



Romancing the Beat.

*the romance arc,
beat by beat.*

A complete working guide to Gwen Hayes's romance beat sheet: the four phases, all fourteen beats, a worked example carried from first meet to happily ever after, the mistakes that sink romance drafts, and a printable beat sheet to plan your own.

How to use this guide.

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

Romancing the Beat is a story structure created by author and editor **Gwen Hayes**, from her book *Romancing the Beat: Story Structure for Romance Novels* (2016). It has become the default beat sheet of the romance genre because it is built on one clarifying idea. In a romance, **the relationship is the plot**. Everything else, however thrilling, is scaffolding around two people learning to love each other.

This guide is One More Draft's independent, expanded walkthrough of what each beat is for, how to write it, where drafts usually go wrong, and a running example so you can watch the machinery move. It is not affiliated with or endorsed by Gwen Hayes. If this structure clicks for you, her book is short, funny, and worth owning.

Percentages throughout are targets, not laws. A beat that lands at 47% instead of 50% breaks nothing. What matters is the order and the logic. Each beat exists because the one before it made it necessary.

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Why romance structure is different.

most frameworks track a goal. this one tracks a relationship.

Nearly every classic structure - three acts, the Hero's Journey, Save the Cat - is built around a protagonist pursuing an external goal against escalating obstacles. You can write a wonderful romance inside those frames, but they keep pointing your attention at the wrong thing: the heist, the case, the crown. In romance, readers are not turning pages to find out whether the bakery gets saved. They are turning pages to feel two people fall in love, fall apart, and choose each other anyway.

Romancing the Beat solves this by making **the emotional arc the A-plot**. Its beats are not events in the world; they are states of the relationship. The Meet, the Midpoint of Love, the Breaking Point. Each one names where the couple stands, not what explodes. External plot still exists and still matters, but it is demoted to a delivery system. Its job is to force the next relationship beat to happen.

Two consequences follow, and they explain almost everything about how this framework works:

- **The story runs on interiority.** The real obstacles are not rivals or storms; they are the wounds the leads carry into the book. The plot's job is to press on those wounds at exactly the wrong moments.
- **The ending is a promise, not a surprise.** Romance readers know the couple ends up together; the genre guarantees an emotionally satisfying ending. Suspense in romance is never *whether*. It is *how*, and *at what cost*, and *who will these two have to become first*.

That guaranteed ending is sometimes treated as a limitation. It is the opposite. Because the destination is fixed, every ounce of tension has to come from character. That is why romance is, structurally, one of the hardest genres to write well, and why a beat sheet built for it is worth learning properly.

THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION

Two people with opposing emotional wounds are forced together, fall in love, are torn apart by those same wounds, and must each grow before they can earn the ending the reader was promised.

The engine: wounds & false beliefs.

before you place a single beat, build the two things that power all fourteen.

Every beat in this framework draws its energy from the same source. Each lead enters the story carrying a **wound** (something that happened) and a **false belief about love** (the wrong lesson they took from it). The wound is backstory; the false belief is present tense. It shapes how they flirt, fight, apologize, and flee.

Design the two false beliefs so they **collide**. If one lead believes *getting close means getting abandoned* and the other believes *being needed is the same as being loved*, every scene between them is a trap and a cure at once. This collision is what people mean when they say a couple has chemistry on the page. The leads are uniquely qualified to break each other's hearts, and uniquely qualified to heal them.

BUILD EACH LEAD IN FOUR LINES

- **Wound:** the specific event that taught them the wrong lesson. Specific beats general. Not "a bad breakup" but "she found the goodbye letter before he wrote it."
- **False belief:** the rule they live by now, phrased as advice they would actually give. "Never be the one who loves more."
- **Defense:** the visible behavior the belief produces, the armor. Workaholism, jokes, exits, control.
- **Need:** the true thing love will have to teach them. It is always roughly the opposite of the false belief.

