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Writing a Romance Novel FOR DUMMIES®

Leslie Wainger

Executive Editor, Harlequin Books

*Foreword by New York Times
bestselling author Linda Howard*

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*Writing a
Romance Novel*
FOR
DUMMIES®

by Leslie J. Wainger

Foreword by Linda Howard

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Writing a Romance Novel For Dummies®

**Cheat
Sheet**

Reader Expectations

Writing a romance is a creative process and far from formulaic. But romance readers pick up each and every novel with certain expectations firmly in place. To write a winning romance, you have to meet these expectations each and every time:

- ✓ A sympathetic heroine
- ✓ A strong, irresistible hero
- ✓ Emotional tension
- ✓ An interesting, believable plot
- ✓ A happy ending

Getting Ready to Write

Before you sit down to start writing your romance, make sure you have the following list covered. Accomplishing these tasks will make the writing process easier and more productive.

- ✓ **Choose a space that can become your home office:** Although an entire room would be great, you can turn any unoccupied corner into dedicated writing space.
- ✓ **Reconcile your family to the project:** Finding time to write can be difficult. Involving your family and getting them on your side from the start makes life easier for everyone.
- ✓ **Collect your supplies:** Grab everything from a computer to a coffee mug, ahead of time.
- ✓ **Surround yourself with relevant research:** Collect research materials before you start writing so that the information is at your fingertips — instead of at the end of a 20-minute drive to the library or bookstore.
- ✓ **Make a schedule:** Block out regular writing time and stick to your schedule, unless you have a real emergency.

Putting It All Together

Keep these tips in mind throughout the writing process:

- ✓ An outline is just a guide, so write one. Yes, really.
- ✓ Let your characters — your hero and heroine — drive the plot.
- ✓ Leave your readers wanting more. Start and stop every chapter (and every scene) so that your reader simply must keep reading.
- ✓ Master the techniques of effective pacing.
- ✓ Build both the emotions and the action to a climax, and follow it with a satisfying resolution.

For Dummies: Bestselling Book Series for Beginners

Writing a Romance Novel For Dummies®

**Cheat
Sheet**

Practicalities Make Perfect

Romance writing and publishing is a business — a business filled with professionals. If you want agents, editors, and everyone else to take you and your work seriously, you have to walk the walk. When you submit a manuscript you want it looking polished and professional. Keep these details in mind:

- ✓ **Accuracy counts:** Check and double-check your research.
- ✓ **Know the rules:** Grammar and punctuation are important. You can break them, but do so with a purpose and only for effect.
- ✓ **Simple is usually better:** Don't go thesaurus-crazy.
- ✓ **Proofread:** Don't just use your computer's spellcheck.
- ✓ **Formatting matters:** Get your margins right and make your font and spacing readable.
- ✓ **Count accurately:** Come up with an accurate word count.

Targeting the Right Publisher and Editor

You can significantly increase your chances of getting published by knowing who's who in the market (publishers and editors) and the types of romance they're publishing.

- ✓ **Check bookstores:** Make use of both the brick-and-mortar and online varieties to see who's publishing books similar to yours. Bookstore employees may also be able to offer insight in the direction publishers are going in the near future.
- ✓ **Read writers' magazines and market guides:** Check these sources to see who's looking for books like yours.
- ✓ **Network:** Keep your ears and eyes open at writers' conferences and talk to everyone you can.
- ✓ **Make full use of the Internet:** Publishers' own sites give you accurate sources, and online writers' bulletin boards, e-mail lists, and related sites have all kinds of useful information — but watch out for unsubstantiated rumors.
- ✓ **Read in-book dedications:** Authors often mention their editors' names.

Stages from the Sale to the Bound Book

The fun isn't over after you've written and submitted your manuscript. Here's a brief outline of the path your book will take on its way to store shelves:

1. Contract negotiation
2. Revisions
3. Deflag and copy edit
4. Galley and author alterations
5. Dedication and acknowledgments
6. Cover — art, copy, and quotes
7. Personal PR

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About the Author

Leslie Wainger has been editing romances and general women's fiction for twenty-five years. She started as the editorial assistant for Silhouette Books and is now an executive editor for Harlequin/Silhouette, where she handles the editorial direction and acquisitions for several romance series. She also edits both series and mainstream novels and works with a roster of authors that includes multiple *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestsellers. In the course of her career, she's traveled extensively to speak at conferences, and she's done both local and national PR in print, on radio, and on TV, including National Public Radio, the *Wall Street Journal*, and Fox News. She's written articles, been featured in industry guides and how-to books, and currently has a *Letters to the Editor* bulletin board in the Community/Learning To Write section of the eHarlequin.com Web site.

When she can get away, she enjoys extended travel vacations; recent destinations have included Australia (where she ate a grub on her first visit and held a baby wombat on her second), New Zealand (where she wisely refrained from swimming in a lake of acid), Peru (where she ate a local delicacy called *cuy*, aka guinea pig, and — more enjoyably — visited Macchu Pichu), Bolivia (where she tasted alpaca), and Spain (where she fell in love with Gaudi's architecture). Next trip? With any luck, somewhere where she can see monkeys in the wild.

