



## EDITING ROMANCE NOVELS 201

**Instructor: Karin Beery**

### LESSON #4

#### **Pitfalls**

We've spent three lessons looking at what works in romance novels. Now we're going to look at what *doesn't* work. These are the things I see over and over again while editing, and leaving them in a manuscript can reduce an author's chance of getting published or making sales. While many of these issues have become pet peeves of mine, this isn't a list based on personal preference. I've gathered input from agents and publishers to find out what they commonly see and how they feel about it.

Here are some of the most common romance-genre pitfalls:

- Inappropriate Conflict
- Clichés
  - Actions
  - Scenarios
  - Characters
- Off-the-Page Action
- Too Many POVs

#### **Inappropriate Conflict**

We touched on this quite a bit when we talked about character GMCs and again when we discussed plotting, but I want to elaborate because this is a common issue. While conflict is necessary, it's also important to help your author understand what you mean by conflict and how to appropriately incorporate it in a manuscript.

I will never forget a situation several years ago when a new writer joined a critique group to improve his manuscript. His group kept telling him that the story needed more conflict, but he didn't understand what they meant. He edited the story, but when he sent out his revised

manuscript, no one liked the characters anymore! He had interpreted “conflict” as “fighting” and ended up with two completely disagreeable characters. Not only was it frustrating for the reader to watch two characters constantly fighting but it also made it difficult to understand why they were pursuing a relationship when they clearly didn’t like each other.

Another similar situation occurred in an author’s first manuscript when she wanted to create a sassy character. The author included several quips and snubs from the heroine toward the hero. She wasn’t intentionally trying to include conflict, but by the end of the book, the heroine hadn’t said a single nice thing to the hero! She’d thought about how nice he looked or how kind he was, but she never showed it. Not only did it create unnecessary conflict but it also raised the question—what did he see in her that he’d want to have a romantic relationship with her?

### **What Do You Do?**

In the first situation, the author tried to create conflict, but he didn’t understand how to use external conflict. As I mentioned in the previous lesson, there has to be a blend of external and internal conflict. You don’t want to tell your authors *what* to include, but you can offer suggestions about *when* to include it.

For example, if everything’s going well for two chapters, it’s probably time to add some conflict—you don’t want readers to relax too much. Leave a note for the author to consider adding conflict, but make sure to offer some suggestions. There are countless ways to add conflict, so I can’t say “adding this will always work.” What I can guarantee is that adding appropriate external conflict will keep the reader engaged.

Suppose the book you’re editing is a manuscript that includes a hero who was once homeless and a heroine who’s a cancer survivor. The characters don’t need to argue about those things, but the author can include external conflict that touches those sensitive areas. After two low-key chapters, you might insert a comment such as: *Everything’s going great for your characters right now. This might be a good time to have the bank foreclose on the hero’s house or have the heroine’s aunt get sick.*

In the second situation, the author accidentally added inappropriate conflict. In Lesson 2, we talked about the importance of creating relatable characters, but they also need to be likable (if you, as the editor, don’t like them, the readers won’t like them either).

There’s nothing wrong with sassy, quirky characters as long as they don’t turn into drama queens. Drama queens create their own drama, and it won’t take long for the reader to realize that those characters are making life difficult for themselves. It’s okay to point out areas where the characters are creating their own conflicts, just make sure to explain why those situations can be troublesome (e.g., it reduces the reader’s sympathy for the character) and suggest alternatives.

That being said, it’s okay for characters to start as drama queens if it’s part of their character arcs. It’s also okay for certain situations to impassion the characters (the formerly homeless hero might become enraged when he sees a family kicked out of their home). There just needs to be a

balance between the genuinely dramatic situations and the overreacting-for-the-sake-of-quirkiness reactions.

## Clichés

Nothing sinks a manuscript faster than pages full of clichés: Writing that’s as flat as a pancake. Characters that are dead as doornails. Overused descriptions that leave readers staring at books like deer caught in the headlights.

But those aren’t the types of clichés we’re going to talk about. Instead, we’re going to focus on different elements that have become cliché because they seem to appear in every . . . single . . . romance novel.

Before we start, here’s a warning: I am *not* suggesting that all of these elements need to be removed from every manuscript. The point of this section is merely to point out some of the descriptions that appear so often that the reader expects to see them. That is **not good**, because you never want the reader to know what’s going to happen!