THE RUNNING EXAMPLE • MEET MAYA AND BEN

Throughout this guide we will follow one invented romance so you can watch each beat do its work. **Maya** is a wedding photographer who shot four hundred weddings and stopped believing in the institution around number two hundred, when her parents divorced two weeks after she photographed their thirtieth-anniversary vow renewal. False belief: love is a performance, and she is safest behind the camera. **Ben** is a chef who lost his restaurant when his business partner, also his fiancée, walked out with the investors. False belief: wanting something out loud is how you lose it, so he never says what he wants. Her armor is distance dressed up as professionalism; his is easygoing agreeableness that commits to nothing. Each one's defense is aimed exactly at the other's wound. They are a disaster. They are perfect.

Four phases, fourteen beats.

half the book falls in love. half the book fights for it.

The frame splits cleanly at the midpoint. Phases one and two bring the couple together; phases three and four tear them apart and rebuild them. If your draft feels baggy, check this seam first. The high point of togetherness belongs at 50%, and everything after it should be earning the ending, not repeating the courtship.

PHASE ONE • SETUP

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

PHASE TWO • FALLING IN LOVE

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

PHASE THREE • RETREATING FROM LOVE

08	Doubts Resurface	~62%
09	Retreat	~70%
10	Breaking Point	~76%

PHASE FOUR • FIGHTING FOR LOVE

11	The Dark Night	~83%
12	Wake-Up	~89%
13	Grand Gesture	~95%
14	Happily Ever After	100%

BEAT 01

TARGET ~4%

Introduce the Leads.

two whole people, two broken beliefs, zero couple.

Before the leads can collide, the reader needs a snapshot of each one alone: their world, their competence, and - crucially - their false belief in action. This is not a resume. It is a demonstration of the exact emotional shape that love is going to have to change. Show each lead doing the thing their armor makes them do, and let the reader sense the cost of it even if the character can't.

Give each lead something to want that is not the other person. A career stake, a family obligation, a deadline. This exterior want will carry scenes later, and its collision with the relationship is where your third act pressure comes from.

ON THE PAGE

- Open each lead mid-motion in their own life, not in reflection. The false belief should be visible in behavior before it is ever named.
- Plant the wound only in glimpses. A photo turned face down, a name nobody says. Full backstory this early kills momentum.
- Make both leads competent and likeable in their own arena. Readers forgive armor; they do not forgive dullness.

WATCH OUT

Spending three chapters on setup. In genre romance the reader picked up the book for the couple; if the leads have not met by 10%, the story reads as stalling.

MAYA & BEN

Maya delivers a flawless wedding gallery and declines, again, the couple's invitation to stay for dinner: "I'm background, that's the job." Ben cooks a stunning tasting menu for a food critic and lets his sous-chef take the credit, because if it isn't his, it can't be taken from him.

BEAT 02

TARGET ~9%

The Meet.

sparks are mandatory. liking each other is not.

The leads collide, and the reader must feel voltage. Attraction, friction, fascination, or all three at once. The meet-cute does not need to be cute. It needs to be **characteristic**. Each lead should meet the other in a way only these two people could, with both false beliefs already distorting the encounter.

The classic mistake is writing the meet as a scene about circumstances (the spilled coffee, the double-booked venue) instead of a scene about perception. What matters is what each lead *notices* about the other, because what they notice tells the reader what their wound is scanning for. Let each lead clock something the other person hides from everyone else. That flash of being **seen** - unwelcome, destabilizing - is the actual spark.

ON THE PAGE

- Put both leads at slight disadvantage. Nobody flirts well off-balance, and off-balance is where armor slips.
- Write the scene twice in your notes, once from each POV, even if only one makes the book. You need to know what both wounds registered.
- End the meet unresolved. An unfinished sentence, an unpaid debt, a name not gotten. Give the reader a reason these two must occupy a scene again.

WATCH OUT

Instant comfortable rapport. If the leads get along perfectly at 9%, you have no book. The chemistry should read as a problem for both of them.

