



The Romance Novel.

*make them want it.
then make them earn it.*

A working field guide to the romance novel: the two promises the genre never breaks, two leads with wounds worth healing, a conflict no conversation can fix, chemistry built from attention rather than adjectives, the beats of falling in love, the dark moment and the grand gesture, the mistakes that make readers stop believing, and a printable romance worksheet to plan your own.

How to use this guide.

read it once for the shape, then keep it open while you draft.

A romance novel is defined by its ending and driven by its middle. Every craft decision in this guide traces back to one job: make two people want each other, keep them honestly apart, and pay it off with a happiness the reader believes.

The structure here is Gwen Hayes's **Romancing the Beat**, the fourteen-beat romance arc. This is the genre how-to that pairs with our Romancing the Beat field guide, the beat sheet itself, and it carries one invented romance from the meet to the last page so you can watch the machine move.

CONTENTS

What a romance novel is	03
The reader's contract	04
The engine: wanting, blocked	05
The map: the shape of falling in love	06
Two leads, two wounds	07
A conflict that is true	08
Chemistry on the page	09
The beats of falling in love	10
Tropes, heat, and point of view	11
The dark moment and the gesture	12
Seven ways romance goes wrong	13
Your romance worksheet (printable)	14
Keep going	15

What a romance novel is.

two promises, and everything else is a choice.

A romance novel makes two promises, and it is those promises, not the kissing, that define the genre. The first is that the **central love story is the plot**. Not a subplot, not a reward handed out after the real story ends, but the spine the book hangs on; take the relationship out and there is no novel left. The second is the ending. A romance ends with the couple together, in a **happily ever after** or a **happy for now** the reader believes will hold. Break either promise and you may have written a fine novel, but you have not written a romance.

Everything else is negotiable. Contemporary or historical, sweet or explicit, a small town or a ballroom, a wedding at the end or two people simply deciding to try. The freedom of the genre lives in those choices, and its discipline lives in the two promises. Readers pick up a romance knowing how it ends. The pleasure is not whether these two people get there but how much it will cost them.

TWO PROMISES • ONE CHOICE

- **The love story is the plot.** The relationship drives every major turn. If it could be cut, it is a subplot.
- **The ending is happy.** Together, and the reader trusts it. Ever after or for now, but never ambiguous.
- **Everything else is a choice.** Subgenre, setting, heat level, tropes, point of view. Pick each on purpose.

THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION

A romance is a novel whose plot is two people falling in love against an obstacle that is real, ending with them together in a happiness the reader believes they have earned.

The reader's contract.

the wanting, the obstacle, and the ending they already know.

The first clause is **the wanting**. The reader has come to feel two people pulled toward each other, and to feel it on the page, in what the leads notice, resist, and cannot stop thinking about.

Romance readers are fluent in this. They can tell within a chapter whether the pull is real or whether the author is simply asserting that it exists.

The second clause is **the obstacle**. Wanting alone is not a book. Something must stand between these two people, and the reader's trust depends on that something being true. If the leads could resolve it over coffee, the reader feels the author's hand holding them apart, and every chapter after that reads as stalling.

The third clause is the strangest, and it is the genre's signature. **The reader already knows the ending**. They chose this book because the couple will be together on the last page. That is not a spoiler; it is the deal. So the suspense of a romance is never whether but how, and at what cost, and whether the writer can make a foregone conclusion feel, in the final chapters, genuinely in doubt.

THE COFFEE TEST

For every obstacle keeping your leads apart, ask whether one honest conversation would dissolve it. If yes, it is a misunderstanding, not a conflict, and the reader will resent every page spent avoiding that conversation.

The engine: wanting, blocked.

two people who want each other, and a reason that holds.

Every romance runs on the same engine. Two people **want** each other, and something **true** keeps them from having it. The wanting has to be built, not announced; the reader should feel the pull in the way each lead watches the other before either admits it. And the block has to hold. It is usually two things braided together. An external obstacle, the situation that makes them impossible, and an internal one, the wound each carries that makes them believe love is not safe.

The internal obstacle is the one that matters most, because the external one will eventually give. Each lead needs a **wound**, an old hurt, and a **false belief** about love that grew out of it. The romance is the process of that belief being tested, defended, and finally surrendered. When the false belief falls, the external obstacle becomes solvable. Not before. That order is the whole structure of the genre.

THREE THINGS RUNNING AT ONCE

- **Wanting:** shown in attention, not stated. What each lead notices about the other is the pull.
- **The external block:** a situation that makes them impossible, and stays so until something is given up.
- **The internal block:** a false belief about love in each lead, the real reason they cannot yet say yes.

