for the course of the story—does the POV character find the other character attractive, annoying, endearing, repulsive? That one scene will let the reader know what to expect in the coming chapters.

Elizabeth isn't initially impressed with Darcy, and it shows throughout the story. Stone and Charlotte are both suspicious and cautious, which lays the foundation for their slow-to-develop romance. Their meet cutes set the tone.

Conflict

It's a common misconception that romance novels are all about two people falling in love. I hear it all the time: *I don't read romance because I know how it's going to end*. So does everyone else—that's one of the reasons people read romance novels! Romance novels are not *just* about two people falling in love, though. They're about two people falling in love ***and how they overcome obstacles and circumstances so that love wins in the end***.

Just like every other novel, romance novels need conflict, but romantic tension is not enough. Let me say that again: ***Romantic tension is not enough***. Too often, new writers think they can string their readers along with three hundred pages of will-they-get-together-or-won't-they, but it doesn't work. They think that keeping distance between characters causes tension when, in reality, it frustrates the reader. Instead of being endearing and sympathetic, the characters often come across as bipolar and irrational.

As I was preparing the lessons for this course, someone sent me a link to an article titled "What Our Top 4 Editors Advise Romance Writers to Do" (<https://nybookeditors.com>). I eagerly

clicked the link and applauded what I read. When asked what feedback the editors regularly give to writers, two of the four responded:

“*Conflict!* Nearly every editorial letter I write for romance novels involves mentioning issues with conflict. Sometimes it’s that the conflict needs to be brought more to the forefront, other times it’s that the conflict feels forced and not natural” (Megan McKeever, romance editor).

“One of my biggest notes is always *conflict, conflict, conflict!* Oftentimes, because authors and readers alike love when the hero and heroine are happy and in love, there isn’t enough conflict throughout the relationship. ***Tension and conflict make the happy-ever-after a bigger payoff***, so don’t be afraid to let your couples get into it throughout the novel so that when they come back together at the end, the reconciliation packs an even bigger emotional punch” (Marla Daniels, romance editor, emphasis added).

Types of Conflict

There are essentially two types of conflict: internal and external.

Internal conflicts are those issues that the characters need to overcome: fear, insecurity, anger, doubt, pride—anything that has contributed to the character’s hole-heartedness. The characters will have to confront these issues in order to embrace the romance.

In secular fiction, that’s often an aha moment. For Elizabeth Bennett, her prejudice begins to crumble when Darcy confesses that he dissuaded Bingley and Jane’s relationship out of concern for his friend; Elizabeth realizes that Darcy cares deeply for his friend, as opposed to being uncaring toward Jane as Elizabeth first suspected. That “aha!” helps Elizabeth change her perspective, which helps her fall in love with Darcy.

In Christian fiction, overcoming the internal conflict often includes a new revelation about biblical truth, but it doesn’t have to. In *A Worthy Pursuit*, Charlotte’s internal overcoming is a long, slow process that stretches throughout the novel. It’s rooted in her faith but isn’t a new revelation; it’s something she must choose to accept and believe.

In Susan Crawford’s *Saving Justice*, however, Kinley (the heroine) has that revelation moment when she realizes she might have been misunderstanding God all along. Though her actions have been rooted in her faith, she sees how she could have misinterpreted things, so her faith in/relationship with God changes as her relationship with Nash (the hero) changes.

The other type of conflict (which many new writers overlook) is the external conflict. This is anything that comes between B and G and their relationship. Maybe B gets transferred to a different city, or G gets sick and has to take a second job to pay the bills (giving them no time to see each other). A family member could die, leaving a character heartbroken, or a house floods, destroying everything the character cherishes. There’s no limit to the kind of external conflict your author can include, and that’s great news because every romance novel *needs* external conflict!

Eternal Importance of Conflict

While the popularity of certain POVs and story structure have changed through the years, the need for conflict in a romance novel has not. Here's proof:

Elizabeth Bennett and Mr. Darcy. By the midway point of the story, Darcy professes his love to Elizabeth, but the story doesn't end there. He has to prove himself to her, and she needs to be willing to admit she has been wrong about him (internal). Then Lydia runs off with Wickham, threatening the family's reputation, and *then* Darcy's aunt tries to come between him and Elizabeth (external). That's four separate conflicts outside of the romantic tension.

You can also see that kind of tension in contemporary writing. In *A Worthy Pursuit*, Stone and Charlotte's introduction occurs as part of a conflict—he's there to take Lily away (not realizing she is legally Charlotte's child). After that first meeting, there's a cougar attack, two kidnapping attempts, an escape, and a confrontation with the bad guy (external), plus Charlotte's fears about getting hurt (internal)—all in addition to the blossoming romance.

Yes, these stories have natural romantic tension, but it's the conflict surrounding it that drives the story forward.