MAYA & BEN

A power cut ruins a reception. Maya keeps shooting by candlelight; Ben rebuilds dinner on camp stoves. They spend four hours running the same crisis, arguing about logistics, and being appallingly good together. He notices she only smiles behind the camera. She notices he feeds everyone and eats standing up, alone.

BEAT 03

TARGET ~14%

No Way / Adhesion.

a reason they can't. a reason they must.

This beat is two gears that must both engage. **No Way** is each lead's reason the relationship is impossible. The strongest version is internal, flowing straight from the false belief, merely dressed up in circumstance. **Adhesion** is the force that glues them into proximity anyway: a contract, a family, a shared crisis, a small town, a fake engagement. The whole middle of your book is powered by this glue, so make it strong, specific, and hard to walk away from.

Test your adhesion with one question. *If the leads stopped wanting to see each other, would they still have to?* If the answer is no, scenes in phase two will start requiring coincidence, and readers can smell coincidence. Obligation, geography, and money are stickier than whim.

ON THE PAGE

- Voice the "no way" in-character. A guarded lead thinks it; a prickly one says it out loud, to the other's face.
- Make the adhesion asymmetric if you can. One lead needs this arrangement more, which creates a power tilt worth mining for tension.
- Seal the beat with a commitment device: papers signed, keys handed over, an announcement made. Burn the exits.

WATCH OUT

An obstacle that one honest conversation would dissolve. If readers can fix your "no way" in a sentence, it is not an obstacle; it is a misunderstanding wearing a trench coat.

MAYA & BEN

The venue that hosted the blackout wedding signs them both: a full summer season, twelve weddings, one preferred-vendor contract with a joint bonus neither can afford to lose. Maya needs the bonus to buy out her studio lease; Ben needs the season to fund reopening a restaurant. No way: she doesn't date believers in weddings, and he can't want anything out loud. Adhesion: twelve Saturdays, one kitchen, one contract.

BEAT 04

TARGET ~28%

Adventures in Love.

the fun and games your reader came for.

This is the longest stretch in the framework, and it is the genre's showcase. The leads spend time together and attraction deepens through **shared experience**. Banter, competence, rescue-and-be-rescued, the slow accumulation of inside jokes. If your book was pitched on a trope (enemies to lovers, forced proximity, grumpy and sunshine), this is where that trope pays out scene after scene.

The craft secret is that these scenes are not filler between beats; each one should move a private frontier. Track **firsts**: first laugh, first touch, first secret told, first defense lowered. A first is a plot event in this genre. If a scene contains no first and presses no wound, cut it or fold it into one that does.

ON THE PAGE

- Alternate arenas. Show the couple in his world, her world, and neutral ground; each setting lets a different side of each lead lead.
- Let the armor work *for* the couple sometimes. Her distance reads as cool under pressure, his agreeableness as kindness. We fall for people's defenses before their depths.
- Keep the external plot ticking underneath (the season, the case, the scheme) so the romance never has to generate its own excuses to meet.

WATCH OUT

A montage where scenes are interchangeable. If you could shuffle your adventure scenes into any order, they are not escalating. Each first should make the next one possible.

MAYA & BEN

Wedding by wedding, they become a machine: she learns he plates dessert to match her golden-hour schedule, he learns she skips every dinner she shoots. He starts leaving her a plate. First: she eats in his kitchen, camera down. First: he tells her what he'd cook on his own menu, out loud, and doesn't laugh it off.

BEAT 05

TARGET ~36%

Inkling of Doubt.

the first crack, right when it's going well.

Just as the fun crests, something whispers *this can't last*. The inkling is small by design. A reminder of the wound, a glimpse of the ex, an overheard remark, a deadline remembered. Its job is not to damage the relationship yet. Its job is to remind one lead (or both) that their false belief exists and has not gone anywhere, and to make the reader's stomach drop half an inch.

Timing is the craft here. The doubt lands hardest immediately after a moment of real closeness, because that is when the wound feels most exposed. Happiness, to a wounded character, is threat. It means there is now something to lose. Write the inkling as the character's armor snapping one buckle back into place.

