Romance Writing 101

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My two home Chapters, Greater Vancouver and Vancouver Island, are holding informal half hour Q&A sessions ahead of each meeting, where less experienced members can ask questions of more experienced ones. Here are some of the topics that we've discussed.

Note: The answers are "quick and dirty," not comprehensive. As with any writing advice, they are opinions, not gospel truth <g>. For more information, check the following sources (available only to members of Romance Writers of America; www.rwanational.org):

- The archives of Romance Writers Report articles, which can be accessed by RWA members at www.rwanational.org.
- RWA conference CDs.
- RWA Chapter loops. Feel free to ask writing-related questions.
- Online courses offered through RWA Chapters.

RESOURCES

Q: What are some useful books on writing?

A: See my article, "Resource Books for Writers," at http://www.susanlyons.ca/articles/index.htm.

THE JARGON

Q: What's all this talk about word count?

A: Publishers' submission guidelines usually include a guideline (or requirement) regarding word count. For example, eHarlequin.com has the word counts (and other guidelines) for every line. Checking word count is an important piece of research to do before you submit, and perhaps even before you start writing. For example, if you want to write for Harlequin Superromance, there's no point writing a book that's 40,000 words or one that's 80,000 words. Some publishers and lines are quite specific, such as Harlequin, because the books are

all the same size (though font size may get adjusted). Other publishers are more flexible, and books in a line may differ in length by 10-20,000 words.

Everyone wants to know if word count means the computer word count or the traditional method, which was based on typewriters. The old method said that if you use Courier 12 pt, with 25 lines per page, one page equals 250 words. Publishers tend not to be so rigid these days, so use your common sense and don't obsess over it. Even if the publisher has specific guidelines, you're usually okay if you're 5% over or under.

If you're writing a historical that's quite dense in terms of description and introspection, 100 typed pages are going to have far more words than if you're writing a breezy contemporary that's 90% snappy dialog. Look at the kinds of books the publisher publishes, and get a sense of how long they are, and how much variation there is in length.

Q: What does TSTL stand for?

A: Too stupid to live. This refers to a character who does something ridiculous and typically also dangerous. Such as the heroine who wakes up in the middle of the night and hears a noise downstairs and, rather than calling 911, drifts down in her filmy negligee to investigate. Or the hero who's a cop and goes rushing into a dangerous situation without first reporting in and calling for backup. If your story relies on your heroine or hero doing something that's TSTL, go back to the drawing board!

Q: What's a PRO and why should I become one?

PRO is RWA's recognition of members who have reached the significant career milestone of finishing an entire manuscript and submitting it to an editor or agent. The guidelines for qualifying and applying for PRO status are on the RWA website, in the Members Only section.

The benefits include: very useful loops with online courses, Q&A, and discussions; a quarterly newsletter with industry information; a PRO Retreat at the RWA National Conference with information focused toward PRO members' needs; career booklets with industry information; and second priority in signing up for editor/agent appointments at RWA National (after RITA and GH finalists).

ROMANCE AND SUBGENRES

Q: I've heard that in order for a book to qualify as a "romance" in RWA terms, it must be at least 30% romance. Is that true?

A: No. RWA doesn't have any strict formula. Always check their Policies and Procedures and contest guidelines to see the current rules. If you're submitting to the Golden Heart, make sure that the romance is a significant component of your book. If you've sold your first book and are applying for published author recognition (or you're entering the RITA), and you and your publisher classify the book as a romance, a novel with strong romantic elements, a romantic suspense, a paranormal romance, a young adult romance, etc., RWA likely won't question this. When in doubt, contact the RWA office for clarification.

Q: I'm starting to write a new romance novel and I don't know whether I should target it to category (i.e., a Harlequin/Silhouette series line) or single title. How do I decide?

A: The most obvious difference between the two is word length. Typically, a category book is shorter (e.g., 50-70,000 words rather than 90,000 or higher). Research the lines and publishers you think might be a good fit for your work and find out their guidelines regarding length and the type of story they're looking for. Then think about your story. Is it a relatively straightforward romance with perhaps one or two issues and/or a mystery/suspense plot? It might be a good fit for category. On the other hand, if it has several subplots and secondary characters, you may well be writing a book that's longer and more complex, and you should be thinking single title.

Q: I think my book might qualify as either "romantic suspense" or "novel with strong romantic elements". How do I know which is the correct classification, so I can decide which editor to submit to and how to phrase my query letter?

A: If your novel combines suspense elements and romance, it could fall into either category, and some books really could be classified as either one. In general, in a romantic suspense there are two stories going on at the same time: the romance story and the suspense story. Both are crucial, and they're interwoven. Often each feeds the other (e.g., something in the suspense plot raises issues for the heroine and/or hero, triggering them to face their internal conflict and grow). A suspense novel with strong romantic elements is typically more the story of one person's journey (or two people's journeys). The story is mostly about the suspense plot and character's journey, and the romance is significant but not as crucial. The romance elements will generally take up fewer pages in the total book.

Choosing the correct classification usually won't be a deal-breaker. If you submitted to the wrong editor and they think your writing is strong, they'll likely either: (1) refer the manuscript to a different editor at the publishing house; (2) send you a rejection letter with positive feedback; or (3) say they're looking for something different (e.g., more romance or less romance) and they'd be prepared to take another look if you cared to revise along those lines.

Q: What's the difference between erotic romance and erotica, and between erotic romance and romance?

