

Crafting Compelling Romantic Subplots

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Chapter 1: WHAT is the purpose of your romantic subplot?

Genre is the big storytelling category that defines the type of story your audience expects. Subgenre is a specific flavor within that genre: the niche within the niche.

1. What are your story's genre and subgenre?

Plot is the main story arc and the primary journey of the protagonist. Subplot is a secondary thread woven into the story that supports, mirrors, or contrasts the main plot. Often adds depth, tension, or emotional stakes:

2. What is the main plot and the subplot(s)?

Love stories can end with characters not staying together, while romance requires them to be together at the end.

3. Is it a love story or a romance?

4. What is the mood of the main plot and of your romantic subplot?

cheerful	reflective	gloomy	whimsical	ominous	fearful	lonely
idyllic	humorous	melancholy	romantic	lighthearted	hopeful	tense

5. What is the level of explicitness of your romantic subplot?

☐ Middle grade

☐ YA

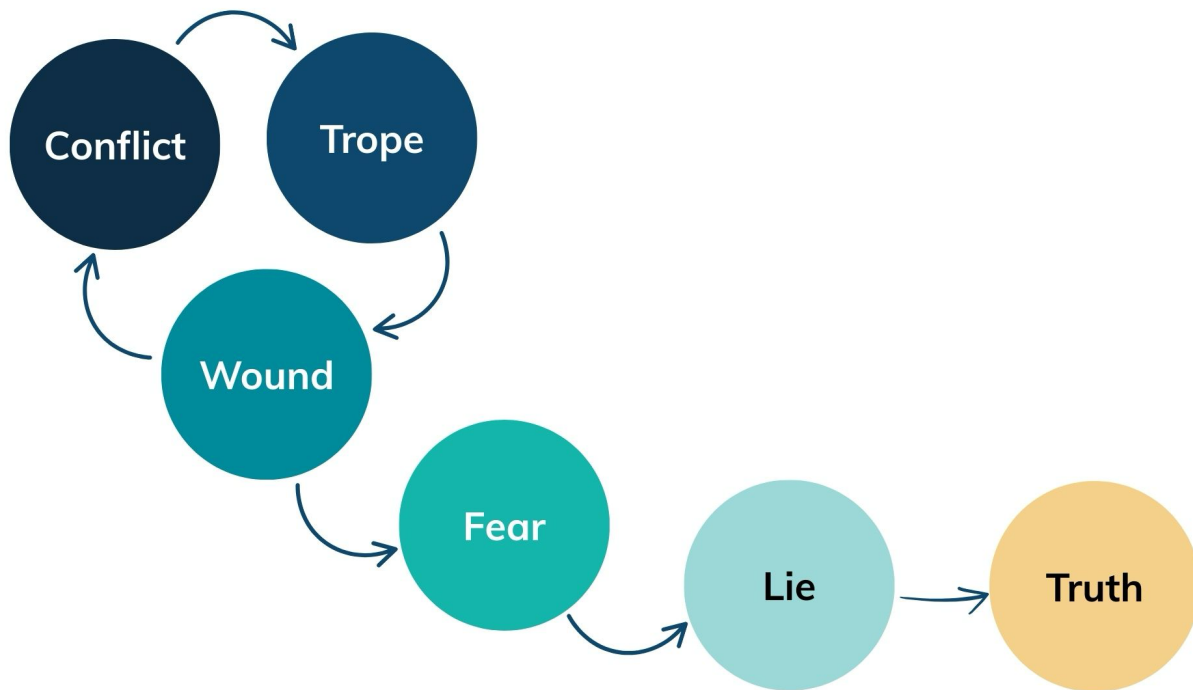
☐ Adult☐ G☐ PG☐ PG-13☐ R

6. Underline or circle one to three tropes for your romantic subplot or write in your own.