Here’s the general rule of thumb: if you (the editor) can predict what’s going to happen, so can the reader. If the reader already knows what’s going to happen, there’s no reason to keep reading! Too many clichés make a novel easy to predict. It’s your job to help your client recognize those clichés and offer suggestions on how to guide them in a new direction.

To make this section a little more manageable, we’re going to break this down into three separate sections: actions, scenarios, and characters.

## Actions

Without hesitation I can tell you that the single, most overused action in romance novels is lip biting. I cannot tell you the last time I picked up a novel that *didn’t* have the heroine biting her lip, yet I don’t know that I’ve ever seen a woman bite her lip (aside from actresses on TV or in movies).

Here’s the truth about lip biting: it’s a nervous habit. People who do it tend to have anxiety issues, and they tend to pull the skin off their lips (ew!). Yet it pops up in every romance novel (usually when the heroine is feeling shy or confused, so it’s not even appropriate use of the habit).

Let’s be better than lip biting.

Other descriptions that I keep seeing:

- Heaving a sigh
- Tucking a strand of hair behind her ear
- Lifting the chin
- Turning (They’re always turning—away from each other or toward something? I never know because it’s unclear.)

Is there anything wrong with these descriptions? No! Does your author have to cut them? No! But be aware of these phrases and others like them, especially if they're appearing regularly throughout the manuscript. There will absolutely be times when the hero heaves a sigh, but if he does it *every* time he sighs, it loses its impact.

### Scenarios

In Lesson 1, I pointed out that the essence of the romance genre is formulaic—publishers and readers expect certain things to happen, and often in a certain way/time frame. Because of that, it's easy to pile together a bunch of familiar scenarios to fill in those slots.

Maybe you've read this one:

Hero and heroine rub each other the wrong way. But they work at the same company, so they see each other every day. The company sends them away together for a work event. On the trip, he teaches her to relax, and he finally sees how attractive she is; she realizes that his laid-back life might not be as bad as she originally thought. Fireworks ensue, they kiss, but then they have to go back to “the real world.” It doesn't take long, however, before they realize they're no longer happy in their familiar lives and what they need is each other. Kiss, kiss. Happily ever after.

I'm going to be completely honest with you—I didn't take that from a book. I'm sure it's in a book (or a dozen) and a few Hallmark movies, but I didn't need to read it (or see it) to create that storyline. I simply took a bunch of overused scenarios and pushed them together.

What are some other cliché scenarios?

- Boy and girl hate each other
- Boy and girl are trapped together by a storm (or sent away together)
- Boy and girl accidentally rent the same room/apartment/vacation rental
- Boy thinks girl is someone else (or vice versa)
- Boy tries to “fix” the girl (or vice versa)
- Big-city boy (or girl) reluctantly returns to his small-town roots
- Small-town girl (or boy) overwhelmed by the big city
- Rich widow hires a nanny

Do these clichés work in novels? Often. Are they memorable? Not at all. So how do you fix them?

It's not necessarily the *presence* of these scenarios that's the issue; it's how they're resolved. More often than not, the reader knows exactly what's going to happen in each situation.

As I mentioned earlier regarding conflict, no one answer is the “right way” to fix this issue. It takes an understanding of the story and the characters to suggest ways to strengthen the story and pull it out of the pit of clichés.

For our earlier example (the work trip), you might suggest that the hero and heroine get along or only one of them is sent to the event (absence makes the heart grow fonder). Maybe there aren't fireworks at the event (or it's the wrong kind of fireworks).

You may be reading some of those suggestions and thinking, "Aren't those *also* cliché?" Probably. There are only so many different plotlines in existence and only so many ways to tell those stories. That's why it's so important to recognize these overused scenarios—if you can't find a good way to tweak the situation, consider tweaking the characters.

### Characters

Be honest: how many times have you seen your dad, husband, or adult son cry? After more than a decade together, I've seen my husband cry twice—when his grandpa died and after one brutally emotional confrontation with a family member. Now go to the romance section of your library or bookstore and see how many of them include a hero who gets misty or teary eyed when he and the heroine finally admit their love to each other.