A: Erotica is in essence about the protagonist's sexual journey. The story and the character arc relate to the sexual journey. There may or may not be a romance or romances, and may or may not be a happy romantic ending. Erotic romance is in essence a romance and has all the elements of romance including a happy romantic ending. As compared to a non-erotic romance, there are usually more sex scenes and they are longer and more explicit, and the language is graphic. Often in non-erotic romance, the heroine and hero fall in love, or are in the process of falling in love, before they become sexually intimate. In an erotic romance, it's often the other way around – i.e., they connect sexually first, then love grows between them.

Q: What's the difference between women's fiction and romance?

A: Women's fiction is about the protagonist's journey and character arc. It may include a romance or romances as a minor or major theme, but in essence the story is one person's journey. Romance is about two people's journey as they fall in love, struggle with external and internal conflicts, and earn a happy romantic ending. Unfortunately, publishers don't always label the books clearly – e.g., a book that's really women's fiction may be labelled romance if the publisher believes it will achieve greater sales, yet readers may be dissatisfied if there isn't sufficient romance for them, or there isn't a happy romantic ending. Writers don't usually have any say in how the publisher classifies their books.

YOUR WRITING

Q: When I write, I find myself holding back because I'm worried about my family and friends reading what I'm writing. How do I overcome this?

A: When you write a first draft, don't let anything hold you back. No-one needs to read those words unless you want them to – and if you keep second-guessing yourself (i.e., letting the internal critic have her say), your writing is going to be diluted and constrained and your voice won't shine through. Let your characters have full voice to be as sassy or profane as suits their personalities. Afterwards, go back and edit and think about where are you targeting this book, and whether the wording is appropriate for it (e.g., you won't want much or any profanity in a Harlequin American Romance, an inspirational romance, or a book targeted to young readers), and whether you have best expressed the character's voice given any constraints of the line you're targeting. If, after editing, you have a book that's too XYZ (profane, sexy, religious, non-religious, violent, etc.) for you to be happy about your family and friends reading it, but you still love it and want to see it in print, then you may wish to use a pseudonym and not tell people you're the author. However, it's tough sustaining a secret life and hiding an important part of yourself from friends/family, so really think carefully before making this decision. Maybe instead you could find a type of book that you're happy to write and also happy to have your family/friends read.

Q: When I write, I find myself thinking, "This isn't original. I've read it before."

A: Don't worry about it when you're writing. Forge ahead with the story and turn off the internal critic. When you edit, you can work on originality. Identify expressions that seem cliché and look for more interesting ways of stating them that are true to the point of view character. Sometimes it's a matter of finding the character's voice (e.g., is she a drawling Southern belle who comes out with all sorts of folksy expressions or a clipped and to-the-point prosecutor who sees life in terms of win/lose?). And sometimes it's a matter of developing your own voice, which is a matter of time, experience, and reflection.

Q: I think I'm a good storyteller, but my basic English skills could use some brushing up. What should I do?

A: You're lucky to be a storyteller. That's a gift that's very hard to learn. English skills are much easier to learn. They're also very important. It is assumed that a writer should be competent at these skills, and it is not the editor's job to fix their work. Don't submit work

until it is polished. Even if you're a wonderful storyteller, errors in grammar, punctuation, spelling, etc. will prevent your story from coming across.

Assess your level of skill realistically, then look for an appropriate resource book or course. A basic children's school book on grammar and punctuation might be useful, or a higher level English text. Or, at a more advanced level, a book such as Strunk & White's, "The Elements of Style" or "The Chicago Manual of Style." Some people find a freelance editor who will not only correct their work but teach them what they're doing wrong. Or perhaps you can find a colleague who will copy-edit your work.

Make a list of your particular writing problems, so you can check for them in your manuscripts. When you are more conscious of the craft of writing, your skill will improve.

When you are relatively comfortable with your work, submit it to a contest or join a critique group and see what feedback you get. If you get comments about grammar and other writing basics, check them out against your reference book. Sometimes the person making the comment is wrong. If they're right, then learn from their feedback and try not to make the same mistake again. You'll get other kinds of comments too (e.g., your heroine is unsympathetic, the pacing is too slow, I didn't find this part believable). Don't take these as gospel truth; see if they resonate with you, and if more than one person makes the same comment. Remember, the critiquer/judge is offering only one opinion. Most of all, don't let the criticisms discourage you. All of us are continually working at improving our skills. It's part of the process of being a writer.

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Q: *What if the "rules" say one thing, and the publisher's guidelines say something different?*

A: If you're submitting to a publisher, always check for their submission guidelines and follow them, whether you agree with them or not.

Q: *What if the publisher's lead author does something in their writing style that I've heard is "wrong"?*

A: There are very few absolute wrongs and rights, but in general, if you're trying to break into the commercial fiction market (as compared to literary fiction), you're safest to stick to a relatively conventional style. Well-established authors have more flexibility. For example, some bestselling authors have head-hopping (or ping-ponging) POV, but generally that's not going to work for a new author. One person mentioned a bestselling author's work where italics are used for sentences such as, "*He had an awfully cute butt, she thought*." Don't try that one yourself. Having a distinctive voice is a good thing. Being eccentric when it comes to basic grammar is not.

Q: Can you share any tips for plotting?

A: There are so many different methods, and you need to figure out what works for you. There's no right or wrong way. Some people like to plot pretty much every detail ahead of time and write a detailed outline. Others think that takes all the fun out of it. Some write in chronological order and others write scenes as they come to them, then fit them all together later. You can read books on plotting, take workshops, listen to RWA workshop tapes and learn about: the writer's journey; scene and sequel; goal, motivation and conflict; the three-act structure; the snowflake method; applying screenwriter techniques; and so on, and so on. One or more of these may resonate with you. Or you will take bits and pieces from some and make up your own method. The more you write, the more you'll figure out your own process.

