

What's Your Problem? A Guide to Creating Believable Conflict in Romance

by Jennifer Lawler
www.ClubEdFreelancers.com

[This article was originally published in *Writers Digest* magazine, back when I was an acquisitions editor. While the examples here pertain to romance, most of the information about conflict applies to any novel.]

As a romance acquisitions editor, I find that one of the biggest problems writers struggle with is creating a believable conflict, or series of conflicts, that will sustain the novel its entire length. Conflict is the core of any work of fiction – it's what makes your readers keep turning pages.

The Purpose of Conflict

Conflict drives the plot of any book. Your main character wants something, and someone or something thwarts him/her/them. In romance, everyone already knows how the book is going to end (happily ever after), so there is no tension over the outcome; the tension (and the page-turning) must come from some other source. At least some part of the conflict must be between the two love interests. No romance reader wants to read about how the plucky heroine met the strong, sexy hero and they realized they were right for each other and everything was awesome once they got rid of those pesky cattle rustlers. That might be a great suspense novel, but it is not a romance.

A romance must have something (a conflict!) that keeps the hero and the heroine apart. And what keeps the reader turning the pages is wondering how on earth you're going to get them to overcome that obstacle and reach the HEA.

You may be wondering that, too. If so, read on.

Setting Goals and Bringing Them Into Conflict

In romance, your two main characters must have internal goals and external goals, which they try to reach. If you can bring your characters' goals into conflict, and thus the hero and heroine into conflict, you have a good chance of creating believable tension that will keep your readers engaged. Sound complicated? Let's break it down a little.

Suppose Greta has always loved her grandmother's quilts, which remind her of her grandmother and her grandmother's house, the only place she ever felt safe and loved. She has the internal goal, perhaps never explicitly stated, but certainly implied, of being safe and loved. But that internal goal also creates internal *conflict*. If Greta wants to be loved, then she is going to have to take risks in life – dating men, caring for them, and so on. She wants to feel safe, and she doesn't want to take risks – but she has to take risks if she wants to feel safe. Quite the conundrum, right?

Greta's internal goal drives her external goal. Suppose she learns that the old general store on Main Street has finally come up for sale, and she realizes that she can buy it to start a quilt shop. She'll be able to share all that's wonderful about quilts – the love that goes into them, the sense of community they build – plus, owning her own business will help her feel more secure, because she's in charge. So the quilt shop becomes the external goal that helps her reach her internal goal.

Of course it's not that easy: she must have obstacles to reaching this goal. She could have problems with the current tenant, or the real estate agent, and these obstacles will create tension. But in romance, the main source of conflict needs to be the love interest – the other main character.

Suppose Hank also wants to buy the building – to house the hobby store he's always wanted to run. His internal goal is to feel connected, and the one time he felt connected was when his dad, who died very young, used to build ship models with him. But suppose he's also smarting from being cheated on by his ex-wife – he wants connection but he's afraid to trust again. There's his internal conflict.

His internal goal of feeling connected becomes an external goal of wanting to start a hobby shop – bringing him into direct conflict with Greta.

Hijinks ensue as each vies to get the property. Each is emotionally invested in their external goal because it is a reflection of their internal goal and being thwarted causes emotional pain. That is the key to conflict in romance – it must have a deep emotional source, even when the story is light-hearted.

For Frank and Greta to resolve the conflict between them (their external conflict) they must both resolve their internal conflict first. Greta may solve her internal conflict by realizing that safety isn't that important to her after all – that she is strong enough and smart enough to weather whatever storms may come, because the conflict with Hank has shown her that this is true. Or she may decide that the risks she runs in the short-term will lead to the long-term achievement of her internal goal (in a romance, this plays out as “loving Hank is worth the risk”). Hank must learn to trust again in order to feel connectedness, and perhaps despite their conflict he realizes that Greta has never lied to him or let him down and so he learns to trust her. When they realize they can both get what they want, they open the Main Street Hobby and Quilt Shop. Ta-da! A believable conflict *and* a satisfying resolution.

5 Questions You Must Answer to Create a Believable Conflict

Answering these five questions in the right way is the core to creating a believable conflict in your romance.

1. What do your main characters want – what are their internal and external goals?

If you don't make this clear, your readers won't care about it. I recently read a beautifully written manuscript about a man, let's call him Joe, who travels to an exotic country and finds out that his former lover, whom he believed dead, is actually alive. And then he sort of meanders around, wondering if he should try to find her, and things happen while he asks a few questions and thinks about it.