holiday romances/flings	best friend's brother/sister	workplace/work adversaries	rich vs poor/ unequal social status
enemies to lovers	secret identity	opposites attract	friends to lovers
second chance	fish out of water	oblivious to love	trapped in an elevator
grumpy/sunshine	redemption	matchmaker	revenge
step siblings	widow/widower	amnesia	rags to riches
arranged marriage	stranded	unrequited love	playboy/rake in love
kidnapped	protector	injury	road trip
bet	time travel	age gap	broken in some way
dark secret	emotional scars	bodyguard	men in uniform
all grown up	blackmail	unrequited love	cinnamon roll hero
wallflower	ugly duckling	antihero	black cat/golden retriever
rejected as unworthy by parents, friends or former lovers	sworn off a relationship	unattainable love interest/one -sided	right person wrong time
sudden/unexpected baby	love at first sight/insta love	return to hometown/reunion romance	break up to save him/her

Chapter 2: WHO are your love interests?

Look at the addendum for examples of the GMC, Trope, Romantic conflict, Wound, Fear, Lie, and Truth.



1. What is the Goal, Motivation and Conflict for each main character?

2. What is the romantic subplot's conflict?

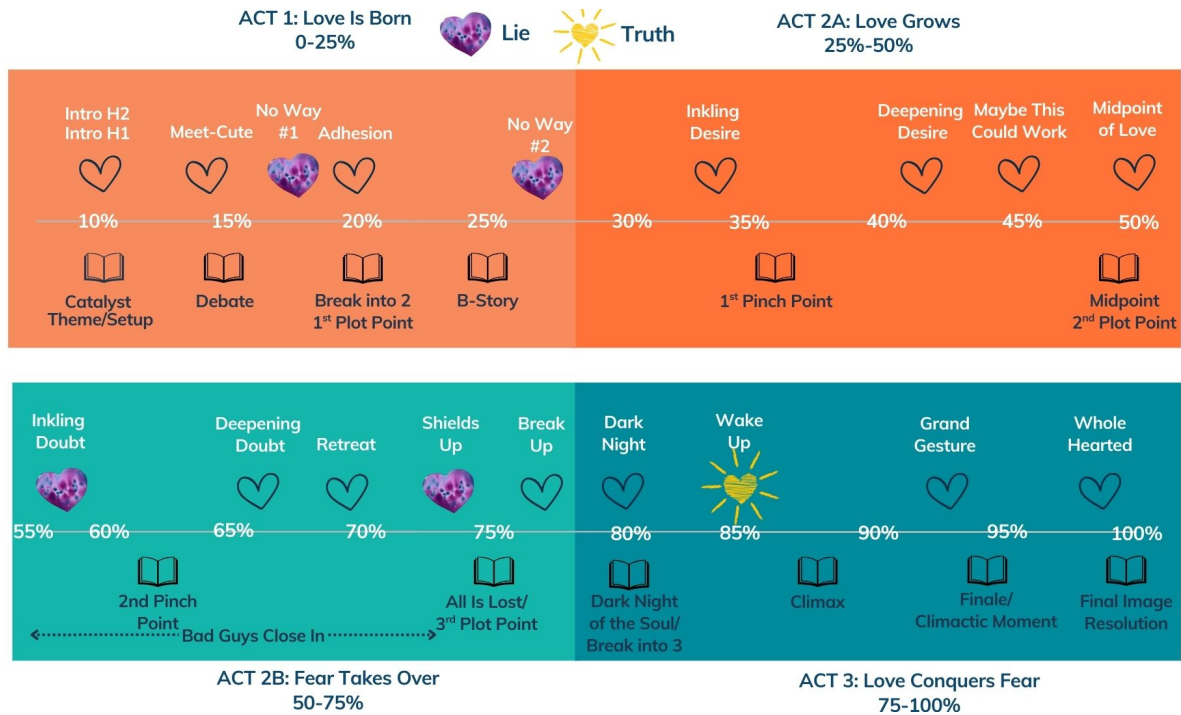
3. What is the wound for each main character?

