

An illustration of a man and a woman in a dark, blue-toned forest. Both are wearing white, featureless masks. The man is on the left, wearing a dark shirt and tie, and the woman is on the right, wearing a red top. They are embracing and looking at each other. The background shows gnarled tree trunks and sparse foliage.

It's Scary How Fun It Is to Write
Romance!

(You just have to know the secrets ...)

Susanne Dunlap



About me!



- Award-winning author of over a dozen historical novels and historical romances
- Author Accelerator Certified Book Coach
- PhD from Yale in Music History
- I live in a historic converted mill in Biddeford, ME



WHAT BROUGHT YOU HERE?

- You love to read romance and wanted to see if you could write one.
- You've started a romance novel but gotten stuck partway through
- You've finished a manuscript but you don't know if it's any good—and what to do next



**WHAT'S THE SINGLE THING YOU REMEMBER
MOST ABOUT THE BEST ROMANCE NOVEL
YOU'VE EVER READ?**



THE PLOT?



THE SETTING?



THE BEGINNING OR THE ENDING?



LET'S COME BACK TO THAT QUESTION LATER.



A ROMANCE REQUIRES:

- At least 2 people who are ready to fall in love.
- Lots of obstacles and bad things that get in their way.
- A desire to make things work out.
- A happy ending.



SIMPLE?

SORT OF...



QUESTION:

If all you need for a romance novel are those simple ingredients, why do millions of people keep reading them?



ANSWER:

Because it's not just the *what* that makes a romance novel work.

It's the *who* first and foremost.



Almost anything can happen in a romance plot.
Any kind of couple can find their HEA.
So long as you make sure of one thing ...



**YOU HAVE TO MAKE THE READER FALL
HEAD OVER HEELS IN LOVE WITH THE
LOVERS TOO.**



**LET'S GO BACK TO THAT QUESTION ABOUT
WHAT YOU REMEMBER ABOUT YOUR
FAVORITE ROMANCE.**



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WHAT YOU REMEMBER ABOUT YOUR
FAVORITE ROMANCE.**

'FESS UP. YOU LOVED THE PROTAGONISTS!



SO LET'S BUILD A PROTAGONIST
TOGETHER!



TO START, YOU SHOULD HAVE:

- Some idea of what kind of romance novel you're writing or want to write
- Some idea of who your protagonists might be
- A willingness to put them through the wringer



TELL ME IN THE CHAT!

- What kind of romance novel you're writing or want to write
- Who your protagonists might be
- Why your reader might fall in love with them



Welcome to
Romance Protagonist Building 101!



What makes a swoon-worthy, lovable
romance protagonist?



- They're not perfect.
- They're ready to fall in love—either through life situation, age, or temperament.
- In other words: susceptible and available.



They can also:

- Be capable of great self-sacrifice
- Possess inner strength no one knows about
- Care deeply about something that matters
- Have a deep wound that's hindering them



Romance protagonists are not:

- Self-centered
- Cruel
- Incapable of change



Take a few minutes and give one of your romance protagonists some love-worthy qualities. Be specific.

(A special talent, a meaningful goal, an unusual attitude...)



Do the same for the other protagonist.



How do those qualities relate to what each protagonist wants more than anything in the world?



Is what they want the same as what
they truly need?



Why is finding love vital to your
protagonists getting either what they
want or what they need?

Or...



Do they think of love as something that
might get in the way of getting what
they want?



Take a few minutes to answer those questions.



Now think about why your two protagonists might not seem so loveable to each other at first.



