



WRITING ROMANCE

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PART 1

**PLANNING YOUR
ROMANCE NOVEL**



1

INGREDIENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL ROMANCE NOVEL

1. YOUR ROMANCE NOVEL

The romance book market has grown into a \$1.2 billion industry since Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* became a bestseller in 1847. Romance represents 54.9 percent of all popular paperback fiction sold in North America, and includes books of diverse lengths, complexity, and subgenres. See Chapter 21 for an overview of the romance marketplace.

The romance story you create may be long or short, complex or simple, sexy or chaste. Whichever area of the market you choose as your goal, you'll want to write a successful romantic story that excites both you and your readers.

2. INGREDIENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL ROMANCE

2.1 A story question

A good novel begins by stirring a question in the reader's mind: the story question. The nature of your story question is determined by the type of novel you are writing. For a romance novel, the story question is usually something like, "Will the heroine overcome her problems and find true love and partnership?" or "Can love triumph over adversity?" The story question must remain the focus throughout the story, and should never be completely answered until the end of the novel.

2.2 An empowering story

The best love stories are fantasies in which the deep emotional values of love, family, and partnership emerge victorious over lesser values. Even when the ending is unhappy, the value of love triumphs, as in the best-selling romance *Bridges of Madison County*, and the movies *Titanic* and *Casablanca*. Hero and heroine are deeply altered by their love. They emerge from their struggles more emotionally whole than they began.

2.3 A sympathetic heroine

Your reader wants to identify with your heroine, care about her, and believe in her. The heroine need not be beautiful, but it must be believable that the hero finds her attractive. Many memorable romances have been written about heroines with disabilities. Mary Balogh's historical novel *Silent Melody* tells the story of a deaf heroine's fight to win the heart of the man she loves. Bobby Hutchinson's *Draw Down the Moon* is the story of how a heroine bound by a wheelchair heals an emotionally scarred hero. In *Mermaid*, Judy Gill created a courageous yet vulnerable heroine with only one leg. Whether physically whole or disabled, your heroine needs strong personality characteristics and at least one believable and nontrivial weakness. She needs fears, dreams, hopes, a personal history, and hang-ups. She should begin the story at a change or crisis point in

her life. Depending on the category of fiction you choose, she could be any adult age.

2.4 A hero she can love

Your hero must be a man your heroine can love. Although the stereotypical hero is strong, macho, taciturn, and stubborn, many memorable romances have featured unique heroes who do not fit this profile. Like the heroine, your hero needs strengths, weaknesses, goals, and dreams. He should also begin the story at a change or crisis point in his life. Depending on the market area you are writing for, he may be either older or younger than the heroine.

2.5 An interesting initial conflict or problem

Most good books begin with an immediate initial problem or conflict, which keeps the reader turning pages until the core conflict develops. By the time the immediate problem is solved, other problems have developed. Although this initial conflict need not have the emotional depth to carry the book, it should be related to the characters and the core conflict.

2.6 An emotionally intense core conflict

As your hero and heroine come to know each other, new obstacles to their happy ending must appear, or the original conflict must grow and change. In the strongest stories, the developing conflict grows out of the characters of hero and heroine to reveal a core difficulty between them which must be resolved before they can have a successful relationship.

2.7 A plot

To be interesting, the events in your romance novel must be important to your characters. In a successful romance novel, the story or plot develops logically and naturally from character and conflict, and inevitably follows classic patterns of storytelling described by Dwight V. Swain in *Techniques of the Selling Writer*, and by Christopher Vogler in *The Writer's Journey*.

2.8 Appropriate sensuality

In a successful romance novel, the degree of sexual intimacy must be appropriate to the characters and the story. In traditional and inspirational romance novels love scenes are rarely described, while erotic romances focus strongly on the sexual aspect of love. The most powerful love scenes in romance are those in which the writer focuses on the emotions of the characters, not the clinical details of lovemaking.

2.9 Archetypes

Throughout time, certain character types appear again and again in our myths and stories, based on patterns or archetypes. Psychologist Carl Jung believed many powerful archetypes have a deep universal appeal. Mythologist Joseph Campbell described how these archetypes appear in the stories of all cultures in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, and more recently Christopher Vogler showed how these archetypes translate into modern fiction in *The Writer's Journey*.

If you have a strong story idea you care about passionately, it will inevitably contain powerful archetypes. To develop an awareness of archetypes you might use in your stories, think about the themes and characters you like reading about. Look at the descriptions of hero archetypes on the next page and ask yourself if the characters that touch you fit any archetypes.

2.10 Crisis and satisfying resolution

As you read a good novel, the obstacles to happiness and fulfillment intensify as the story progresses. As you near the end of the book, you reach a point where it seems impossible for hero and heroine to resolve their differences. This is the crisis, or black moment.