Some people find it intimidating to plot the whole book ahead of time, but useful to plot the first third, then write it. After that, they plot the second third, and so on.

Some people like to have a story board or scene list that gives the bare bones of what needs to happen at various points in the story, which they keep as a reference and revise as they go along.

One general principle many writers agree on is that you shouldn't second guess yourself as you write. If the writing is flowing, let it happen. You may later need to edit it, or even chop out huge pieces, but if you over-think as you write you're likely not to be happy with the result.

Q: When you're writing the first draft should you ever put in a place-marker like "research this" or "write this scene later" and carry on past that point?

A: Different authors will give you different answers. Probably the key factor in making this decision is whether the research, scene, etc. might have a significant impact on the rest of the story. If you're writing a legal suspense novel and you don't research the relevant law and procedure before going ahead, you may have to do a great deal of rewriting, and even rethinking your story. On the other hand, if you know pretty much everything that's going to happen in a scene, including conflict, emotion and character arc, you may well be able to skip that scene and write it later. But be wary, because we all know that sometimes characters have a mind of their own, and they may take a scene in a different direction than the one you'd intended.

Q: I love writing dialog and sometimes worry that I get carried away. How do I know if it's too much?

A: When you're writing, let the dialog flow naturally. Later, go back and evaluate it. Does every bit count? If the characters are doing social chat like "hi, how are you, nice weather today," is there a good reason for it? If it's not advancing the story, revealing character, showing conflict or emotion, or serving one or more other useful purposes, then it shouldn't be there even if it's brilliant, witty, or laugh-out-loud funny. Save it; maybe you can rework it a little and use it in another book.

Studying TV/movie dialog is a good way of learning how to make every word count. But be aware that, with books, you also need to include actions and emotions – things that on screen an actor would bring to life.

If you feel that you're too close to your work to evaluate it, get another writer's input.

Q: *How long should chapters be, particularly when I'm submitting a partial or entering a contest that calls for the first three chapters?*

A: In general, there's no fixed length that's desirable for chapters. Check the line/imprint you're targeting and see what other authors do. Some lines may have fairly standard chapter lengths; others may have a lot of variety. In general, concentrate on telling your story effectively. Think about when you want to change scenes and points of view. A chapter break can be an effective time to change points of view, or to change to a different time and place. Consider what story points and hooks you want to end on. You would like the reader to turn the page to the next chapter. The third chapter should end on a significant jumping off point (hook), especially when you're submitting a partial. You want the editor/agent/judge to be dying to know what happens next.

Q: *When should I insert a spacer between paragraphs?*

A: Typically, use a spacer for a break between scenes – where time and/or location change. Occasionally you'll see a spacer when point of view changes within a scene, but in general this isn't recommended. Instead, make the new POV clear in the first sentence of the new section (e.g., use the POV character's name and couple it with an internal thought only that person could have). When you're inserting a spacer, it's often a good idea to insert something like * * * *, not simply extra space. If the extra space falls at the bottom of the page, it could get lost. The publisher, when doing copy-edits, will decide whether to leave the asterisks in, or to substitute blank space, according to their house style.

Q: *Do I use American or English spelling?*

A: If you're submitting to a US publisher, use US spelling. If you're submitting to a UK publisher, use UK spelling. In Microsoft Word, you can highlight your entire document and set the language (it's under Tools, Language, Set Language in Word 2003). If the document was in one language and you then change to another, you will also want to re-set the spell-checker (in Word 2003, go to Tool, Options, Spelling & Grammar, and click on Recheck Document).

Q: *Can/should I use brand names in my book?*

A: It depends. There are three main considerations. (1) What's typical for this kind of book, published by this publisher? Approaches vary from avoiding brand names entirely, to the style that was typical of "chick lit" with brand names all over the place. (2) What suits your story? If there's no reason to specify the brand, then don't. If the brand says something about the character or story (e.g., the hero who drives a new Mercedes versus the hero who drives a restored Mustang convertible), then include it. (3) Are you saying good or bad things about

it? If you're saying bad things about a car, restaurant, etc., then avoid using a brand. If you need a label (e.g., a restaurant name), make one up.

Q: *What are some tips for organizing the information for my book (or series) – research notes, character details, time lines, etc.?*

A: There are all sorts of things you can do, and your choice depends in part on the type of book you're writing and in part on your personality and style. Some people favor electronic note-keeping and others favor paper. You will probably always have some paper, because there will be things you've printed from the internet, torn out of magazines, or copied from reference books. (If you find useful information on the internet, it's often a good idea to print it out or at least bookmark it, because you may have trouble locating it again.)

A binder with tabs, or labeled file folders, are good ways of organizing paper information. If you also keep electronic files, you might want to label them in the same way. You will want to keep track of pertinent character information (e.g., age, physical characteristics, style of dress, expressions they use, relatives and friends, work, hobbies, etc.) and include photographs if you find any that are a good match. Keep details regarding setting (e.g., real or made up city/town, house, office). Keep a calendar for the events of the story. And tie that to the real calendar – e.g., to keep track that you don't have two Thursdays in a week, don't have someone going to the office on Sunday (unless you intend them to), don't forget about special days (e.g., Thanksgiving) including historical or contemporary events (e.g., presidential elections).

Another useful tip: Keep a list of all the names you use for characters in all your books, so you don't end up repeating the same ones.

Q: *How do you navigate around a manuscript? How do you find the place where you mentioned a particular detail? Do you save each chapter as a separate document?*

A: Each writer finds the system that's best for her/him. Many of us don't like having chapters in separate documents because we find it's harder to locate things, and to do things like change a character's name through the whole book. One way of finding information is the basic Find feature of your word-processing program. If you're looking for the part where the heroine discussed her sister, search for "sister." If you're looking for a particular scene, think of something distinctive about the scene (e.g., maybe they were drinking red wine) and search for that. Many authors also keep a scene chart, either in paper format or electronically (ranging from a one-sentence summary to a detailed description of setting, action, goal/motivation/conflict etc.).