4. What is the fear for each main character?

5. What is the lie for each main character?

6. What is the truth for each main character?

Chapter 3: WHERE do you place the romantic subplot?



1. No Way #1 (Lie stated)

2. No Way #2 (Lie re-stated)

3. Inkling Doubt (Lie reappears)

4. Shield Up (Lie confirmed)

5. Wake Up (Truth)?

6. Is your romantic subplot the primary or secondary subplot?

Chapter 4: HOW do you show romance on the page?

Pick an emotion for your main characters and write an element that expresses it as:

an internal thought

an external thought

an internal emotion

a line of dialogue

Resources: Books and Online

Books

Romancing the Beat by Gwen Hayes

Save the Cat! Writes a Novel by Jessica Brody (chapter 10)

The Trope Thesaurus by Jennifer Hilt

The Emotions Thesaurus by Angela Ackerman and Becca Puglisi

Foolproof Romance by Christopher Downing

Creating Character Arcs by K.M. Weiland (helps with any character arc, including romance)

Online

150 Romantic Tropes-<https://eviealexandraauthor.com/150-romance-novel-tropes/>

Save the Cat Beat Sheets-<https://savethecat.com/beat-sheets>

Feelings List-<https://www.hoffmaninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/Practices-FeelingsSensations.pdf>

Online Emotions Thesaurus-<https://onestopforwriters.com/emotions>

Addendum: Examples for Chapter 2 WHO are your love interests?

GMC for a Grumpy Character in a Mystery Genre

Main Plot

Goal (External):

Solve a high-stakes mystery e.g., uncover the truth behind a suspicious death, missing person, or major cover-up that no one else believes in.

Motivation:

They need to prove they're still capable of solving things alone, that *logic and control* are more reliable than people or emotions. They believe solving the case will validate their worth and keep them emotionally protected.

"If I crack this case, I'll prove I don't need anyone. That I'm still sharp and not broken."

Conflict:

To solve the case, they must trust the one person they swore they'd never let in again.

A young person has vanished under mysterious circumstances. The case was previously closed, dismissed, or mishandled, much like how the protagonist felt in their own life.

The only person willing to help — or assigned as their partner — is the **sunshine love interest** (a new character or someone from their past).

The case forces Grumpy to work closely with the sunshine-type partner (an old flame), who challenges their assumptions and brings warmth, empathy, or intuition into the investigation (everything the grump distrusts.)

Clues begin to suggest **corruption, personal betrayal**, or a **connection to someone the protagonist once trusted and lost**, Grump's emotional defenses weaken. The deeper the case gets, the more their internal conflict is triggered.

Obstacle:

They must **rely on others** to uncover the truth, including someone they don't want to let in emotionally.

Pressure Point:

Their refusal to open up **obstructs the investigation**. Leads dry up, trust breaks down, and lives may be at stake.

Stakes:

If they fail, the truth stays buried and someone else gets hurt or vanishes, echoing their past failure.

Symbolic Reflection:

Solving the case means facing their **fear of vulnerability** both as a detective and as a human being.

Romantic Subplot**Internal Conflict:**

"I'm falling for them again, but I can't afford to trust anyone."

External Conflict:

The love interest demands emotional honesty, connection, and trust which the grumpy character resists. Their guarded nature creates tension that interferes with both the investigation *and* the relationship.

Internal/Romantic Conflict Intertwined:

- Every time love interest gets close to the emotional truth, the grump deflects or lashes out.
- The love interest wants emotional honesty just as much as solving the mystery but the grump fears that kind of exposure even more than failure.
- The grump's lie ("*I'm better off alone*") starts to sabotage the case itself.

Tropes:

1. **Grumpy/Sunshine** – Emotional walls vs. persistent warmth
2. **Slow Burn** – Romance unfolds slowly amid the mystery
3. **Second Chance Romance** – The love interest may be someone from their past
4. **Forced Proximity / Partners in Investigation** – Mystery requires them to work together

Wound:

They were abandoned (by a parent, lover, or mentor) when they were vulnerable perhaps during a past case that went wrong. They associate emotional closeness with betrayal and loss.