Cliché! (Toe pick!) (If you don't understand that reference, let me know.)

Do men really cry when they tell a woman they love her? Probably. Does it happen too often in novels? Yes! Because you're working in a genre that thrives on formula, it's crucial that the characters be unique and respond uniquely. A teary-eyed male professing his love is no longer unique. In fact, it's getting on some people's nerves.

After speaking with a few industry professionals, here are some characters they're tired of seeing:

- **Manly women:** Not merely women who are independent but women who have no room or need for men (makes you wonder how they ever ended up in a romance novel). One publishing editor said: *Heroines can be strong without being manly. And they should be. Every. Time.*
- **The crying cowboy:** Remember, the leading men are *heroes*. As one agent put it: *Did you ever see Batman cry? No. On the absolute rarest of occasions, like, say, his mother or wife dies, you may see a man cry. Other than that . . . no. Nada. Zip. Do men cry in real life? Yes. But they are real-life men, not heroes in books.*
- **Bipolar characters:** These are usually the heroines. They're laughing one minute, crying the next. It's okay if the plot puts them in a bad situation that pushes out the tears, but there needs to be a reason behind those emotional dynamics. Otherwise, they'll be labeled as drama queens.
- **Weak characters:** These are the characters who don't know what they want. They fumble through their lives and hope for the best.

- **100 percent good/bad people:** No one is completely evil or righteous, yet those characters keep popping up in books. The hero and heroine need faults, and there has to be something redeeming in the villain.
- **Not necessarily cliché, but worth noting:** When editing historical fiction, realize that people didn't start marrying for love until the Industrial Revolution. It wasn't until the twentieth century that our modern ideas of marriage began to emerge. Having characters who insist on marrying for love works in historical romance dating back to around 1850 (maybe a little earlier), but it's borderline cliché and historically inaccurate to have a hero in Colonial America insisting that he marry for love.

These types of characters have become cliché to the point of turning off agents and publishers. Can a character start off weak or emotionally bipolar? Sure, if it's part of the character arc. But to maintain that persona throughout the novel will not help the author grab anyone's attention.

As you're editing the actions, scenes, and characters in romance novels, you want to be aware of whether or not you can predict what's going to happen in the novel and how it's going to happen (and if there will be any lip biting or hair tucking while it happens). If the answer is yes, yes, yes, and yes, then there's a problem—the story is too cliché.

Cut all of the clichés? No, but be aware of them so you can help guide authors onto a less-traveled path.

### Off-the-Page Action

This is a tricky one because it's appearing more and more in published books, but it's usually in books by previously-published authors. I've spoken with other industry professionals, however, and we all agree that it's not the best writing style and it's *definitely* something to discourage new writers from doing (as it could hurt their chances of getting noticed). If you're working with published authors, point it out too—you'll only make their novels stronger.

This tricky pickle of an issue is what I refer to as off-the-page action.

Here's what happens: An author knows that she needs to start a chapter with action, so she shows her heroine going out for an early morning jog. The reader gets to see what the heroine sees and feels the impact of each step—nice showing, good use of action. But then the heroine starts thinking about the night before when she ran into the hero at the ice cream shop. The story either goes into a flashback or (even worse!) the heroine tells the whole scene by remembering it and thinking about how she felt during it.

Technically, the chapter started with action, but it's irrelevant and leads right into paragraphs (or pages) of telling (and it's usually telling important information that should have been shown, not remembered). Unless the character gets kidnapped on her run, that action has no bearing on the story, so I'm going to put it in writing here: ***It's not enough to start a chapter with action; it needs to be relevant action that adds to or strengthens the story.***

Just because other writers have gotten away with writing scenes like this doesn't mean you should let your clients do it. Point out that it's telling, and suggest ways to make the story stronger (instead of starting with the jog, show the scene at the ice cream shop).

Off-the-page action is often connected with the next potential romance-writing pitfall . . .