Q: *I keep hearing that books need to be fast-paced and there shouldn't be too much description. How much is too much, especially in a shorter-length book?*

Some people naturally write lots of description (especially if they've done a lot of research) and others naturally write very little. When you've finished the first draft, go back and edit to make sure you have an appropriate amount. "Appropriate" depends on a number of things. The length of the book is a big factor. So is the type of book: a historical or fantasy requires more description because you're building a rich, textured world, and readers want a fair

amount of detail. In a fast-paced contemporary, there's much less need for detailed description of places, clothing, etc. In romance, you'll always want sufficient description of character and emotion so the reader is drawn in and cares about the heroine and hero.

Description should be woven in small bits throughout the book, not dumped in great chunks. A good writer can say a lot with very few words (e.g., giving a telling detail that provides the reader with insight about personality or emotion). Description should never be filler; it must always have a purpose, such as to illustrate character or enhance the mood.

And, finally, description must be appropriate to the point of view character. If the heroine is dressing to meet the hero, she might obsess over what she's going to wear – e.g., deciding to wear a short skirt and heels to show off her legs, which she considers to be one of her best features. She might choose a colour of blouse that brings out the green flecks in her hazel eyes. When the hero meets her, if you're writing from his point of view, he's not likely to analyze the details, just think she looks really hot, her legs go on forever, and her eyes are sparkling.

Q: *My romantic suspense has a couple of things that critiquers have questioned. My heroine has two lovers, and my hero was involved in someone's death (though he wasn't the one who caused it). Are those taboo?*

A: Depending on the facts of the hero's situation, the scenario you've described shouldn't be a problem. The heroine's situation is more dicey, especially if you're targeting a Harlequin/Silhouette category line. In romance, it's acceptable for the heroine or hero to have dumped a lover or been dumped, but it's usually not acceptable for them to be sexually involved with two people. If you're writing erotic romance or erotica, then it's a different matter.

Q: *I'm writing a historical romance. How many characters do I need, and how many points of view?*

A: Typically you will want to have more than simply the heroine and hero for a historical. Family and/or friends should play a role in the story. You will generally want three or four point-of-view characters.

Q: *How long should my book be?*

A: Research the lines and publishers you think might be a good fit for your work and find out their guidelines regarding length and the type of story they're looking for. For all Harlequin lines, you can find guidelines at eHarlequin.com. If you're not targeting Harlequin and your targeted publisher doesn't provide guidelines, the general rule of thumb is that you won't want to be over 100,000 words, and probably more like 80-90,000 for a first book. Printing costs are high and today's reader tends to look for a fast-paced read, and both factors make for lower word counts. And yes, there are always exceptions. But be aware, what works for a bestselling author (e.g., a very long book) isn't necessarily going to work for a first-time author. Play it safe.

Also, think about your story. Is it a relatively straightforward romance with perhaps one or two issues and/or a mystery/suspense plot? It might be a good fit for category (i.e., the Harlequin series lines). On the other hand, if it has several subplots and secondary characters, you may well be writing a book that's longer and more complex, and you should be thinking single title.

Q: How do I know when my work is finished?

A: When you've done the best job you can at the time. This means not just writing the story, but editing it, probably several times. Take a look for books, RWA workshops and articles that discuss the editing process. You may also want to get feedback from others (e.g., through contests and/or critique groups). As a final step, it's good to read your work out loud. You're guaranteed to find more things that need fixing. If, after that, you're happy with your work, then it's ready. You can fine-tune for years, but that won't necessarily improve your book, and in fact sometimes you can harm it by dulling the freshness and vitality.

Q: I've finished writing my book. What happens next?

A: You edit, and make it as good as you possibly can. Then, if possible, get some feedback. See the answer above about critiques and contests. Note also that some contests have editors/agents as final round judges, and if they like a manuscript they may request that you submit it.

Once you've polished your work and are happy with it, it's time to submit it to an editor or agent. By now you should have done some market research and have an idea what publisher(s) might be interested. With some publishers, you can submit directly without an agent. With others, you require an agent unless you have the opportunity to attend a conference and pitch directly to an editor. Some authors prefer to try getting an agent first; others prefer going directly to an editor. You can discuss the pros and cons with other authors on your various online loops and at RWA Chapter meetings and conferences.

Q: How do I find the nerve to show my work to others?

A: If you want to be published, that means people (thousands of them!) will be reading your work. So, get over your issues with it <g>. Yes, that's easier said than done but, seriously, you do have to get over it. You might want to start with a contest run by a different RWA Chapter, where you'll be anonymous. Build up your courage and look for constructive critique partners in your local Chapter or an online Chapter. When you're asking for a critique, let the critiquer know what you're looking for. For example, you may have just started a book and want to know if, in general, the characters and story line resonate with the reader. Or you may have finished and made ten editing passes and you're now ready to submit, and you want a final, very nit-picky read. Those will be two very different critiques.

Q: If I'm sending my work for a critique, should I wait until the whole book is finished?

A: If you're really confident about your work and just want a final opinion before submitting it, then wait until it's finished. Many of us prefer to get input as we go along, so that any significant problems can be identified early and dealt with (e.g., she's not sympathetic; the

conflict between them seems contrived). However, even if you're sending a chapter at a time, it's good to have edited that portion at least once. It's a courtesy to your critique partners to have done some basic cleanup, so they can focus on important things rather than being distracted by typos, misspellings, etc.