THE RUNNING EXAMPLE • THE OFF SEASON

*Throughout this guide we follow one invented contemporary romance, working title **The Off Season**. Ines Calloway comes home to Marrow Point, a fading harbor town on the Maine coast, to sell her late father's boatyard by spring and pay for her mother's care. Tomas Reyes holds the yard's lease, builds wooden boats there, and is finishing the last hull her father commissioned. She needs it sold. He needs it kept. Both of them are right, and they are living forty feet apart until the thaw.*

The shape of falling in love.

setup, falling, retreating, and fighting for it.

The arc used here is **Romancing the Beat**, Gwen Hayes's fourteen-beat romance structure, grouped into four phases. It is the beat sheet romance writers reach for most, and this guide is the genre how-to that pairs with our **Romancing the Beat** field guide, which walks the beats themselves. Read the map as an emotional shape, not a checklist.

SETUP

01	Introduce the Leads	~4%
02	The Meet	~9%
03	No Way / Adhesion	~14%

FALLING IN LOVE

04	Adventures in Love	~28%
05	Inkling of Doubt	~36%
06	Deepening Desire	~45%
07	Midpoint of Love	~50%

RETREATING FROM LOVE

08	Doubts Resurface	~62%
09	Retreat	~70%
10	Breaking Point	~76%
11	The Dark Night	~83%

FIGHTING FOR LOVE

12	Wake-Up	~89%
13	Grand Gesture	~95%
14	Happily Ever After	100%

The percentages are targets, not laws. What matters is the shape: the leads come together, the wounds push them apart, and the last movement is each of them choosing the other at a price. The fourteen beats live as a free fill-in planner named on the last page.

Two leads, two wounds.

each one wrong about love in a way the other will test.

A romance needs two leads the reader can love separately before it asks them to love each other. Each needs a life the reader believes, work, people, a place, and each needs a **wound**: an old injury that taught them something false about love. Not a tragic backstory for its own sake, but a specific hurt with a specific lesson attached. The lesson is the false belief, and the false belief is what the whole book will argue with.

The craft is in the pairing. The two wounds should not be identical; they should fit, so that each lead is precisely the person who will trigger the other's fear and, eventually, prove it wrong. A lead who believes everyone leaves should fall for someone who is packing. A lead who believes love makes you small should fall for someone who takes up room. The wounds are the romance. Choose them before you choose the meet.

BUILD TWO PEOPLE WORTH THE TROUBLE

- Give each a life. Work, friends, a place, and a want that has nothing to do with the other lead.
- Name the wound and its lesson. One old hurt, one false belief about love that came out of it.
- Fit the wounds. Each lead should be the exact person who will set off the other's fear.

THE OFF SEASON • THE WOUNDS

Ines grew up second to the yard. Her father chose the work every time, and the lesson she took was that love means being fit in around someone's real life. Her false belief: you get put somewhere, you do not get chosen. Tomas is the one who stays. His father drowned off the point, his mother moved inland, the woman he nearly married left for Boston, and he never asked any of them not to. His false belief: asking someone to stay is how you lose them. She is packing. He will not ask.

A conflict that is true.

no conversation fixes it. someone has to give something up.

The obstacle between your leads must be **true**, which means it survives honesty. A misunderstanding is a conflict that dies the moment two people speak plainly, and readers know it; they spend the middle of such books waiting for the conversation and blaming the author for withholding it. A true conflict is different. Both leads can lay every card on the table and the problem is still there, because what they want is genuinely incompatible, or because loving each other costs one of them something real.

The test is whether the obstacle can be resolved by **information** or only by **sacrifice**. If a fact, once revealed, would end the standoff, you have a misunderstanding; reveal it early and find the real conflict underneath. If the standoff ends only when somebody gives up a thing they were right to want, you have a romance. The obstacle should also press on the wounds. The best external conflict is the one that seems to prove each lead's false belief correct.

MAKE THE OBSTACLE HOLD

- Run the coffee test. If one honest talk dissolves it, it is not the conflict. Find what is underneath.
- Make both of them right. The reader should be unable to say which lead ought to give in.
- Aim it at the wound. Let the situation look, from inside each lead, like proof that love is unsafe.

THE OFF SEASON • THE CONFLICT

Ines and Tomas can tell each other everything, and it changes nothing. The developer's offer covers her mother's care for years; his lease is the only thing standing between Marrow Point and a marina of condos. She is not wrong to sell. He is not wrong to fight it. And the situation reads, to each of them, like the old lesson confirmed. To Ines, he is one more man who would keep her only if she fit around his work. To Tomas, she is one more person already halfway to the highway.