For instance:

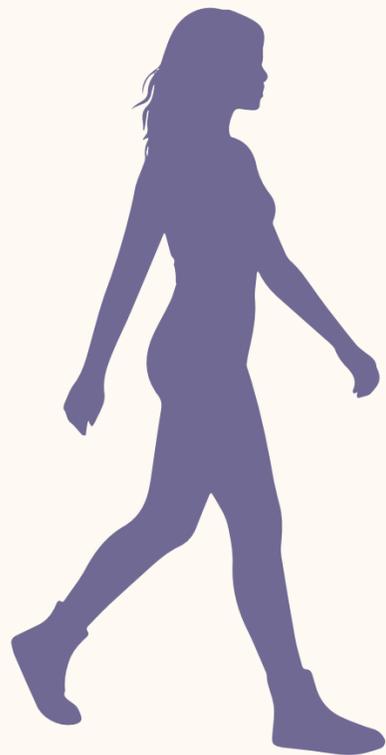
They hide their special talent because they're afraid of being laughed at.
They're so focused on their goal that they seem rude in social situations.



Let's get more specific...



They walk into the scene.





They walk into the scene.



The meet-cute.



They walk into the scene.

The meet-cute.



How does their first appearance reveal (or hint at) what you've just figured out —to each other, to the reader?



What will that moment be like for one
of your protagonists?



Take a few minutes to think about a situation for your protagonists when you first introduce them.



Possible introduction points:

- The actual meet-cute.
- Caught in a difficult or funny situation.
- At a moment of painful transition.



What's stopping them from falling in love with each other instantly?

- A wound or painful backstory.
- They believe themselves unworthy of love.
- They're in a situation that makes love/a relationship difficult.



Or something else.



Now, knowing these things, what's the worst possible outcome for each of these protagonists you no doubt love already?



Go ahead. Torture them a little.



Now dig deeper...



LET'S TALK OBSTACLES





The obstacles to love can be internal,
external, or both.



For the next few minutes, choose one of your protagonists and decide what's standing in their way of getting what they want—internally or externally.



Is the same thing standing in the way
of falling in love with each other?



How will each discover those obstacles
in the other?



Quick example:
The Duke & I, by Julia Quinn
(Otherwise known as the first
Bridgerton series...)



What is it in the duke's past that makes him think he can't have—or doesn't deserve—happiness?



Now take that obstacle and make it more compelling/stronger/harder/funnier—whatever is in keeping with your story.



Push it just a little bit more...



What will make your readers care about
any of this?



Why readers care:

- Problems they can relate to
- Difficulties that aren't their fault
- Realistic and consistent behavior & reactions
- Things get worse and worse—no insta-solutions



So you've built two great characters.
What's next?



LET'S TALK ARCS



How do you keep your reader caring about your protagonist as the story progresses?



Remember: Your protagonists have to change in some meaningful way.



It's all about the arcs!

- Character arc
- Romance arc
- Plot arc



Arc basics:

- The character arc spans the entire story
- On the way they make mistakes
- But no “TSTL” (too stupid to live)



In the next few minutes, answer these questions:

- Who is your protagonist at the beginning, and who are they at the end? (What have they learned/gained/survived?)
- What is the absolute worst thing that happens to them?
- What is one characteristic that helps them achieve what they want in the end?



Congratulations! Your protagonists are
alive in your mind!

What's next?



Avoid the 3 Mistakes Aspiring Romance Authors Make

(And Actually Finish and
Publish Your Book)



Mistake #1:

Treating Romance Like Any Another Genre



The fix:

Prioritize the Emotional Journey



**In romance, the emotional journey
drives everything—including the
structure.**

THE COURSE OF TRUE LOVE

(According to a Romance Novel)

Lovers introduced to reader



Meet-Cute



Get to know each other and start to fall in love (palpable chemistry)

Midpoint: In love

Things go wrong, maybe this can't work

Ack! Dark Night of the Soul!



Tada! Grand Gesture!



*Happily
AFTER*



Does that make romance formulaic?

- Only if you just consider it a plot structure.
- The structure needs to support the emotional build-up and payoff



So how does that work?

What makes every romance new, even
within the same basic structure?



Example:
The Proposal
Sandra Bullock &
Ryan Reynolds





Sandra Bullock's Character—Margaret

- *Wants:* a fake marriage so she can stay in her great job in the US



Ryan Reynolds's Character—Andrew

- *Wants:* to finally be promoted to editor in his soul-crushing job and be taken seriously at work and in his family life



What they want drives what happens,
the action, the PLOT



But in romance, you
have to dig deeper.