Q: *If I get a rejection letter that says the writing isn't strong enough for their line, what does this mean?*

A: That's pretty much a standard form rejection and it doesn't convey much information. They're just saying that the book didn't stand out for them. It could either be because you need to work on the nuts and bolts (e.g., grammar); it could be that you don't understand the basic structure of a romance (e.g., conflict, resolution, happy ending); it could be that your characters and story aren't distinctive; it could be that the elusive thing called "voice" isn't there (i.e., your writing is competent but not memorable). You may have a gut-level recognition of where your problem lies. If you don't, consider finding someone (e.g., a published writer or an experienced critique partner) who will read the first three chapters of your manuscript and give you some feedback.

WRITER'S BLOCK

Q: *Do you have some tips for dealing with writer's block?*

A: There are two kinds of situations that we refer to as writer's block. The serious kind is where you've gone days, weeks, maybe even months and been unable to write. If that's the case, you may have some serious things going on in your life and this just may not be a good time for writing. If you want to be writing but can't seem to, do anything you can to stimulate your joy in life, your creativity, your enjoyment of books and reading.

The easier problem is the one almost all of us face occasionally, where we get stalled. There are all sorts of different things to try. If you experiment, you'll figure out which techniques are the best triggers for your creativity. For example:

- Just keep writing. You can always edit or even delete later.
- Don't try to make it perfect. Don't think about whether you're writing "well"; just write. If your internal critic is sitting on your shoulder, the words are likely to come out stilted and unnatural. If you get rid of the critic, the characters can speak through you. Remember, you're going to have lots of chances to edit your work later.
- Get away from the computer and do something physical. Physical activity can shake up your mental blocks.
- Think about why you're stalled. If it's because you don't know what happens next, then pull back from the story and focus on the characters. While you're taking that walk, talk to your characters (preferably in your head, unless you're on the treadmill at home), get to know them better, and think about all the things they might do next.
- Write in a different place. Get away from the desktop computer and write in the living room, on the patio, at a coffee shop.
- Write at a different time of day.

- Write something different. Don't write the next scene in your book; write a character bio in their own words, write an email from one character to another, write a short story, write a poem, write wildmind (see Natalie Goldberg's books).
- Play music.
- Try another creative activity, such as doing some drawing before you write.
- If you can't focus on writing because your mind is cluttered with other "stuff," make a list of all that other stuff so you won't forget it, then turn to your writing.
- Give yourself a day or two off to play.

Don't let not writing become a habit, though. If you're serious about your writing career, you need to make writing a regular part of your life.

SYNOPSES

Q: I've never written a synopsis and I'm terrified. How do I write one?

A: Think of a synopsis as you telling someone about your story. (Let's assume here we're talking about a romance novel.) Who is your audience (typically and editor/agent or contest judge) and what do they need/want to know? They want to know about the characters, the story, the conflict, the emotion, the development of the relationship, the setbacks, the resolution. Some writers start with a one-line description, but more typically that goes in your cover letter. Most synopses start with a brief paragraph about the heroine, then one about the hero. Who is the person? For example, "Jenilee Jefferson is a feisty thirty-year-old lawyer who is more successful at winning cases than winning love." The details vary depending on what's important in your story, but typically you will want to have a brief description of personality plus some personal details (e.g., age, occupation, where she lives). Then you'll have a brief "set up" description – e.g., where she's "at" in her life right now. For example, "Having just lost her fiancé to a woman whose greatest talent is picking the right pair of shoes to match every outfit, Jenilee's given up on men and is devoting her attention to the biggest case to come her way." Interesting, but what's her goal, and why does she want it? That's what hooks the reader and makes them care. "If she wins, she'll achieve her ambition of being the first female partner at the firm of Arbuckle & Pickens, thereby proving to her daddy once and for all that a girl child is just as good as a boy." The reader can see her immediate goal (winning the case), the bigger goal (becoming partner), and the true, deeper motivation and goal (her father's made her feel second class because she was a girl not a boy, and she wants to prove herself to him).

Then you have a short paragraph on the hero, in similar format. Ideally, it reveals some personality differences and a conflict or potential conflict between them.

(A note re writing style: (1) use present tense in a synopsis, even if your book is written in past tense; and (2) write in a style that reflects the voice/tone of the story. For example, Jenilee's book is likely to be humorous but also have some poignancy because of her issue with her father.)

From the initial paragraphs, move on to summarize the basic plot. You don't need all the details, only the most important ones. And focus on conflict (the conflict between heroine and hero, and also the internal conflicts each faces as the story unfolds), emotion, and the development of the relationship. Set out each turning point (e.g., when they first kiss) and the emotions involved. Typically in romance there's a crisis point (often referred to as the black moment) when it seems that the lovers can never be together, so make sure you include this. Also include the resolution and the happy ending. Never write a synopsis without revealing how the story ends.

In terms of length, check the submission or contest guidelines. Some editors/agents prefer no more than two pages. Others like to see approximately one page for each 10,000 words of story. See if you can find guidelines on the publisher, agent, or contest website. Even if length is not specified, take clues from words like "short" or "detailed." A short synopsis typically won't be longer than two double-spaced pages. A detailed synopsis will normally be longer than that. You want to give a concise description of your characters, the attraction and the conflict between them, major plot points, major developments in the romantic relationship, and the resolution of the external plot and the romance. In general, even for a detailed synopsis of a 90,000 word book, you should have fewer than 10 double-spaced pages.

There are many resources for synopsis writing: e.g., online courses, articles at RWA's website and on author websites such as Lisa Gardner's Tricks of the Trade http://www.lisagardner.com/tricks/synopsis.htm, workshop CDs in your Chapter's library.