How to Help Your Author

There's no set rule as to how much tension a story needs to include or how much of it needs to be external versus internal, but there should be a combination of the two.

If you're editing a romance that leaves you bored or frustrated, keep track of the different types of conflict. It's possible not enough conflict is there. It's not your job, however, to tell the author what kind of conflict to include. Instead, you want to help stimulate the author's creativity.

I once edited a historical romance novel that relied entirely on romantic tension. It worked for a while, but by the time I was halfway through the story, I wanted to smack someone. When I suggested more conflict, however, the author wasn't sure what would work. To me, there were two obvious options—a love triangle or blackmail. The author didn't like either of those, so we kept brainstorming.

Eventually, we landed on an idea that was pretty obscure and not anything I ever would have written, but she liked it. And it worked! When she sent back the new chapters, they contained some of her best writing, and it added depth to both the characters *and* the plot. If I'd told her, "You need to add a love triangle," it may not have worked as well, because she didn't see that for her story.

She had enough book-publishing experience to know that she didn't have to take all of my suggestions, so she pushed back until we found what worked for her. New writers might not realize that they can say no, so make sure you're shining a light on all the possible paths and not pointing them down the path *you* would pick.

Four-Part Story Structure

If you look back to Lesson 1, you'll recall that I talked about the three-act story (which I'll now call the *framework* to avoid confusion). The three-act framework is essential to any novel, but when it comes to the romance novel, there's another structural blueprint that fits inside of the three acts—it's the four-part story structure.

As explained by Gwen Hayes in *Romancing the Beat*, the romantic plot framework also needs to include these elements:

- A. Set-Up
- B. Falling in Love
- C. Retreating from Love (or, as can often happen, Wrestling with Love)
- D. Fighting for Love

When you nestle these parts into the three-act framework—complete with transitional elements—you end up with something like this:

Beginning (Act I)

Inciting Incident
Set-Up/Meet Cute
Door #1

Middle (Act II)

Falling in Love
Retreating from Love
Door #2

End (Act III)

Fighting for Love

What does this look like on the page? For this example, we're going to use *A Worthy Pursuit*, because the ideals of structure and framework have changed through the years and the blueprint used in the classics, like *Pride and Prejudice*, don't necessarily work well today.

Inciting Incident

For both Stone and Charlotte, their inciting incidents happen before chapter one (or “off the page”). Stone's inciting incident is when he agrees to retrieve Lily for her grandfather; that launches him into the story. For Charlotte, it's when the school for gifted children closes and she runs away with Lily (though technically this happens on a page—it's in the prologue—it happens before the first chapter).

Set-Up/Meet Cute

While Stone spies on Charlotte and Lily, he's knocked unconscious by Charlotte's friend and protector, Dobson. Dobson drags Stone's body back to the house where he meets Charlotte. The two eventually talk, and Stone realizes Charlotte might be telling the truth about being Lily's

guardian. During this time, they are physically attracted to each as their emotional attraction begins to blossom.

Door #1

Stone has a decision to make: take Lily and fulfill his contract or find out if Charlotte's telling the truth (thereby turning his back on his client). He goes through the door with Charlotte and decides to wait on returning Lily until he has all of the facts.

Falling in Love

When Stone decides to investigate Charlotte's claims of guardianship, she realizes he's not just a man after money. He has a heart to do the right thing, just as she does. He also notices Charlotte's admirable qualities, as well as her passions and talents. That begins the falling-in-love process.

Retreating from Love/Wrestling with Love

Charlotte needs to figure out if she can truly love again, as well as decide if she even wants to. While conflicts arise around her, she continues to fight the inner battles with fear and doubt, which prevent her from confessing her love to Stone (even though he's already confessed his love). This is where she's wrestling with love.

Door #2

With all of the facts finally in place, Stone reaches Door #2: follow the facts or fulfill his contract. He decides not only to end his contract with Lily's grandfather but also to make sure Lily and Charlotte are safe forever by exposing the grandfather's crimes.

Fighting for Love

While rescuing Lily from her grandfather, Stone is shot. Charlotte watches over him and tends to him; as he lies unconscious, she can finally admit her feelings. She throws propriety out the window and stays by his side night and day, willing to risk her reputation for the man she loves.

Is This Absolute?

The order of events may shift a bit from novel to novel, especially when considering the classics. As I mentioned earlier, the preferred plot structure has changed through the years, and stories like *Pride and Prejudice* don't necessarily fit this blueprint. We're not editing the classics, however, so it's important to understand what works and sells in the current publishing climate.

The novel you're editing might have the inciting incident after the meet cute, or the fight for love might begin before the characters go through Door #2. The location and timing of these elements don't have to be exact, but they should all be present in the story. As long as the organization of the plot works to keep the reader engaged and the story moving forward, there's no reason to change it.