Margaret

- Orphan and only child
- Barricades herself behind work
- Doesn't think she needs anyone at all



Margaret

- She's afraid!
- Afraid of feeling
- Afraid of emotional involvement



Margaret

- *Needs:* to find the family she never had and open herself to vulnerability and emotion—love



Andrew

- From an affluent family, also an only child
- Under pressure to take over family business
- At odds with his father because that's not what he wants



Andrew

- He's afraid too!
- Afraid he won't succeed and his father will be proved right



Andrew

- *Needs:* true connection based on the person he is and all he has to offer, including love



Those deeper factors
—the needs—drive the
emotional arcs.



Emotional arc=Character arc=
ROMANCE



Margaret and Andrew's growth as characters powers the emotional punch of the story.



Margaret

- Her growth as a person makes her give up her want—she sacrifices herself
- She is able to recognize Andrew's true worth and her true feelings



Andrew

- Sees Margaret's vulnerability when she acts unselfishly
- Recognizes his own truth, that it isn't just ambition that has kept him slavishly by her side



Mistake #2:

Starting With Plot Instead of Character
Want/Need/Motivation



Plot=What happens

- The setup, the premise
- The events and actions of the characters
- Based on the *wants* of the characters



In *The Proposal*:

- The setup: a type-A boss who will go to any lengths to be able to stay in her high-powered job—including a fake marriage.
- What happens: The two protagonists spend a weekend in Alaska with his family to prove to immigration that their fake marriage is real



In *The Proposal*:

This is enough to get you to pick the movie to watch (or open the book), but not enough to get you invested in the entire story.



Only the character arc can keep you
reading/watching, make you care.



Character Arc=How the character changes from the beginning to the end.

- Completely integrated with the plot
- What's going on *inside* the characters
- Based on the *needs* of the characters



The fix:

Start with desire, fear, and vulnerability—the foundation of character arc.



In *The Proposal*

- Think of how Margaret and Andrew have changed by the end. They've achieved their deep needs—giving the story its poignancy.



**ROMANCE THRIVES IN THE GAP
BETWEEN EXTERNAL GOALS AND
INTERNAL LONGING.**



Mistake #3:

Trying to do it all alone



You're building something big here. You need a team!

- You can do it alone—but it will take longer and you'll probably make more mistakes.
- And once you've finished, what's next?



Your Path Forward
Romance Your Writing,
Romance Your Reader



The Program that Shows You:

- How to craft a compelling romance from start to finish
- How to revise with confidence
- How to publish in a way that works for you
- How to market to readers who are looking for exactly what you write



Your Path Forward

Book a call with me. Use the QR code below or the link in the chat.





Have questions? Here's a bit more info
about the program.



Romance Your Writing, Romance Your Reader is:

- The one program you need for support, community, and actionable craft
- For writers who are serious about breaking into the romance market
- Comprehensive guidance: From drafting to revision to publishing to marketing



Members Benefit from:

- Lifetime access to self-paced, online video lessons, templates, and checklists
- Unique tools for drafting, revising, and marketing
- Weekly live coaching calls
- A private Slack community for support and accountability
- Professional guidance on writing, editing, publishing, and marketing



What members are saying:

“I am so happy to be a part of Susanne’s Romance writing group. The lessons and coaching are exactly what I needed to find the direction that will result in more satisfying work as a writer!”

Cynthia Hill



What members are saying:

“Romance Your Writing, Romance Your Reader is thorough and approachable, for beginning and experienced writers alike, whether a planner, pantsier, or plantier. The combination of course material and community is a boon to any writer seeking to start or deepen their knowledge in writing romance.”

Margaret McNellis



Your investment:

- The entire program is in beta and currently costs \$1,800 for lifetime, unlimited access.
- A payment plan of \$300 a month is available.
- **Join with a full payment by midnight tonight (10/16/2025) and save \$150!**



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Still want to know more? Schedule a call:





Thank You!