Chemistry on the page.

what they notice, what they resist, what they cannot stop replaying.

Chemistry is not a quality two characters have. It is something the prose **does**, and it is built almost entirely out of attention. A lead who wants someone notices them: the specific way they hold a cup, the thing they say that is not quite a joke, the exact moment their face changes. Then they resist the noticing, argue with it, and replay it later when they should be thinking about something else. That loop, notice, resist, replay, is the pull, and it belongs on the page in concrete detail, scene after scene.

The failure mode is assertion. “She felt an undeniable attraction” tells the reader a pull exists and gives them nothing to feel. Replace the label with the evidence. What did she see? What did she nearly say? What did he do with his hands, and why is she still thinking about it at midnight? Give the reader the same sensory data the lead is drowning in and let them arrive at attraction on their own. Banter, proximity, and touch all work, but attention is the engine under every one of them.

SHOW THE PULL

- Notice specifically. One precise physical detail beats a paragraph of adjectives about eyes.
- Resist on the page. Let the lead argue with the attraction; the argument is the proof it exists.
- Replay it later. The scene the lead cannot stop rerunning is the scene the reader believes.

WATCH OUT

Attraction told is attraction lost. “The tension between them was electric” is a promissory note the prose never cashes. Every time you write a label like chemistry, spark, or tension, delete it and write the three concrete things the viewpoint character noticed instead. If you cannot name three, the scene has no chemistry yet, and no adjective will supply it.

The beats of falling in love.

adhesion, adventure, doubt, and the midpoint that changes the terms.

Falling in love has a structure, and it is not a straight line up. After the meet, something **binds** the leads together despite their reluctance; that adhesion is what forces proximity when either would rather walk. Then come the adventures, the stretch where they are thrown together, begin to see each other clearly, and start to enjoy it against their better judgment. Somewhere in here an **inkling of doubt** arrives, a first flicker of the wound, and desire deepens anyway.

The **midpoint** is where the terms change. It is usually the first real admission, a kiss, a night, a confession of something true, and it feels like a win. It is also the point of no return. After it, the leads cannot pretend they are indifferent, so the wounds, which were manageable when nothing was at stake, become dangerous. Everything before the midpoint is the pull; everything after it is the price. Build the first half so the second half has something to lose.

SHAPE THE FALL

- Bind them early. Give the leads a reason they cannot simply leave each other alone.
- Let the doubt flicker. Plant the wound's first objection before the joy peaks, not after.
- Make the midpoint cost. The first real yes should raise the stakes, not settle them.

THE OFF SEASON • FALLING

Adhesion is the boat. Her father's commission is half paid, so the sale cannot close until the hull is finished, and Tomas cannot finish it without the plans locked in her office. Their adventures are the winter yard. She learns to steam a plank; he learns she kept the books for a restaurant that failed. Inkling of doubt: he catches her measuring the office for the listing photos. Midpoint: the night the pipes freeze, she sleeps in the loft, and by three in the morning neither of them is pretending anymore.

Tropes, heat, and point of view.

a trope is a promise. keep it honestly, then make it yours.

A **trope** is a promise made in the pitch. Enemies to lovers promises real antagonism that turns into respect before it turns into love. Second chance promises a past that still hurts and an account that must be settled. Forced proximity promises a situation nobody can walk away from. Readers choose tropes the way they choose cuisines, and they can tell when the label is on the jar but not in it. Use a trope by delivering exactly what it promises, and make it fresh in the specifics rather than by dodging the promise.

Heat level and **subgenre** are choices too, and neither is a measure of seriousness. Closed door, open door, and everything between are all romance if the two promises hold. Decide early and keep faith with it; a reader who bought sweet feels cheated by explicit, and the reverse. **Dual point of view** is the genre's most common camera because the reader wants both wounds from the inside. If you use it, give each lead a distinct voice and a distinct blindness, and switch on purpose, when the other head is where the pain is.

CHOOSE ON PURPOSE

- Deliver the trope. Whatever the label promises, the scenes must actually contain it.
- Set the heat and hold it. The level is a contract with the reader, not a dial to turn mid-book.
- Split the camera with intent. Two viewpoints means two wounds, two voices, two blind spots.

WATCH OUT

A trope is not a plot. Forced proximity puts two people in a room; it does not tell you why they cannot leave it emotionally. Enemies to lovers does not excuse a love interest who is simply cruel. If the trope is doing all the work, the wounds and the conflict are not yet on the page, and the book will read like a template with names typed in.

The dark moment and the gesture.

the wound wins, then someone pays to prove it wrong.