ON THE PAGE

- Keep it deniable. The lead should be able to explain the moment away - and do so, out loud or internally, a little too quickly.
- Source the doubt from the false belief, not from the other lead misbehaving. The threat is internal weather, not a plot villain.
- Show a micro-withdrawal afterward: a canceled coffee, a formal text, one step back that the other lead notices and doesn't name.

WATCH OUT

Skipping this beat entirely. Without the inkling, the midpoint high reads naive and the later collapse reads unforeshadowed. Doubt planted here is what makes the breakup land as tragic instead of arbitrary.

MAYA & BEN

A groom's toast quotes the exact vow Maya's father made at the renewal ceremony. She shoots the rest of the night flawlessly and drives home without saying goodbye to the kitchen. Ben notices the missing goodbye. He tells himself it's nothing, which is what he tells himself about everything he wants.

BEAT 06

TARGET ~45%

Deepening Desire.

doubt made it scary. they lean in anyway.

Despite the inkling, the bond strengthens, and this beat is where the relationship graduates from chemistry to **intimacy**. The currency here is vulnerability, exchanged deliberately: a wound shown on purpose, a story never told before, help accepted by someone who never accepts help. Desire deepens not because the leads are more attracted, but because being known turns out to feel better than being safe.

Make the exchange reciprocal but not simultaneous. One lead risks first; the other lead's answer - matching the risk, honoring it, keeping it - is what converts a confession into a bond. In a slow burn, this beat carries enormous physical charge precisely because nothing is consummated; in a higher-heat book, this is often where physical intimacy escalates in step with the emotional kind.

ON THE PAGE

- Trade secrets, not summaries. A lead who narrates their trauma tidily is still performing; let it come out sideways, in fragments, at a bad time.
- Let each lead do the thing their false belief forbids, once, in a small dose. The reader should see the person they could become.
- Anchor the scene somewhere private that belongs to one of them. Territory shared is trust made visible.

WATCH OUT

Healing the wound here. The leads glimpse what intimacy could be; they do not get to keep it yet. If the false beliefs dissolve at 45%, your third act has nothing to break.

MAYA & BEN

After a rained-out rehearsal dinner, Ben cooks the menu from his dead restaurant - the one he never talks about - just for her, and says its name out loud. Maya photographs him in his own kitchen and, for the first time in years, shows someone the personal work on her camera roll: four hundred weddings' worth of the small true moments she never sells.

BEAT 07

TARGET ~50%

Midpoint of Love.

the high point. they are, for now, together.

At the book's exact center, the leads commit, emotionally, physically, or both. This is the summit of the falling-in-love half, a scene of joy, union, and (false) arrival. Both leads believe, sincerely, that the hard part is over. The reader, who has been watching the wounds this whole time, knows better. That gap between the couple's happiness and the reader's dread is the finest tension the genre produces.

Commit fully to the joy. Writers who fear sentimentality rush this scene, and it is the single most expensive scene to rush. Everything in phase three hurts in proportion to how good this moment was. Whatever form the commitment takes at your book's heat level - a first kiss, a first night, the word "us" - let it be earned, specific, and unhedged.

ON THE PAGE

- Echo the Meet. Same setting, same gesture, same joke - transformed. The distance between beat 2 and beat 7 is the proof of the arc.
- Give each lead a moment of acting *against* their false belief and feeling free, not terrified. That freedom is the bait the third act will snatch away.
- End on a small overreach, a promise slightly bigger than either can keep yet. "Stay." "Move in." "After the season, let's..." It will come due.

WATCH OUT

Solving the external plot here too. Keep the contract, the season, the scheme alive past the midpoint; you will need its pressure to detonate the Breaking Point.

MAYA & BEN

Mid-season, a wedding falls through and they get a Saturday off. Ben cooks for no one but her; Maya leaves the camera at home - her first unphotographed day in nine years. He asks her to stay. She stays. Neither of them performs anything, wants anything quietly, or eats standing up.

