

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Getting to know the romance market and figuring out your place in it
- » Perfecting the craft of writing a romance
- » Choosing whether to indie publish or go the traditional route
- » Defining success if you're indie publishing
- » Submitting your manuscript to a publisher

Chapter **1**

Romance Writing at a Glance

The world of romance writing and publishing is rewarding. There's nothing better than hearing back from a reader that they laughed and cried while reading one of my books. Pulling out those emotions in readers is always my goal, and I get excited and happy when I know I've hit my mark. But romance publishing can also be complex — even daunting — especially when you're approaching it for the first time. So, I've taken up the challenge of demystifying this world for you. Whether this book marks your first foray into writing romance novels or you've been hard at work honing your skills for years, I'm glad you're here. As you read, you'll find lots to interest you and, most of all, help you write a winning romance novel.

In this chapter, I provide you with a snapshot of the romance-writing process and the romance industry as a whole: from the different types of romance novels, to the elements that all good romance novels possess, to the pros and cons of indie versus traditional publishing. So let's dive in!

Tuning in to the Market

Many aspiring writers set out to tell a story without a clear idea about what kind of story they're writing, whether (and where) a market exists for it, or what they'll do with the manuscript when they're done writing. Now, I won't tell you that an unplanned approach to writing never works, because a lot of books get published every year, and some of them undoubtedly follow that path.



TIP

But if you want to write popular fiction in general and romance novels in particular, you can cut down on the time you spend on writing, as well as increase your odds of success, by researching the marketplace and paying attention to what readers and editors are looking for.

Defining a romance

A large portion of the fiction books on store shelves — from mysteries, to science fiction, to horror, and pretty much everything else — have romantic elements in them. But they're not considered romances. If you want to define your book as a romance novel, you need to keep certain things in mind.

At its heart — pun intended — a *romance* distinguishes itself from other forms of fiction because the romantic relationship is the focus of everything that happens — it's the driving force behind the story, the one thread that makes the entire tapestry fall apart if it's removed.



REMEMBER

Romance readers are knowledgeable. They're very aware of the elements in a book that make them happy and the elements that make them *unhappy*. Romance readers have specific expectations for every book that they pick up. They want to identify with the heroine and love the hero. They want to root for the relationship to overcome the seemingly insurmountable obstacles in its path, and at the end of the day, they want an interesting plot that delivers a happy ending. When you meet these expectations and focus on the central romantic relationship, your book becomes a romance novel. (See Chapter 2 for more details on meeting readers' expectations.)

Contrary to popular belief (a belief you've probably run up against, if you've been a romance reader for a while), romance novels do *not* follow a prescribed formula. Instead, writers of this genre have a lot of freedom in how these expectations are satisfied.

Subdividing romances into genres

Approximately one-third of all fiction novels sold in the mass market are romance novels, making romance one of the top genres of all time. But not all romances are the same. Within romance publishing in general, all kinds of distinctions exist. Each type of romance comes with its own set of reader expectations that must be met. In Chapter 2, I go into detail about the different types of romances. But every writer needs to know the major distinctions:

- » **Contemporary versus historical romances.** The first big decision you need to make — one that affects every page of your novel from first to last — is whether to set your book in the past or the present.
 - **Historical romance:** Your readers expect your research — into clothes, everyday life, occupations, social structure, language, and everything else — to be accurate and your characters to behave in ways that are appropriate to their world and its society. (I devote Chapter 13 to research specifics.) Certain story lines and plot twists work perfectly in historical contexts, while others are completely out of place — and it's your responsibility to know which is which.
 - **Contemporary romance:** These novels are set in your reader's own time, so they're often subject to even closer and more knowledgeable scrutiny. Slang that's even slightly out of date or characters that feel like they're from the 1950s (when women were expected to cook, clean, and do just what the man said), for example, will turn a reader off faster than you can type "Chapter 1."
- » **Category versus mainstream romances.** This concept is based on the ways that books are packaged and marketed to the reader.
 - **Category romance:** Also known as *series romances*, these novels are published on a monthly schedule in groups, which usually consist of four or six novels. The groups are referred to as *lines* or *series*, and all the books in a given series are similar in certain basic ways such as length, editorial focus, and cover design. Series books appear together on store shelves and are marketed to readers as part of a series rather than as individual titles. Most series are contemporary romances, but that's always subject to change.
 - **Mainstream romance:** These novels are also known as *single titles*, which is an accurate description of how they're perceived and sold. Each book stands alone and fits its own individual vision, though that vision often identifies the book as belonging to a subgenre like romantic suspense, western, or Regency. A single title has unique packaging and is placed on the book racks separately, usually in alphabetical order by the author's last name. Single titles almost always have larger page counts — sometimes

substantially so — than series books, which allow them to have more complex plotting and a bigger cast of characters.