That she's an admitted bookaholic goes without saying, but she's also an all-too-avid collector of CDs and DVDs, with a bent toward popular films (especially romance in any form) and TV series she's known and loved. Additional collections include tacky salt and pepper shakers and (of course) monkeys.

She's also been a fangrrrrl her entire life, and that shows no signs of stopping. Davy Jones was the first great love of her life (and she still insists they would have been perfect for each other, if only he could have waited for her to get from twelve to twenty-two). Current obsessions include everything related to "The Lord of the Rings" (especially Viggo Mortensen, with a note to include the fact that she's been a fan since "Ruby Cairo"), "Farscape" (if you want to see an amazing romance, check out Ben "John Crichton" Browder and Claudia "Aeryn Sun" Black), and James "Spike" Marsters, formerly of "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and "Angel."

Additional useless trivia: She has three cats and the commute from hell.

Dedication

To all my authors, past and present: Thank you for making me look good.

Author's Acknowledgments

As the dedication says, I have to thank all the authors I've worked with. Every single one of them has made me a better editor, and many of them have also become some of my best friends. Special thanks to Linda Howard for the intro and Patricia Gardner Evans for the tech read. For additional technical help, special thanks also to Nancy Yost, who had the (bad?) luck to be scheduled to have lunch with me right when I needed a piece of info and came through in spades, and to Joan L., who answered a library question for me and gets collies in return.

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Family and friends are the backbone of everyone's life. Mom, Dad, Judi, Polly and your attendant crews . . . thank you. Thanks also to all the friends — real-life and on-line — who've supported, pushed, commiserated, laughed, cried, and promised to buy (and even requested autographs). If I start naming names, I'll either go on for pages or leave out someone crucial, so basically, if you think you should be included . . . trust me, you are. (But special mention has to be made of Melissa, at whose baby shower this book — or at least my participation in it — was also born, Kimm, AZ, Mario, Cheryl, Shelly, Linda K. and Mr. B., all of whom went above and beyond at various points.)

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Foreword

I admit it: When I wrote my first romance book, I didn't know what I was doing. Of course, I was only nine years old and didn't know what I was doing most of the time. What I did know was that I loved writing, and I took great joy in creating these rambling, clichéd stories that swooped in and out of different characters' points of view as the plot galloped from one country to another — all without a single chapter break. I *knew* what chapters were; I just didn't care. All that mattered was telling the story.

My love of writing never faded. I eventually learned to break the tale into chapters (just as I learned the rules of grammar), although I still hate all that wasted white space on a page. Margins are for sissies. Do you know how many words you can get on one sheet of paper when you make your handwriting really, really tiny so you can actually get two lines of prose inside one ruled line of notebook paper, and write from one side of the paper to the other? A lot. And I wrote on both sides of the paper. I think one sheet held close to 1,500 words. Ah, the good old days. Now stories have to be typed and double-spaced on only one side of the paper; not only is a lot of white space wasted, but the challenge of seeing how small I can write and having the words still legible is gone.

But fast-forward a couple of decades, roughly. I was still writing. I had never stopped, and writing was the great private joy of my life. I wrote westerns; I wrote science fiction; I wrote fantasy; and I wrote thrillers — but they all had one thread in common: They all had romances in them. I *connected* to romances, but I wrote everything by the seat of my pants. I hadn't researched or studied anything and had no idea of any do's or don'ts — I just had the stories. Finally, one morning I woke up and decided to see whether I was good enough to be published. Then I did some research. I found out how to prepare a manuscript (margins were required) and how to submit it. Everything else, I did the usual way: by the seat of my pants.

I wrote a book and sent it to Leslie Wainger, my dear friend and editor of over 20 years now, who bought it. That's how she became my dear friend and editor. I was a newbie in the business; she was fairly new herself. What I knew about writing would have rattled around in a peanut shell, but I loved what I did know. Leslie loves books, and she taught me the publishing lingo, how a manuscript gets into book form, and all the other details that become part of a writer's life. Her editing — good heavens, how I needed editing — taught me more about the *structure* of writing than anything else I'd learned since learning the English language.

Little did I know that my chosen genre, romance, was the toughest one to write. It can't be, you say; so many romance books are out there — it can't be difficult. Oh, yeah? Try it. Romance readers are probably the most prolific readers on the face of the earth, and they don't read just romance. They read everything. As a group, they're frighteningly knowledgeable. They know their genre, they know what they expect, and they like being surprised. How do you give them what they expect and surprise them at the same time? Sheer dumb luck, and a lot of hard work.

Romance is the best discipline for writers. It forces you to learn how to make your characterization so strong that the characters not only live on in the readers' minds, but the readers also have a personal connection to the books. A romance writer has to learn pacing, how to tell a coherent, cohesive, and engrossing story in 80,000 words or less, depending on the category line. It's a tough challenge. Any tips are appreciated.

There weren't any tips when I started writing, back in the dark ages B.C. (Before Computers). No one had analyzed the hearts and parts of numerous romance books and broken them down for me to study so I could polish my craft, tighten my plot, and otherwise get a head start.

I feel cheated. Why wasn't this book written 25 years ago????

But it's written now, by an expert in the romance publishing field, for you to enjoy and learn from. Have fun!

I still feel cheated.

— Linda Howard

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