BEAT 08

TARGET ~62%

Doubts Resurface.

the wounds wake up and start whispering.

The honeymoon curdles - slowly. The false beliefs, humiliated at the midpoint, reassert themselves, and the thing each lead fears about love starts to look *true*. This is the framework's most psychologically delicate stretch. Nothing needs to go outwardly wrong for everything to start going inwardly wrong. Closeness itself supplies the threat, because closeness raises the stakes of loss.

Let external plot conspire with internal weather. The deadline nears, the ex resurfaces, the bonus is threatened, and every event arrives pre-distorted by the wound's interpretation. He is quiet one evening; she reads it as the beginning of the end. She works late; he reads it as proof that wanting her was the mistake. The leads are not fighting each other. They are each fighting a ghost, using the other person's face.

ON THE PAGE

- Write misreadings, not misdeeds. Each lead's behavior stays innocent; only the interpretation turns toxic. That keeps both sympathetic.
- Reprise images from phase two, soured. The shared plate gone cold, the inside joke that lands wrong. Reuse is resonance.
- Escalate in silences. What the leads stop saying to each other is the plot now.

WATCH OUT

Importing a third-party villain to cause the trouble. If a scheming rival breaks the couple, the couple never has to grow - and the reader's promised payoff (healed wounds) evaporates.

MAYA & BEN

A magazine offers Ben's restaurant revival a feature, contingent on a business plan he keeps not sending, because naming the dream aloud is unbearable. Maya watches him shrink from it and hears her father's voice: they always stop performing eventually. She books three out-of-town shoots she doesn't need. He lets her, agreeably. Neither asks the only question that matters.

BEAT 09

TARGET ~70%

Retreat.

old defenses win. the armor goes back on.

One or both leads pull back to protect themselves. This is doubt converted into **behavior**: the walls from chapter one rebuilt higher, because now they know exactly what they are keeping out. The professional distance returns. The jokes return. The relationship is still officially alive, but one lead is already conducting its funeral in private.

The retreat should be in-character and armor-specific. A runner runs; a controller schedules the feelings away; a pleaser agrees with everything and vanishes inside the agreement. The reader recognizes the defense from phase one, which is what makes this beat quietly devastating. All that growth, apparently undone. Show the retreating lead being *rewarded* by the armor too. It works; that is why they built it. Distance does feel safer. That is the trap.

ON THE PAGE

- Contrast is the tool. Place a retreat scene beside its phase-two mirror. The same kitchen, now formal. The same banter, now performed.
- Let the other lead reach out once, and let the reaching fail - not cruelly, just insufficiently. Doors close on hinges, not slams.
- Track POV interiority tightly: the retreating lead should narrate the pullback as reasonableness, maturity, "being realistic."

WATCH OUT

Making the retreat look like indifference. The reader must see the love still burning under the armor - retreat is fear wearing sensible clothes, not the absence of feeling.

MAYA & BEN

Maya starts editing at her studio again instead of his kitchen table. Ben says that makes sense, the season's busy. Agreeable to the last. He stops leaving her a plate. She notices, photographs the empty counter without knowing why, and files the shot in the folder she never shows anyone.

BEAT 10

TARGET ~76%

Breaking Point.

the implosion. the false beliefs appear confirmed.

The relationship collapses. Something forces the simmering retreat into open rupture - a discovered secret, an ultimatum, the external plot detonating at last - and the leads separate. The essential craft requirement is that the break be caused by **the wounds**, with the external event as trigger rather than cause. Done right, both leads behave badly in ways the reader completely understands, and both walk away certain their false belief was right all along. See? Love ends. See? Wanting loses.

Write it as tragedy, not fault. If one lead is simply wrong or simply cruel, the reunion will require groveling instead of growth. The best breaking points are ones where each lead, given their wound, could not have done otherwise, which is exactly why each must change before the end.