The more emotionally intense a crisis is, the more satisfying the reader will find the resolution and victory that follow. A particularly intense black moment is created when a character experiences the event he or she most fears. For example, the heroine who fears abandonment may believe the hero has abandoned and betrayed her.

Following the black moment in which hero and heroine face the reality of losing each other, they realize love is more important than the obstacles between them, and they make a sacrifice for love.

2.11 An emotionally satisfying ending

When readers pick up a romance, they hope for a happy ending. Whether the ending is happy or sad, by the time hero and heroine arrive at the last page, they must achieve personal growth. In a romance novel, the ending must be emotionally satisfying, affirming the values of love and positive relationships.

POWERFUL ARCHETYPES FOR YOUR CHARACTERS

Wild woman — She's passionately and completely herself. She's certain of her identity, of who and what she is. She never needs to wear a mask or pretend to be someone she is not.

Angry young man — He sees injustices all around him, and his life is consumed with the need to rage at these injustices, to do battle against them.

Hero/Heroine devoted to a cause — “The cause” is so important that everything else must be sacrificed to it. Friendships, ambitions, love relationships, possessions must all be given up for the cause.

Passionate artist — The artist is consumed by the need to create. Everything that happens in the artist’s life becomes grist for the mill of art. The artist might suffer deeply at the death of a friend, but at the same time will probably soon need to put that suffering into a painting, a novel, a poem, a song. He or she is able to love deeply but cannot give up art.

Weary warrior — The weary warrior is usually a man, but may be a woman. The warrior has done battle, has seen death, and

become drained by it. This deeply moral person has become cynical about his or her ability to right wrongs. The weary warrior is usually placed in a story where he or she must once again do battle, must come out of withdrawal and take up the sword. This archetype is seen in many stories of burned-out cops, weary secret agents, and crusaders returning embittered from the battles.

Earth mother — Earth mother has a bottomless well of maternal love to give. She nurtures simply by being there. She is well grounded, seems unshakable. She is fulfilled by giving to babies, husbands, friends, who all come away from her arms strengthened. Her strength is quiet and certain. Earth mother also has a male counterpart, whose nurturing tends to be more concrete.

Virginal heroine — She feels deeply, cares deeply about those around her, but shies away from intimacy with men, sensing a danger she can't define. She is unconscious of her own deeply passionate nature until it is awakened by the hero. Most publishers today are skeptical of virgin heroines, although statistics show that many individuals do remain virgins well into adulthood.

Alpha hero — See Robyn Donald's description of the Alpha hero on page 10.

Shapeshifter — This archetype describes anyone who has a pattern of changing character or appearance unexpectedly. Some shapeshifters undergo true transformations, particularly in paranormal romances. The hero of Gail Crease's *Poseidon's Kiss* is a son of the sea god Poseidon, while the heroines of Nora Roberts's *In the Garden* trilogy are all witches. Most shapeshifters, however, only appear to change. This archetype's most common appearance is in romance where the shapeshifter represents the mystery of the opposite sex, whose members may appear bewilderingly changeable.

Shadow — The shadow archetype represents suppressed or hidden, dark-side energies. Many romances feature dark, dangerous

heroes who are tamed or redeemed by love. Battles with the dark side have a strong primal appeal, evidenced by the enduring popularity of Charlotte Brontë's Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, and the recent wave of vampire heroes in paranormal romance. The weary warrior and the angry young man are both dark heroes.

Trickster — This mischievous archetype is present in all comic characters, and in characters who deliberately practice trickery for non-comic purposes, such as con men, secret agents, detectives, and undercover police heroes.

For more information about archetypes, see Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey* and Carol S. Pearson's *Awakening the Heroes Within*.

3. CAN A SUCCESSFUL ROMANCE DEAL WITH CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES?

Forty years ago, series romance publishers would seldom buy a novel that dealt with a controversial issue. Today, the extent to which a romance editor will be friendly toward a book dealing with a sensitive issue depends on the editor's interests, the market being targeted by the publisher, and the publisher's recent experiences with similar issues in the marketplace.

Here are only a few of the issues that have been tackled by romance authors:

❖ **Mary Jo Putney:** In *The Burning Point*, this best-selling author tackles the issue of physical abuse in marriage with sensitivity and hope. In *One Perfect Rose* she tackles the issue of death and dying, and in *The Spiral Path* she explores survival of childhood abuse. See Mary Jo's article on writing about controversial issues in Chapter 23.



Robyn Donald on ...

The Alpha Hero

Why is your hero so tough, hard, and outrageously masculine? You need to know, so that you understand what sent him down the Alpha road. What secret vulnerability is he hiding — especially from the heroine? An Alpha hero should directly threaten the heroine's peace of mind, her way of life, but never forget — he's a good man.