Pacing

Not only do romance readers expect the four-part story structure within the three-act framework but they also expect it to happen at a certain time. Again, it doesn't have to be exact (on page 148 B must realize that he loves G), but there's a tempo that matches the rhythm established by the meet cute and supported by the structure. The story should follow that tempo.

Here's a rough look at how this can play out:

Beginning (Act I): first 25% of the story

Inciting Incident
Set-Up/Meet Cute
Door #1

Middle (Act II): middle 50% of the story

Falling in Love
Retreating from Love
Door #2

End (Act III): final 25% of the story

Fighting for Love

I repeat, these percentages are *not* exact, but they're good guidelines to follow to keep the story moving forward at an expected (i.e., desired) pace.

Why Does It Matter?

It matters not only because readers expect it but also because it's a proven pace that works. If a novel is supposed to be a romance novel but B and G don't meet until halfway through the story, there's a problem. Why? ***Because there's no romance until B and G meet, so there's no real story until that point.*** If that happens in a novel you're editing, there are two possible reasons: either the author included too much backstory (which means everything prior to B and G's meeting can probably be cut), or the author is *not* writing a romance novel, in which case the manuscript should be edited and pitched differently.

An example of how pacing can work without following this formula is the as-yet-unpublished historical romance featuring a courtship by mail. A friend of mine is currently working on a story in which B and G fall in love by writing letters to each other. They don't meet until about a third of the way into the story, but because of the time period and their situation, it works. If she tried to force it and make the characters meet earlier simply for the sake of meeting in the first quarter of the book, the story would lose many necessary scenes that deepen the characters and their relationship.

Just remember—this isn't a chemical formula that needs to be followed precisely to prevent a disastrous explosion. Instead, think of it as a recipe. You can make a few substitutions or add a little more or less of one ingredient and still end up with something wonderful.

What about the Classics?

When it comes to the classics in any genre, you'll notice different POVs (usually omniscient) and pacing (often having longer beginnings/endings). In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth retreats from love (running from Mr. Darcy's bumbled proposal) while also falling in love, and that doesn't happen until almost halfway through the story.

That probably wouldn't work today as contemporary audiences expect to see things happen at a faster pace. Though readers across the country will wait for Austen to bring Elizabeth and Darcy together, they're much less patient with contemporary stories, in which they're used to seeing B and G meet in the first one to two chapters.

Since we're on the topic of introducing the characters, it's important to be aware of the pacing expectation for introducing B and G in a romance. Generally speaking, readers expect to see them meet in the first chapter; sometimes authors can get away with the meet cute happening in the second chapter if it fits the storyline. A good rule to follow is to have them meet as early as possible. If they meet any later than chapter two, make sure it's a romance novel and not a story with a romantic thread. If it *is*, in fact, a romance, encourage your author to put the meet cute earlier in the story.

HEA (Happily Ever After)

When it comes to romance novels, there *must* be a happily ever after. That's what the readers expect, and it's what sets the genre apart! It's possible to have a historical novel with a romantic thread in which B and G don't end up together. That's fine if the book is classified as historical. If, however, it's a historical *romance*, those two had better be admitting their feelings to each other by the end of the book.

If your author is pitching her manuscript to specific publishers, check to see if they have any requirements about how their romance novels need to end (some publishers prefer stories that end with either a proposal or a wedding). If they aren't pitching to a specific house, then just make sure the manuscript includes the happy ending.

That's it for Lesson 3! In the next lesson, we're going to look at all of those other things that set the romance genre apart but didn't quite fit under the *character* or *plot* umbrellas. Until then, here are some assignment options.



LESSON #3 ASSIGNMENTS

To receive a certificate of completion for this course, you'll need to complete at least one assignment from below. However, to get the most from this course, you are encouraged to complete all of them.

Assignment #1

Identify the meet cute in these movies/books: (I use a lot of movies because not everyone has read the same novels, but many people have seen these movies.) If you haven't read any of these books or seen any of these movies, pick two or three books and find the meet cute.

- a. *10 Things I Hate about You* (aka *Taming of the Shrew*)
- b. *50 First Dates*
- c. *Beauty and the Beast*
- d. *The Princess Bride*
- e. *Grease*
- f. *The Notebook*
- g. *A Walk to Remember*

Assignment #2

Where's the external conflict? Using the list above (or your favorite story), find the external conflict. List as many things as you can find that come between the hero and heroine.

Assignment #3

Using the list above, identify the structural elements in each story. Then identify where in the story they occur (pacing).

- Inciting Incident
- Set-Up/Meet Cute
- Door #1
- Falling in Love
- Retreating from Love/Wrestling with Love
- Door #2
- Fighting for Love