ON THE PAGE

- Pay off the midpoint's overreached promise here. The thing they swore at 50% is precisely what breaks at 76%.
- Let each lead say one true thing and one unforgivable-sounding thing. Truth makes it hurt; excess makes it stick.
- Sever the adhesion too if you can. Season over, contract done, case closed. Nothing external requires them to meet again. Whatever brings them back must be chosen.

WATCH OUT

The pure misunderstanding breakup - one overheard sentence, no conversation, book over. Readers call this the "big misunderstanding" for a reason. A breakup survives scrutiny only if talking it out would have been genuinely impossible for these two wounded people.

MAYA & BEN

Season finale wedding. The magazine editor is there; Ben still hasn't sent the plan. Maya, terrified of watching him let the dream die the way her parents let theirs, submits it for him. For the first time all book, Ben stops being agreeable: she took the one thing he hadn't risked and risked it without him. Maya hears only that she is, again, background. Two true wounds, one kitchen, no survivors. She quits the venue. He lets her.

BEAT 11

TARGET ~83%

The Dark Night.

alone in the wreckage, each lead meets their wound.

Each lead sits alone in the ruins and discovers that the armor no longer works. That is the engine of this beat. Retreat was supposed to make the pain stop, the way it always has, and this time it doesn't. The false belief has been obeyed perfectly and has delivered only loss. In the silence after the breakup, each lead is finally forced to look at the wound directly, without the other person there to blame or to hide behind.

This beat is where romance earns its reputation as a literature of growth. Give each lead a confrontation with the **original** wound, not just the fresh breakup: the parent, the ex, the grave, the empty restaurant. Often a secondary character (a friend, a sibling, a stranger at exactly the right bar) says the true thing the lead has been dodging for 300 pages. Let it land like a verdict.

ON THE PAGE

- Separate the leads fully. No texts, no drive-bys. The growth must be private to be credible.
- Contrast their dark nights. Two POVs grieving in opposite, characteristic ways deepen both characters at once.
- Return each lead to a phase-one location or ritual, and let it fit badly now. The old life no longer fits; that misfit is the proof of change.

WATCH OUT

Rushing to the reunion. The dark night needs real duration on the page - skip it and the ending reads as two unchanged people who simply missed each other, wounds fully loaded for the sequel nobody wants.

MAYA & BEN

Maya finally visits her father and asks the question she's photographed around for a decade; his answer - that the marriage was real even though it ended - breaks something loose. Ben stands in his dead restaurant and admits, out loud, alone, that he didn't lose it because he wanted it too much. He lost it quietly, the same way he was about to lose her.

BEAT 12

TARGET ~89%

Wake-Up.

the realization: what must change is me.

The dark night resolves into clarity. Each lead sees the false belief *as* false, not as a mood but as a fact, and understands what they must change in themselves to be capable of the love they threw away. This is the internal climax of the book. The Grand Gesture that follows is only the external proof of a decision that happens here, quietly, inside.

Keep the wake-up about the self, not the other person. "I should call her" is not a wake-up. "I have spent ten years making sure nothing was ever mine to lose, and I lost everything anyway" is a wake-up. The lead stops negotiating with the wound and simply outgrows it, usually in a small, concrete moment: a decision made, a truth spoken to the right witness, an action taken that the old self could never have taken.

ON THE PAGE

- Stage it small. Wake-ups land best in undramatic settings - a kitchen at dawn, a parked car - because the drama is entirely internal.
- Have the lead do one thing for its own sake, not to win the beloved back. Growth performed for an audience is not growth; the reader can tell.
- If both leads arc, give each a distinct wake-up beat. Simultaneous identical epiphanies feel authorial.

WATCH OUT

Outsourcing the epiphany. A friend may hold up the mirror, but the lead must do the looking. If the realization arrives entirely via lecture, the character is still passive at the exact moment the book exists to make them active.

MAYA & BEN

Ben sends the business plan himself - late, imperfect, his. Not to impress Maya; she may never know. Because the restaurant is worth wanting out loud. Maya prints the never-shown folder, four hundred weddings of true moments, and hangs it as a gallery show titled "Evidence." Evidence, she tells the printer, that it's real. Even the ones that ended.