Show that he's a hero, with all that that implies — generosity of spirit, competence, confidence. Because he's a hero, he is never needlessly rude or aggressive. A hero demands high standards. Although he's a natural leader, that inborn authority and control over his emotions have been honed by intelligence, experience, and circumstances. The writer needs to know what those circumstances were, or discover them as she writes.

An Alpha hero tries to behave according to his own ideas of honor. If he fails, he has an overriding reason for his treachery — often the greater good of mankind — for which he may feel he has to sacrifice both his own happiness and that of the heroine.

There's an aura of danger about the Alpha hero. This man lives by his own rules; he's strong-willed enough to impose those rules on others, but he has a healthy respect for humanity and its laws.

At first he may not understand that the strong sexual attraction he feels for the heroine can be transmuted into love. He may begin by being cynical about emotions, but by the end of the book he's learned that he can trust the heroine with his happiness and honor. So he must have the capacity to love, to feel compassion, to learn to live with another person.

Robyn Donald has almost 70 published romance books to her credit and is coauthor with Daphne Clair of *Writing the Romantic Novel*.



- ❖ **Daphne Clair:** In *Marriage Under Fire*, a heroine, re-examining her life and her marriage, commits adultery against the hero. In *No Escape*, Clair's heroine has abandoned the daughter she loves because she's afraid of physically abusing her.
- ❖ **Judith Duncan:** In *Streets of Fire*, an ex-prostitute and an injured ex-policeman struggle to find their happy ending.
- ❖ **Laurey Bright:** *An Interrupted Marriage* tells the story of a heroine who has spent two years in a mental hospital.
- ❖ **Mary Kirk:** In *Phoenix Rising*, Mary Kirk's heroine kidnaps her son from his abusive father and goes on the run to protect him. In *Embers*, Mary Kirk's heroine returns to the childhood home where she was an incest victim. In *Miracles*, her hero has recovered from a near-death experience only to discover he's now a psychic healer.

If you are writing about a controversial issue, watch the bookshelves carefully to discover which publishers and which lines are dealing with similar issues today. Visit publishers' websites and look for Writers' Guidelines or Submission Guidelines. Many publishers will state directly whether they wish to see controversial issues in manuscript submissions.

4. YOUR OWN ROMANCE NOVEL

Because each area of the romance genre has its own unique flavor, there's probably a place for your story idea somewhere in the genre. For the best chance of publication, study market information before writing and submitting your story. Read what's being published today, and read about writing and about romance. For more resources, see Market Information on the CD-ROM.





Daphne Clair on ...

Controversial Issues in Romance Novels

Serious matters are dealt with successfully in romance by being individualized, given a personal face. One woman's efforts to overcome the effects of rape on her love life, or one man's battle with alcoholism for the sake of his relationship with a woman, described by a skilled and sincere writer, can illuminate, educate, comfort, and influence, even mobilize. A reader who cares about your characters will gain understanding of their problems in a wider sense. Stories influence readers.

"Big" issues like saving whales or rain forests tend to overwhelm the story. If the heroine has reared a pet whale from birth, or lives in the threatened rain forest, there's a germ of a story — not about whales or rain forests but about two people. Does the sheltered but imprisoned whale represent the heroine's own need for security? Or does the hero's determination to build a road and hospital in the wild arise from guilt at failing to save his son from some tropical disease? And how does that affect the love story?

The issue should be central, not an extra that could be removed without affecting the romance. But a romance is not about a problem. It is about a woman or a man with a specific problem who falls in love with someone who at first compounds the problem and ultimately helps resolve it. The relationship between two people falling in love is at the heart of every romance.

Daphne Clair has written nearly 70 romantic novels as Daphne Clair and Laurey Bright — with millions of readers worldwide — and a fat historical novel that was well-reviewed in her native New Zealand. She lives and works in the "winterless north" of New Zealand with her Netherlands-born husband, where they run a retreat for working writers. With Robyn Donald, Daphne Clair conducts romance writing workshops for aspiring writers.





INGREDIENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL ROMANCE

A successful romance ...

1. Opens with a question that stirs the reader's mind.
2. Is empowering, affirming the values of love, family, and relationship.
3. Has a sympathetic heroine the reader can care about.
4. Has a hero both the heroine and the reader can fall in love with.
5. Begins with an interesting initial conflict or problem.
6. Develops an emotionally intense core conflict.
7. Keeps hero, heroine, and reader involved in continuing complications and problems for the characters — the plot.
8. Has a level of sensuality appropriate to the characters and the story.
9. Contains at least one powerful character type the reader will recognize and identify with — an archetype.
10. Develops to a black moment when all seems lost.
11. Concludes with an ending that affirms the values of love and positive relationships, and satisfies the reader.