Fear:

If I let them in, they'll leave or betray me, and I won't survive it.

Lie:

Love is a liability. Trust gets you hurt. I'm better off alone.

Truth:

Love isn't a weakness. It's the courage to be seen, and it can give you strength rather than take it away.

Once the grumpy character accepts that trust doesn't always end in pain, they can truly connect both emotionally and as a team. This unlocks both the romance and the resolution of the mystery (symbolically and plot-wise).

GMC for the Sunshine Love Interest in a Mystery Genre

Main Plot

Goal (External):

Uncover the truth behind the disappearance — not just to solve the case, but to protect someone vulnerable from being forgotten or abandoned.

Motivation:

They believe **no one should be left behind or dismissed**: not the missing person, not the grumpy ex, and not themselves. They need justice *with compassion*, and they want to prove that *hope and connection matter even in darkness*.

"If I give up on people, I lose who I am, and I won't let that happen."

Conflict:

To solve the case, they must work with someone who once pushed them away emotionally and still keeps them at arm's length. As the investigation uncovers deeper wounds and dangers, they're forced to confront their **old heartbreak** while deciding if they can trust the grump again or risk getting hurt a second time.

"To find the missing person, they must risk reopening the heart that was broken the last time they tried to help."

Obstacle:

The grump's resistance threatens both the case and the fragile trust they're trying to rebuild.

Pressure Point:

As the case parallels their own breakup (or unresolved past), the sunshine is torn between staying and walking away.

Stakes:

If they fail, the truth stays buried and someone else gets hurt or vanishes leaving them to live with the guilt of not doing enough both in the case and in their own broken heart.

Symbolic Reflection:

For the sunshine, the mystery becomes a test of how much to give, how long to hope, and whether love requires being chosen, not just trying harder.

Romantic Subplot

Internal Conflict:

"I still care about them, but if I open up again and they shut me out, I don't know if I can take it."

External Conflict:

The grumpy partner keeps emotional distance and resists the connection that once mattered to them both even as the case forces them together.

The sunshine struggles between wanting to heal the grump and needing to protect their own heart.

Internal/Romantic Conflict Intertwined:

As they investigate the missing person case, the sunshine becomes emotionally invested — not just in solving the mystery, but in making sure this person isn't forgotten, like the grumpy once made them feel.

The deeper they dig, the more the case reflects their past: someone vulnerable, overlooked, and possibly abandoned. It stirs up their own fear of not being enough to hold someone's attention or loyalty.

Every clue that brings them closer to the truth forces them to work with the grumpy partner — reigniting chemistry but also reopening the wound of being left behind.

The sunshine pushes for answers — in both the case and the relationship — but keeps hitting the same emotional wall: the grump won't let them all the way in.

As the case reveals secrets about betrayal, corruption, or loss, the sunshine begins to question whether loving someone who won't open up is a pattern they've fallen into — and if trying to "fix" the grump is really about rescuing the person who's gone missing or rescuing a part of themselves.

The closer they get to solving the mystery, the more the sunshine has to face their own choice: do they keep pouring love into someone who won't receive it, or do they choose to protect their own heart — before they vanish emotionally, too?

Tropes:

1. **Grumpy/Sunshine** – Emotional walls vs. persistent warmth
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Wound:

They were once **left behind or rejected** when they tried to love someone who couldn't love them back (emotionally unavailable grump.)

Their wound may be tied to a deeper belief that *their love isn't enough* if it's not returned.

Fear:

If I open up again, I'll be hurt all over again and I won't be able to stay soft in a hard world.

Lie:

Hope makes you foolish. Love has to be earned, and I wasn't enough before.

Truth:

Love isn't about fixing others or proving your worth, it's about showing up, being seen, and choosing to try again *together*.