BEAT 13

TARGET ~95%

Grand Gesture.

proof of change, performed at full risk.

One lead (sometimes both) risks everything to win the other back. The airport run, the speech at the wedding, the door knocked on in the rain. The genre's most beloved furniture lives here. But the gesture's size is not what makes it work. What makes it work is **specificity of proof**. The gesture must demonstrate, unmistakably, that the false belief is dead. It is the internal change made external, at maximum personal cost, with no guarantee of success.

Design the gesture as the one act the old self could never have performed. The lead who could never want out loud must want, publicly, at volume. The lead who always ran must stand still and stay. If any character from chapter one could have made this gesture, it proves nothing; if only the transformed lead could, it proves everything. And let it cost something real that stays paid whether or not the beloved says yes.

ON THE PAGE

- Aim the gesture at the beloved's wound, not the general public. The right grand gesture is legible to an audience of one.
- Give the receiving lead agency - a real beat of choice, not an inevitable melt. Their yes should be an act, not a reflex.
- Reprise the book's central image or object one last time, transformed. Frameworks end where they began, one octave higher.

WATCH OUT

Spectacle without proof. A flash mob apologizes for nothing. If the gesture could be bought, delegated, or performed by the un-grown version of the lead, swap it for something smaller that only the new self could do.

MAYA & BEN

Opening night of Maya's show, Ben walks in carrying a plate - her plate - and, in front of the room, tells her what he wants: the restaurant, the terrifying magazine feature, and her, named out loud, in that order of difficulty. Maya steps out from behind the wall of photographs, into the frame, where anyone can see her face.

BEAT 14

TARGET 100%

Happily Ever After.

the promised ending, paid in full.

The leads choose each other, wounds healed enough that love is now sustainable, and the book delivers the emotionally satisfying ending the genre guarantees. Two standard flavors: **HEA** (happily ever after: permanence on the page - the proposal, the wedding, the years-later glimpse) and **HFN** (happy for now: a committed, hopeful present without long-term promises - often truer for younger leads, shorter timelines, or first books in a series). Either fulfills the contract. Ending a romance without one of them breaks it; that book may be excellent, but the genre's readers will correctly tell you it was not a romance.

The craft of this beat is **evidence of durability**. Don't just reunite the couple; show the healed beliefs operating in ordinary life. The reader has watched these two fail at love for four hundred pages. Give them thirty seconds of watching them be good at it. That is what the whole machine was for.

ON THE PAGE

- Answer the opening image. Whatever snapshot beat 1 gave of each lead alone, close with its healed double, together.
- Resolve the external plot in the romance's favor but not by magic. The bonus, the restaurant, the case should land where the growth put them.
- Keep it short. The emotional climax was the gesture; this is the exhale. A chapter, an epilogue, a last image - then out.

WATCH OUT

The unearned epilogue. If the wounds weren't truly healed in beats 11 and 12, no number of epilogue babies will convince the reader. The HEA is a receipt; the purchase happened earlier.

MAYA & BEN

One year later: Ben's new restaurant, opening night, full room. Maya is there with her camera - hired by no one, photographing her own life for once. On the wall by the kitchen hangs one photo from the blackout wedding where they met. He plates dessert at golden hour. She eats sitting down. Nobody is performing, and everybody stays for dinner.

Adapting the frame.

one skeleton, every subgenre.

HEAT LEVEL

The beats are heat-agnostic. In a sweet or closed-door romance, the Midpoint of Love might be a first kiss and Deepening Desire a held hand; in a high-heat book, physical intimacy may arrive early while *emotional* intimacy runs the beats. That is the key insight. The framework tracks emotional commitment. Sex, at any heat level, is placed wherever it either advances or complicates the emotional arc, never as a substitute for it.