The **dark moment** is the point where the false belief wins. Something happens, each lead reads it through the wound, and they retreat; the retreat feels, from inside, like wisdom. The rule is that the break must grow from the wounds the book has planted, not from a new misunderstanding imported for the climax. If the reader can see it coming from the leads' own flaws and still cannot stop it, it lands. If it arrives out of nowhere, it reads as the author needing a third act.

The **grand gesture** is proof, not a speech. At least one lead must act against their false belief at a real cost, and the action has to be the thing the wound said never to do. A declaration says the belief has changed. A gesture shows it, and the reader only believes what is shown. Then the ending: a happiness demonstrated, not announced, with the external obstacle resolved because someone gave something up, and a final image that proves the two people are different than they were.

EARN THE LAST PAGE

- Break them with the wound. The dark moment is the false belief winning, not a new problem.
- Make the gesture cost. The act must be the exact thing the wound forbade, done anyway.
- Prove the ending. Show the changed people in action; do not let a speech do the work.

THE OFF SEASON • THE ENDING

Dark moment: the developer raises the offer, Ines signs the letter of intent, and Tomas, who does not ask people to stay, says only that the hull will be done by the closing. She hears what she has always heard.

Wake-up: a note in her father's plans, the boat left unnamed, the naming left to her. Grand gesture: Tomas walks into the closing and asks her, in front of the buyer, to stay, carrying a cooperative offer from the town's boat owners that covers her mother's care and costs him his savings. She tears up the letter. She names the boat.

Seven ways romance goes wrong.

read this list again at the end of every draft.

- **1. Insta-love.** Leads who want each other before the reader has seen a reason why. Fix: build the pull out of attention across several scenes, and let the reader fall a page before the lead does.
- **2. The fixable misunderstanding.** A conflict one honest conversation would end. Fix: run the coffee test, then find the sacrifice underneath and make that the obstacle the whole book turns on.
- **3. The cruel love interest.** A lead whose coldness is never accounted for or redeemed. Fix: put a wound behind every hard edge, and write the scene where the reader watches it visibly change.
- **4. Telling the chemistry.** Sparks, tension, and heat asserted in labels. Fix: cut the label and write the three concrete things the viewpoint character noticed in its place.
- **5. The dark moment from nowhere.** A break-up imported to supply a third act. Fix: grow it from the false beliefs planted on page one, so the reader sees it coming and still aches.
- **6. A lead with no life.** A partner who exists only when the other is in the room. Fix: give each lead work, people, and a want that predates the romance and survives it.
- **7. The ending by declaration.** A speech standing where proof should be. Fix: make the grand gesture an action against the wound, at a cost, and show the changed couple in motion.

THE MASTER DIAGNOSTIC

For any scene that feels flat, ask two questions. What does each lead want from the other in this room, and which false belief is the scene testing? If neither wound is under pressure and nobody wants anything, that is the scene the draft can spare.

Your romance worksheet.

print this page. the wounds first, then the beats.

THE TWO PROMISES (SUBGENRE +
ENDING)

WHAT BINDS THEM (ADHESION)

LEAD ONE + WOUND + FALSE BELIEF

MIDPOINT OF LOVE

LEAD TWO + WOUND + FALSE BELIEF

THE DARK MOMENT (WHICH WOUND WINS)

THE MEET

THE GRAND GESTURE (WHAT IT COSTS)

THE TRUE OBSTACLE (NOT FIXABLE BY
TALK)

HEAT LEVEL + TROPE + POINT OF VIEW

Keep going.

the paper version ends here. the fill-in version doesn't.

The fourteen beats this guide is built on, Gwen Hayes's *Romancing the Beat*, live as a **free fill-in planner** at One More Draft. Every beat from the meet to the happily ever after, with a text box under each one that saves as you type, so you can read a beat, draft your couple's version of it on the spot, and walk away with a full romance outline in an afternoon.

onemoredraft.com/guides/romancing-the-beat

One More Draft is a complete workshop for writers: a distraction-free manuscript editor with professional export, story planning tools for characters, beats, and worlds, and Quill, your resident story editor, whenever you want a second pair of eyes. The editor is free, and there is a free desktop app for Windows.

MORE FREE FIELD GUIDES

- *Romancing the Beat* · the fourteen-beat romance structure this guide pairs with
- *How to Write a Romantasy Novel* · the love story braided with a fantasy plot
- *Save the Cat for Novels* · the fifteen-beat commercial standard
- *Three-Act Structure* · the load-bearing classic
- *How to Outline a Novel* · from blank page to working plan

All free, all fill-in-able, at **onemoredraft.com/guides**.



ONE MORE DRAFT

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