HOW DO YOU SELL?

Q: For those who have sold, what's the magic that gets you to that point?

A: No magic, unfortunately. You have to really learn the craft and work on all aspects of your writing, from the nuts and bolts of grammar through to what makes for great characters and a memorable story. Editors are looking for polished work. One thing to bear in mind while you're writing is that you know a great deal about your characters, and you may be inclined to make one of two mistakes: you may assume your reader knows more than they do and forget to tell them important information, or you may spoonfeed them with way too much detail. It's a really good idea to get feedback on your work, because you're too close to it to know how readers perceive it. Having a critique group is a great help. You can also enter contests that provide feedback. When you get input from others, don't be defensive and refuse to listen, but don't take it too seriously either. Weigh it and see if it resonates with you, and see if more than one person expresses a similar concern. Don't let someone try to change your story into theirs; stay true to your characters, theme, story. (If you're in a critique group that's making you feel bad about yourself and your writing, quit and find another.)

CONFERENCES AND PITCHES

Q: Should I go to the RWA National Conference?

A: It depends where you are in your career and what your goal is, and also on your personality. It can be overwhelming for a new writer who's an introvert; you might be better to start with a smaller regional conference and build up. At National, there are dozens and dozens of useful workshops, including publisher spotlights in which they discuss their lines and what's coming up. You can get some of the workshops on the conference CD, but not all of them – and some people get more out of attending in person. Editors and agents participate on panels, so you can get an idea of their personalities (e.g., agent ABC might be a fabulous agent but if your personalities aren't a match, maybe she/he is not the right agent for you). If you want to pitch an editor or agent, be aware that you may not get an interview with the person you want. Some of the editors/agents only do a couple hours of appointments and RWA sets priorities in terms of getting appointments. Sometimes all the appointments are gone by the time the Golden Heart finalists have finished selecting their appointments. If the editor/agent is attending a smaller regional conference, your chance of getting an appointment may be higher.

What else happens at National? Great inspirational speeches by some of your favorite authors. Networking at meals and workshops. Talking about writing with other writers. Getting free books at publisher give-aways. Attending the literacy signing to buy books and contribute to literacy. Attending the wonderful Rita/GH awards ceremony.

But also bear in mind that many of the same things are available at regional conferences, at a lower cost. Be sure to check out the conferences that are available in your area.

Q: If I'm attending a conference, should I ask for a pitch appointment?

A: Yes, if it will serve a purpose at this point in your career. Do you have a complete manuscript that's suitable for this editor/agent, ready to submit if they ask for it? If not, is this editor/agent someone you might want to submit to in the future, and you'd like to have a conversation with them about what they're looking for, etc.? Are you a novice at pitching and need the experience? All are valid reasons – however, be aware that editors don't want people wasting their time (e.g., if you aren't pitching a complete manuscript, sign up for a group appointment not an individual one). Note that group appointments can give you more information and experience: you get to learn from other authors' pitches and hear how the editor/agent responds to various pitches and questions. If you don't have a good reason for pitching at this point, don't ask for an appointment. Appointments are limited, so be courteous and let them go to the people who have a stronger need.

SUBMITTING TO EDITORS AND AGENTS

Q: When do I need to get an agent? Do I need one in order to sell?

A: You don't need an agent in order to sell. Some houses such as Harlequin/Silhouette and Kensington welcome unagented submissions. Other houses require that submissions be agented, though often an exception is made if the author has pitched in person to an editor at

a conference. That's not to say you shouldn't try to get an agent before selling, but many people say it's harder to find an agent than to find a publisher who will buy your work.

If your work is targeted to houses that aren't open to unagented submissions, it's usually a good idea to try to get an agent. This may occur more in subgenres like young adult or women's fiction, although an increasing number of romance publishers are making their submission process more restrictive (though see the answer to the previous question).

If you're submitting unagented, start researching agents and make a list of your top picks. If you final in the Golden Heart or make your first sale, this is a good time to approach agents – but there's still no guarantee you will find one. If an agent offers to represent you, make sure they are excited about your writing, not just looking to pick up an easy 15% commission. An alternative is to pay a literary lawyer to review your contract and negotiate for you.

With a number of publishers (e.g., if you're writing for a Harlequin/Silhouette category line), there may not be much to be gained from having an agent. However, if you want to move to a different subgenre (e.g., from category to bigger single title books, or from e-publishing to a bigger print publisher), you should consider finding an agent. If you intend to keep writing for your old publisher as well as writing bigger books for another publisher, consider whether you want an agent to represent all your writing or only the bigger books. Agents have different philosophies about this.

Q: *I'm thinking of submitting my work to an e-publisher. Any guidelines? Is it easier to get published with an e-publisher?*

A: Research the various e-publishers. Some are well-established and have an excellent reputation. Others are relatively new and are developing a solid reputation. Others are more questionable. Check out their websites and ask on loops if authors who have experience with the publisher will contact you privately. (It's a good idea to volunteer to phone them, if they're willing to talk to you. If the author has had a bad experience, she may (wisely) not want to express it in writing, but may be willing to share it in a phone conversation. If authors are kind enough to share their thoughts, keep that information confidential unless you have their permission to share it (e.g., if they recommend a publisher, they may say that you can refer to that recommendation if you submit).)

It may be a bit easier to get published by an e-publisher, depending on what you write. For example, some e-publishers are more flexible regarding the type of books they're looking for whereas some print publishers have moderately strict guidelines for different lines/imprints. For example, a book set in a certain time period might be fine with an e-publisher but not with a print publisher. However, the experience of one e-publisher is that they contract only about 5% of all the material that is submitted, so you still must submit high quality work.