## Too Many POVs

In Lesson 1, I talked about using two points of view in a romance novel. I stand by that. I'm not going to change my mind (unless the industry standard changes), but I *am* going to talk about one more POV issue that tends to pop up in romance novels: the same scene from both POVs. I've noticed this pattern a few times, and I'm hoping we can stop this trend before it becomes an issue:

Chapter 1: Scene in hero's POV

Chapter 2: Scene in heroine's POV of heroine thinking about the previous scene

Chapter 3: Scene in heroine's POV

Chapter 4: Scene in hero's POV of hero thinking about the previous scene

Just in case that's confusing, here's a more detailed example:

Chapter 1: (hero's POV) in the park with the heroine

Chapter 2: (heroine's POV) cleaning the house while thinking about her time in the park with the hero

Chapter 3: (heroine's POV) runs into the hero while grocery shopping

Chapter 4: (hero's POV) putting away groceries and thinking about his time in the grocery store with the heroine

There are two main issues with this format:

1. Every other chapter is telling.
2. It's unnecessarily repeating information.

The reader doesn't need to see each character's reaction to everything that happens. Instead, the focus should be on showing those events and situations that push the plot forward. Yes, the reader will miss seeing one of the character's reactions to that particular issue, but there will be plenty of scenes and more conflict later.

Here's an example: the hero and heroine meet in the park. In the hero's POV, he confesses that he avoids dog-friendly parks because he doesn't like dogs. Many authors then separate the characters and show the heroine thinking about how much she loves dogs and doesn't know if she could ever be with a man who doesn't like them. That information is important, but the heroine's hesitation can be *shown* in the original scene without having her think about it later. Instead, while still in the park with the hero:

- she questions the hero about his dislike of dogs
- she becomes tense
- she withdraws from the hero, putting space between them

- she cuts the visit short
- she stops engaging in the conversation or her answers become shorter

Any of those options show what's happening without having to play POV ping-pong. Not only is it strong storytelling but it also will hold the reader's attention. When authors show each scene from each POV, it doesn't take long before the reader gets bored and starts skimming chapters.

If you see this type of back-and-forth happening, point it out to the author.

And that's it for Editing Romance 201! I hope this course has given you a better understanding of how to approach a romance edit, as well as given you some tools you can use to help authors strengthen their stories. There's one more round of assignments for you to complete if you'd like a certificate of completion for the class. I hope you enjoyed it!

\* \* \*

## **LESSON #4 ASSIGNMENTS**

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

For this week's assignments, you'll need a romance novel. If you're new to the genre and don't have a favorite one yet, this exercise will still work if you use a movie plot (but you should be reading a romance novel during this course!). Once you've picked your story, complete two of the following assignments.

### **Assignment #1**

Take this sample from the lesson and think of different ways you can suggest to take some of the clichés out of this story:

*Hero and heroine rub each other the wrong way. But they work at the same company, so they see each other every day. The company sends them away together for a work event. On the trip, he teaches her to relax, and he finally sees how attractive she is; she realizes that his laid-back life might not be as bad as she originally thought. Fireworks ensue, they kiss, but then they have to go back to "the real world." It doesn't take long, however, before they realize they're no longer happy in their familiar lives and what they really need is each other. Kiss, kiss. Happily ever after.*

### **Assignment #2**

Summarize a story you've read (or seen—I'll let you use Hallmark movies for this). If it was too cliché, explain why and suggest ideas for making it less predictable and more memorable. If you enjoyed it, explain how it avoided being one giant cliché.

### **Assignment #3**

There's no such thing as a 100 percent good or 100 percent evil character. Think about some of your favorite or most memorable characters. What are their good and bad qualities? Romance novels don't often have physical villains, so you may have to pick a different genre to analyze the good and bad in both the villains and the heroes. If you can't think of anyone, here are some ideas:

- Darth Vader
- Luke Skywalker
- Han Solo
- Servius Snape
- Harry Potter
- Mr. Darcy
- Elizabeth Bennett
- Belle
- The Beast

#### Assignment #4

Take these made-up characters and suggest some external conflicts that could mess up their relationships.

##### Jeff's GMC

Goal: Own a restaurant

Motivation: His dad was a chef for someone else for years, and instead of making a name for himself, he died unknown and in debt because the restaurant owner took all the credit

Conflict: He can't secure financing to purchase a building

##### Rena's GMC

Goal: Save the city's small, volunteer-run museum

Motivation: Due to health issues in college, she had to research her family heritage; she discovered decades worth of information in the city's museum and wants to preserve it for others in her situation

Conflict: Budget cuts have forced the local government to consider canceling the museum's funding