» **Sweet romance versus steamy romance.** There are different “steam levels” in romance:

- **Sweet romance:** In these clean and wholesome romances, the steam level focuses on emotion rather than the sexual aspect of the relationship. There can be sexual tension in a sweet romance, but it’s kept mostly off the page and implied. If there is sex, it’s behind closed doors. Think Hallmark romance movies. Inspirational or Christian romances fall in this category.
- **Steamy romance:** If a romance doesn’t mention it’s sweet, then it probably falls somewhere within the steamy spectrum. Different publishers have different ways to show the steam levels, ranging from one hot pepper to five hot peppers, to naming the levels different things. Just be aware of your steam level and take note what a publisher wants for a particular romance line.

Beyond these basic distinctions, the romance genre is also divided into all kinds of more specific *subgenres*. Subgenres can include romantic suspense, inspirational romance, western romance, romantic comedy, and others I detail in Chapter 2, where I also help you figure out where you — and your novel — fit into this spectrum.

Practicing Your Craft

After you know the marketplace and what kind of romance you want to write, you have to take care of a few everyday matters before you start hitting the keyboard. Writing is a creative profession, and after you and your muse get in “the zone,” the last thing you want is to be yanked back to reality because your kids are fighting over the remote, or you have a question about grammar or British history and have no idea where to go for the answer. Here are a few suggestions to help limit the number of distractions you may encounter (I include many more in Chapter 3):

- » Set up a workspace for yourself, even if it’s only a corner of your bedroom or family room.
- » Get your family invested in your writing so that they’re happy to pitch in so you can succeed.
- » Dedicate a specific time each day or week when your writing is given first priority.

Only after you have the mundane under control can you sit down, face that blank screen and blinking cursor, and *start* telling your story. After that it takes dedication and commitment to *finish* telling your story.



REMEMBER

No one can make you a storyteller or magically inject you with talent, but if you have the drive and creativity to be a writer, you *can* hone your craft so you make every book as strong as it can possibly be. Writing has many practical aspects, and the bulk of this book focuses on helping you master them. Here's a quick look at just a few of the topics I tackle.

Everything starts with characterization

Let me note here that while there are other types of romances, this book focuses on heterosexual romance, with one man and one woman. This is an important distinction as we move into talking about characterization in later chapters.



REMEMBER

Without compelling characters to win over the reader, a romance novel simply won't succeed. The heroine, in particular, is key, because she becomes the reader's alter ego. Your heroine needs to be strong, smart, and attractive, but also vulnerable and emotionally accessible. She needs to be an interesting and admirable woman who your reader enjoys spending time with. Your hero needs to be just that: heroic. But that doesn't mean he has no flaws. He definitely needs to be vulnerable, otherwise he won't have a place for the heroine in his life or his heart. Your hero has to be a man that your heroine — and your reader — can fall in love with. (Chapter 4 covers creating characters, making it one of the most important chapters in this book.)

Both your hero and heroine should be fully realized human beings, with complete and complex inner lives. They need to have more going on than just sexual attraction — although, as I discuss in Chapter 11, sexual attraction and emotionally involving love scenes are important, too. Every character also needs an individual voice. Chapter 9 sets you on the right path to creating unique ways of speaking — ways that are also distinct from your own voice — for all your characters, especially the star couple.

It's all about emotional tension



REMEMBER

Emotional tension is the driving force of every romance. Your hero and heroine are more than just attractive faces. Make their relationship the driving force of your novel, because your reader's main reason for picking up a romance novel is to experience the roller-coaster thrills of falling in love.

To keep that roller coaster going, you need to create emotional tension between your hero and heroine, something that comes from who they are that can believably keep them apart for the course of the book. Maybe your wealthy hero has a hard time believing that the heroine's not just like all the other gold diggers. Maybe the heroine thinks no man can be trusted to stay for the long haul because her father left her mother, and her own relationships have never lasted longer than six months. In every book, the emotional tension is unique to that heroine and hero, grows out of who they are, and is enhanced by their situation.