Q: *Should I submit to publishers and agents at the same time?*

A: This depends in part on your subgenre. If you're writing category romance (i.e., targeted to a Harlequin/Silhouette series line), you may not need or want an agent. Submissions from unagented authors are normal and treated fairly by Harlequin/Silhouette.

If your book is targeted to houses that don't accept unagented submissions, you have a few options: pitch to an editor at a conference, enter a contest that's judged by an editor from a house you're interested in, write a query letter and take your changes (see the Q&A below), or find an agent.

If you're writing work that falls in the middle – i.e., it's targeted to publishers other than Harlequin/Silhouette who accept unagented submissions – then you have a tough decision and there's no clear right answer. Many writers say that it's easier to find a publisher than to find an agent, so you may want to shop your work around to editors. If you get an offer, then you may want to approach the agents on your short list. On the other hand, if you shop your work around and collect rejections from most of your target publishers, then submit to an agent, the agent isn't likely to want to represent the book as there's not much else she/he can do with it.

Q: *If a publisher says they don't accept unagented or unsolicited submissions, is it total taboo to submit?*

Don't send chapters or a full manuscript, but you might try sending a query letter with a short synopsis and the first 3-4 pages. What's the worst that can happen? You don't get a response, or you get a response saying it's their policy to not accept unagented, unsolicited submissions. However, if you submit, be sure to be totally professional. Use white paper, a standard font (typically Courier Dark or Times New Roman), and double-spacing for the manuscript pages. Write a query letter that's professional and informative; the tone should be friendly without being informal. Bear in mind that you're writing to an editor, not a lawyer or accountant; capture their interest. Make sure the pages are clean and odour-free (no perfume; no cigarette smoke). Make sure the packaging material is appropriate (no padded envelopes that explode lint in the editor's face).

Q: *I pitched to an editor/agent at a conference and received a request to submit. Should I submit immediately? How long can I wait?*

A: Submit as soon as you believe the work is ready for the editor/agent's eye. In general, you shouldn't pitch until your work is ready to submit and so, ideally, you can send it off the day after the conference. However, maybe you need to do some final tweaking, based on something the editor said, or on things you learned at the conference. Or perhaps you expected to be asked to submit a partial (i.e., a synopsis and three chapters) and it's polished and ready, but the editor/agent asked you to submit a full manuscript, and you're not ready to do that. There are three things to bear in mind: (1) rarely is the editor/agent sitting waiting with bated breath to receive your submission; however, on the other hand, he/she may actually remember you and your pitch – and that memory will fade, the longer you wait; (2) you want to impress the editor/agent with how professional you are, and one of the qualities of a professional writer is to be prompt; (3) you never want to submit something that you don't consider to be the best work you're capable of at this stage in your career. Bottom line: if it takes you a year to be ready, use that year well then go ahead and submit.

Q: *What's the guideline re submitting the same work to two publishers/agents at the same time, if you're an unagented author?*

A: These days, the industry is such that it's pretty much assumed you may be submitting to more than one place, especially if you are querying or sending a partial (and there's generally no need to specify this in your cover letter). However, check the submission guidelines because certain publishers/agencies may specify no simultaneous submissions or ask you to note if you're submitting elsewhere.

If a publisher/agent asks for "an exclusive" (i.e., the exclusive right to consider the manuscript for a specified period of time), you can choose whether to grant that right.

If a publisher/agent requests a full manuscript based on consideration of a partial, realize that they have invested time in reviewing your work, they have a positive opinion of your writing, and they're going to invest more time in looking at your full manuscript. It may in that case be courteous to inform them if you intend to submit elsewhere.

Q: *If I've submitted to one editor at a publishing house, can I pitch or submit to a different editor at the same house?*

A: Generally, you wouldn't contact a different editor if the first editor has asked to see more of your work or given you positive feedback. This editor has invested time in you – and if you produce a fabulous book, she deserves to be the one who acquires it. However, if the editor has moved to a line you don't write for, or you've written a manuscript for a line she doesn't acquire for, then it's probably appropriate to contact a different editor. If you're pitching, let the second editor know about your feedback from the first one. And then there's the situation where you've had a form-letter rejection from one editor. Usually there's nothing wrong with submitting a different manuscript to a different editor – but most people say you shouldn't submit the same one (even if you've changed the title and character names) to a different editor at the same house. Many publishers track all submissions. If you want to get your work in front of other editors, submit to contests where those editors judge the final round.

Q: *If I've been invited to submit material and don't hear anything, how long should I wait before following up?*

A: Did the editor/agent indicate their turnaround time in their request? If so, wait until that time has expired. If not, does their website state their normal turnaround time? If you don't know their normal turnaround time, you should usually allow approximately three months. Then follow up with a short, professional note asking if they have had the opportunity to consider your submission. Use email if they have requested that you communicate by email; otherwise, send a letter or phone the publisher and ask for the editor's assistant. Note: If you are submitting by mail, you may wish to include a SASP (self-addressed stamped postcard) with your submission, asking that it be returned to indicate that the editor/agent has received your material (i.e., it wasn't lost in the mail). But be aware, your package may not be opened by the receptionist; it may be sitting unopened in a stack on the editor's floor.

Q: *What if I'm unagented and have submitted the same manuscript to more than one editor/agent, then I get an offer from one?*

Whenever you get an offer, it's a good idea to say thanks very much, you're excited, you'd like to write down the relevant information, and you'll get back to them as soon as possible. Then hang up, scream, breathe, then evaluate the offer. You may wish to consult with other authors in your various loops. If it's an offer from an editor, you may wish to contact agents who are currently considering your material or agents on your wish list. But be cautious: don't sign with an agent whose attitude is "sure, I'll represent you; you have an offer in hand." Wait for one who has read your work and loves it. If you have an offer from one publisher/agent but might prefer another one who is currently considering your work, let the preferred one know you have an offer and ask if they've had a chance to look at your work yet. If you accept an offer, immediately notify anyone else who is considering your work, so they won't waste their time reviewing something that's already been sold. As always in this business, be professional and courteous.