SUBGENRE

In romantic suspense, fantasy romance, or romcom with a strong external engine, run two beat sheets side by side - this one for the relationship, a conventional structure for the plot - and make their beats trigger each other: the case's setback causes the Retreat; the heist's deadline forces the Grand Gesture into the worst possible room. In category romance the frame runs nearly pure. In women's fiction with romantic elements, the romance may demote to B-plot, and this sheet still maps it - just compressed.

POV

Dual POV is the genre's workhorse because this framework is symmetrical: both leads carry wounds, and readers love watching each misread the other. If you write single POV, the non-POV lead's arc must still happen, visible through behavior the narrator misinterprets for us. Their Dark Night and Wake-Up occur off the page, so their Grand Gesture (or their answer to one) has to carry the evidence of it.

SERIES

Romance series usually re-run the frame with a new couple per book (the found-family model), promoting last book's side characters. If one couple spans several books, each volume still needs its own mini-arc of these beats and at least an HFN. Cliffhanging the central relationship without one is the genre's least forgiven move.

Seven ways romance drafts go wrong.

read this list again at the end of every draft.

- **1. The plot-shaped hole.** The external story is so busy that the couple falls in love in the gaps. Fix: for every scene, name which relationship beat it serves. No beat, no scene.
- **2. The wound mismatch.** The leads' false beliefs never actually collide, so conflict must be imported from outside. Fix: redesign one wound until each lead is the other's worst-case scenario and best-case cure.
- **3. The frictionless middle.** Adventures in Love with no escalating firsts, fifty pages of pleasant hanging out. Fix: give every scene a first or a wound-press; cut the rest.
- **4. The imported villain.** A scheming ex or rival causes the breakup, so the leads never have to grow. Fix: let the villain trigger, but make the wounds pull it.
- **5. The big misunderstanding.** One overheard sentence, zero conversations, one hundred pages of avoidable agony. Fix: make honest conversation genuinely impossible for these two wounded people, or write the conversation and let it fail truthfully.
- **6. The skipped dark night.** Breakup on Tuesday, reunion on Thursday. Fix: give both leads real time alone with the original wound; the reader needs to watch the change happen, not be told it did.
- **7. The spectacle gesture.** A grand gesture any un-grown person could buy. Fix: design the one act the chapter-one version of this lead could never have performed, and make it cost something that stays paid.

THE MASTER DIAGNOSTIC

For any scene that feels dead, ask: whose false belief is on stage right now, and is this scene pressing it or healing it? If the answer is "neither," the scene is not about the relationship, and in this genre, that means it is not about the book.

Your beat sheet.

print this page. one line per beat is enough to start.

WOUND & FALSE BELIEF - LEAD A

07 MIDPOINT OF LOVE

50%

WOUND & FALSE BELIEF - LEAD B

08 DOUBTS RESURFACE

62%

01 INTRODUCE THE LEADS 4%

09 RETREAT 70%

02 THE MEET 9%

10 BREAKING POINT 76%

03 NO WAY / ADHESION 14%

11 THE DARK NIGHT 83%

04 ADVENTURES IN LOVE 28%

12 WAKE-UP 89%

05 INKLING OF DOUBT 36%

13 GRAND GESTURE 95%

06 DEEPENING DESIRE 45%

14 HAPPILY EVER AFTER 100%

Keep going.

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

This entire beat sheet exists as a **free interactive planner** at One More Draft. Same fourteen beats, with a text box under each one that saves as you type. Read the beat, draft your couple's version of it right on the page, and walk away with a complete 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, industry-standard screenplay formatting, story planning tools for characters, beats, and worlds, and Quill, our resident writing partner, when you want a second pair of eyes. The editor is free, and there is a free desktop app for Windows.

MORE FREE FRAMEWORK GUIDES

- How to Write a Romance Novel · the genre how-to this beat sheet pairs with
- How to Write a Romantasy Novel · braiding romance with a fantasy plot
- Save the Cat for Novels · the fifteen-beat sheet with word-count targets
- Three-Act Structure · the load-bearing classic
- Story Circle · eight steps around the wheel of change
- Mystery / Detective · the fair-play whodunit beat sheet

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



ONE MORE DRAFT

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