I explain how to use emotional tension to propel your plot and create momentum in the hero and heroine's relationship in Chapter 5. Compelling emotional tension gets your reader involved even more deeply in your characters, and the more deeply involved your reader feels, the more quickly she'll turn the pages to see what happens next. (Bestselling novels aren't referred to as page-turners for nothing!)

Plotting, pacing, and point of view

Once you have your characters and their conflict down, your job is to plot out, and then tell, their story. Think of your novel as the context in which the hero and heroine can work out their issues. But plotting is more than just figuring out what happens in the story. You need to structure events in a way that keeps your reader's interest. You need an *external conflict* — something that gives your hero and heroine something to argue about and deal with when they can't talk about the emotional conflict that's *really* bugging them.

In Chapter 5, I give you tips on how to use conflict to build the reader's involvement as the action escalates. In Chapter 10, I focus on pacing, especially achieving the all-important balance between showing and telling: knowing when to let your characters show the readers what they're doing and thinking, and when using narrative is the most effective tool for getting the reader from point A to point B.



WARNING

When you're telling your story, guard against letting *your* voice call too much attention to itself, which can overshadow the characters, their voices, and their points of view. I provide strategies for finding your own voice and using it for greatest effect in Chapter 8.

Finding the right spot to begin your book and knowing how to start and stop every chapter and every scene for maximum effect are crucial aspects of structuring your plot. As you work on these mechanics, creating cliffhangers and knowing how to resolve them is likely to become one of your most effective strategies. For more information on beginnings and endings, not to mention on how to leave your reader dangling (but in a good way), check out Chapter 12.

Choosing Indie Publishing or Traditional Publishing

In today's world, many romance authors are finding success with indie publishing, also called self-publishing. Some are even making six-figure incomes and beyond. This is due largely to the invention of the Kindle (a wireless electronic reading device, aka "e-reader") and ebooks (short for "electronic books"). Other authors find success in the traditional way, by submitting their work to agents and editors. I also know hybrid authors who are doing both. But, how do you know which path is right for you, and where to start?

Exploring the pros and cons of each



REMEMBER

There is no one right way to publish. Indie publishing is generally a much faster process than traditional publishing. Yes, there are things you must do in order to publish, like hire an editor, but I know successful indie authors who write and publish a book in just a few months. This allows indie authors to follow trends and keep up with the market at a breakneck speed. But the downside is you must do everything yourself, or assemble your own team to help you do everything yourself. Traditional publishing can take up to two years, or longer in some cases, but you have a whole ready-made team of professionals to help you along the way.

In the end, though, you can decide to do both for different books. Some projects are simply better suited for indie publishing, while others will do much better traditionally. It all depends on what you want to achieve. It's wonderful that we live in a world where authors can choose hybrid alternatives. Chapter 15 gives you an in-depth look at each avenue to help you decide where to start.

Choosing your path

If you are the type of person who loves control and wants to be involved in every step of publishing, you might be more suited to indie publish. This option gives you more freedom. You are your own boss, you create your own deadlines, and you get a larger percentages of royalties. But keep in mind you also pull all the weight, supply all the upfront costs, and have to make all the decisions.

If your goal is to see your book on the shelf of every bookstore, you might want to try for a traditional contract. Yes, it can be difficult to sell a manuscript to an editor, but you will most likely get an advance, and they pay for all the costs involved. It's possible your publisher will provide some marketing, and they may set up things like book signings for you. Yet, your royalties are apt to be small, and

unless you are quite lucky, you may need a full-time job to support yourself. If you're unsure about your path, we touch on both options here to help you decide. Part 5 explores indie publishing and traditional publishing in detail.

Best Practices of Indie Publishing

If you decide you're best suited for the indie-publishing route, Chapter 16 helps you learn what to do to put your book ahead of the game. No one can promise you massive sales. But there are things you can do to better position your book in the market — the most important is creating a well-written book that pulls the reader in. Nothing can kill your career faster than putting out a book that wasn't ready. Editing, formatting and design, and marketing are some of the areas where indie authors may encounter some pitfalls and where it might make sense to hire professionals.



REMEMBER

When you publish, you are putting forth an introduction to you, as a writer. First impressions are of paramount importance. You will never again get the chance to introduce yourself to that reader. Make sure your first impression is a good one.