Q: *Recently I've seen some agents doing or saying things on the Internet that I don't think are professional. What's up with that?*

The *Internet* has changed the way everyone does business. We now have the option of sharing (and videoing) as much or as little about our personal lives and opinions as we choose. It's up to each of us to decide on our professional image. We may choose to be friendly and approachable, a little mysterious, fun and a bit eccentric, or downright kooky. We need to think about who we want to reach and what message we want to convey. If an agent chooses to convey an image that you don't find professional, then that's an agent you won't want to work with. Similarly, if an agent (or editor) checks out an author's website, blog, tweets, or whatever and doesn't think that author is presenting herself professionally, it'll make the agent think twice about making her an offer.

This also leads to the caution that, when you're sharing information with the world, you should take some basic precautions. Do you feel safe sharing your home address (or making it easy to find)? How about letting people know you're out of town on a signing trip or holiday (one person tweeted about their absence and their home was broken into)? What about posting pictures of your lovely young daughters, or even pictures of yourself? Or telling people where you work, shop, or go to church? That's a personal decision for each of us.

PROMOTION

Q: *When you sell, what's the most effective and reasonably priced way of promoting your book(s)?*

A: We all wish we knew! Unfortunately, there aren't any neatly compiled statistics on this, and it's hard to measure the results of a single promo method. Also, in most cases your goal is not only to sell this particular book but also to get your name/brand out there and build your career. Repetition of your message (brand, book cover, etc.) is important because it often takes several positive impressions to result in a purchase decision.

If you can do only one thing, having a good (not necessarily huge and fancy, but effective) website is the most important. If your budget is very limited, find other things you can do at no cost, such as guest blogging, having your own blog, sending electronic ARCs (advance reading copies) to online review sites, writing articles for magazines, arranging local signings or events, sending media releases, sending notices to groups you belong to, sending notices to alumni magazines, and telling everyone you meet.

If you have some funds to spend, many romance authors recommend placing an ad in Romance Sells. This RWA-sponsored magazine goes to booksellers and librarians, it's reasonable ($200), and there is no ad design fee. Note that Romance Sells may not be as effective for authors of category/series romance, because booksellers/librarians purchase all the books in a particular line rather than selecting books by specific authors. Romance Writers Report is another good place to consider advertising. It goes to 10,000 people who read and write romance, as well as to romance editors and agents, and the ad costs range from $100 to $850.

If possible, find out what, if anything, your publisher is doing. You will want to coordinate with their efforts. Also, keep them advised about your own initiatives.

Other methods that many authors use include getting promo material prepared and sending it to bookstores (expensive and time-consuming), advertising in *RT BookReviews* (expensive), and doing social networking on MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, etc. (time-consuming). Each of these methods is no doubt effective for certain authors and certain books, so it's a matter of what suits your personality, budget, and available time.

It's good to do some of the standard things such as having a website and doing some guest blogs, because readers expect that (and likely so do your publisher and agent). It's also good to think outside the box and find unique ways of promoting yourself (e.g., if you're a sailor and your hero or heroine is a sailor, let the sailing organizations know about it; people enjoy reading books that feature their interests, hobbies, pets, geographic location, etc.).

Q: *How do I get in touch with other RWA Chapters if I'm in the area for a signing or event?*

A: The RWA Chapters are listed on the RWA website. From there, visit the Chapter's website for information about meetings, how to contact them, etc. If you want to invite members to a signing, it would be nice if you also attended one of their meetings (if it fits your schedule).

Q: *What are some tips for an effective book signing?*

A: Have good communication with the store ahead of time and try to check the details (without being too pushy). If possible, have a setup where you're accessible to customers, preferably not stuck behind a table. Be outgoing and friendly, but not high pressure. If you're reading, make it short and catchy. Be flexible, professional and pleasant. Expect something to go wrong and don't get upset. Signings aren't as much about selling books today as about making a positive impression on booksellers (take chocolate!). Try to get promotional material in the hands of potential buyers; they may feel self-conscious about picking the book up while you're there, but they may check it out at another time. Know where the restrooms

are, because someone's bound to ask you <g>. And be sure to hand them a bookmark when you give directions.

AFTER SELLING

Q: After I sell a book, will the publisher ask me to edit it?

A: That depends on your writing and on the editor. You may get zero edits or you may get a 14-page single-spaced revision letter. Never send something that's less than your best work with the hope that the editor will figure out what's wrong and tell you how to fix it. Instead, send your best and hope for an editor who is insightful enough to point out any weaknesses. Getting a revision letter from an editor is not an insult. The editor wouldn't have bought the book if she didn't like it, and your writing. The revision letter is her/his way of helping you make the book the best it can be, so it'll be a credit to you and the publishing house.

ROMANTIC SHORT STORIES

Q: Are there markets for short romance stories?

A: *Woman's World* (US) magazine probably pays the best. They want stories of 800 words only. You can find that magazine at some grocery and drug stores. *New Love Stories Magazine* is a print magazine that comes out every two months (http://www.newlovestories.com/). There are a number of magazines in England and Scotland, such as *Woman's Weekly* and *The People's Friend*, which you can find in magazine stores or the magazine section of big book stores. Online, there are a number of publishers such as *The Wild Rose Press*.