Packaging your romance in a professional way is also very important. Everyone knows the saying, "You can't judge a book by its cover." Yet, everyone does. Your cover will be the very first thing people will see, and if it looks homemade, you will lose many potential sales. If you decide now that you're going to spend the necessary money to hire a graphic designer in order to publish a professional product, you'll be ahead of many writers who try to do everything themselves. There are many ebooks languishing in the bottom of the sales pool. Don't let your book be one of them.

Working with editors and graphic designers

Working with industry professionals can be rewarding, and can help your book reach that next level. It's not difficult, and you'll get many tips in this book to set you on the right path. Just be aware that even though you are hiring these jobs out, it's also important for you to know the market. You must be well-read in your genre to know when a developmental editor is steering you in the right direction. You also need to be aware of what kinds of covers sell better than others. Don't stress, you probably already read books in your genre, and you probably subconsciously pay attention to covers without even realizing it. The next step is to study them and look for clues of good design.

Marketing and selling your book

Marketing is often the thing that authors are most afraid of. No one likes to shout, “Buy my book!” The good news is, this is not necessary to have a successful launch. In fact, market research is probably more important to sales than anyone realizes. You won’t have to spend as much time trying to convince others to buy your book if you’ve written the book to sell from the beginning. That doesn’t mean you won’t ever have to advertise. You will. But your ad dollars will go much further if you’ve prepped your book for success before you’ve published. I walk you through how to market your book in Chapter 16.

Submitting Your Manuscript

If you decide to publish traditionally, you will need to send query letters and eventually submit your manuscript. This is generally considered a lot more nerve-wracking than the writing process. Although you can’t control the process after your manuscript leaves your hands, you *can* take steps beforehand to weight the odds in your favor.

Choosing the right publisher



REMEMBER

You can give your book its best shot at being published by targeting the most appropriate publisher for your genre, and, when possible, a specific editor whose taste runs to books like yours. You can’t ensure a sale, but finding an appropriate publisher helps you on two fronts:

- » It increases your chances of success.
- » It saves a lot of time.

Once again, you need to research the market. Look past what’s out there and focus on who’s publishing it and which agents are involved. I provide tips on how to compare what you’re writing to what each house is publishing, how to know if you need an agent, how to figure out what a particular editor likes to see, and other helpful strategies in Chapter 17.

Putting together a selling submission

Every publisher has its own rules about submissions, what they look at, and what they buy. Those rules often vary based on whether an author has an agent and whether an author’s brand-new or has been published elsewhere, even if in a

different genre. Whatever you submit, you want it to be as perfect as possible to increase your chances of making a sale.

You can submit your manuscript in three types of formats: complete manuscript, partial manuscript, and query letter. A complete manuscript is self-explanatory, but the latter two require some explanation. Query letters and partial manuscripts both involve a synopsis of your manuscript (I discuss them in greater detail in Chapter 17). In a query letter, your synopsis has to be brief, and it's all an editor sees of your novel. The good news is you don't need to convince the editor to buy your book based on your query; you only need to convince them that they want to see more of it. And in the scheme of things, it's easier to get an editor to invest their own time rather than the company's money. A partial manuscript consists of a longer synopsis and chapters — usually the first three chapters. This manuscript gives an editor a fuller look at what you're capable of.

In most cases, an editor likes to see a complete manuscript before going to contract with a brand-new author. Getting a request for a complete manuscript, based on your query letter or partial manuscript, is no guarantee that you're going to make a sale, but you're that much closer.



REMEMBER

Submitting a complete manuscript also means that you have to make sure every possible detail of your manuscript is perfect. For tips on formatting and advice on grammar and spelling — two aspects of writing and manuscript preparation that every author thinks they have under control but which many authors are wrong about — check out Chapter 14. My biggest suggestion on that score? Use or ignore spell-check — whatever makes you happy — but *always* proofread your work. It's also helpful to have a fresh set of eyes on your manuscript, so if you can, ask another author to read your work, too.

Somewhere along the way, you're almost certainly going to deal with rejection, either when submitting your manuscript for traditional publishing or in the form of low sales or bad reviews when indie publishing. Every writer has faced rejection, and dealing with it can be the hardest time in their career. The good news is that rejection won't kill your career. If you take every rejection as a learning experience, you will go far. Above all, never give up writing. There's always hope that the next book you write will sell well and make you into a bestselling author.