No, no, no. This is not a goal and it does not create believable conflict. Joe has to care about achieving a goal. He has to care *a lot*. That is what makes readers care. And in caring, he will set out to find his lost love, and petty bureaucrats/armed bandits/the jungle will try to thwart him.

However, we need more than Joe-against-the-odds to make a romance. Enter Josephine. Josephine has to want something, too. Something that will bring her into contact – and into conflict – with Joe. What could that be? Perhaps Josephine doesn't want the not-dead lover to be found – maybe it's her sister, and she's afraid the people who tried to kill her in the first place will succeed if they find out where she is. So she sets out to stop Joe. Their separate goals bring them directly into conflict with each other.

2. What's at risk if your characters don't reach their goals, whether internal or external? It has to matter.

If you can make the consequence big, like your hero will lose his job or your heroine her freedom if the goal isn't reached, you're more likely to keep the readers turning pages. A character racing to win a twenty-dollar bet doesn't have much in jeopardy, and failure isn't devastating. However, you can tie a smaller external goal into a bigger internal goal – the twenty-dollar bet may just be the external manifestation of something hugely important to the character – for example, proving that she is not a failure. Suppose LouAnn's awful father says, "I bet you twenty bucks you can't get a job by the end of summer" and she takes that bet. It's not the twenty bucks that's actually at risk.

Because you have two main characters trying to reach their goals, their competing goals must be of similar importance. If Anna is trying to reach Nome to get medicine that will save her dying mother's life, and Joe is trying to reach Nome to have a beer, and they come to blows over who gets the last seat on the dog sled, you do not have a believable conflict. If Joe doesn't reach his goal, oh well. Who really cares?

3. Are readers likely to sympathize with the goal? It has to be important and meaningful – saving the ranch, winning the election, bringing the bad guys to justice.

Suppose you have a story where the Greek shipping magnate spearheads a hostile takeover of the financially imperiled business that the spunky heroine is trying to save. And we are expected to believe that once the shipping magnate does her out of a job and destroys her dreams she will fall in love with him and have his children. Uh huh.

Now, her goal – saving the business – is important and meaningful and we can sympathize with it – but what about his goal? He has to have a sympathetic goal – a reason for wanting to take over the heroine's company that readers will understand. One way to accomplish this is to give him a *misguided* external goal based on an internal goal – for example, suppose all he wants is to make his father proud of him, and so he follows in his father's footsteps by launching hostile takeovers of vulnerable companies. Readers can sympathize with his internal goal while disliking his external goal. And then the conflict can be resolved when he realizes that his father was proud of him all along, or that his father will never be proud of him but that's okay, or whatever will serve to help him meet his internal goal.

If the conflict comes from the hero being domineering or mistreating the heroine, that is plain unsympathetic. Readers have to love your hero. If your hero is a big fat jerk, no one will love him. They also have to like and respect your heroine.

4. Do the main characters act realistically about their goals and their conflict? Do they respond and react in ways that readers will understand?

If your hero meets the heroine on page one, is promising his undying love on page two, and tries to prove it by stalking her as she goes about town on page three, he is not going to come across as a roguish charmer readers will root for but as a scary sociopath who needs intense psychotherapy.

When your characters' goals are too small, trivial, or contrived, you often end up making the characters act in unbelievable or unsympathetic ways. We've all read some form of conflict along the lines of "I don't date blue-eyed men and you're a blue-eyed man." If the conflict relies on a misunderstood e-mail, or some malicious third party interfering with the couple's road to happiness, or could be cleared up if the heroine would just ask one nine-word question, it isn't believable.

Believable conflicts are real problems, serious ones, that the couple must solve before they can unite.

5. How do their goals bring them into conflict?

If the hero wants to win the calf-roping competition, and the heroine wants to win the barrel-racing competition, and they support each other in their goals, then that is all very nice but it's a disaster for your story.

Sometimes writers think they can create conflict by adding in scheming ex-wives, malicious former in-laws, an outlaw biker gang, and a bounty hunter. And the Mafia. And a secret religious organization. Did I mention the bounty hunter? They believe that having all these third parties throwing obstacles in the way of the hero and the heroine creates conflict. These obstacles can indeed create problems, but they don't create *romance* conflict.

A romance is not a series of "and then this thing happened and then another thing happened." A romance has motivations, consequences, and plot developments that arise naturally from the characters' central goals and the conflict(s) these goals create. In other words, "*because* this thing happened, this other thing happened."

Because Greta wants to open her shop in the old general store she comes into conflict with Hank, who wants to open *his* store there. Scheming landlords, nutty city council members, and meddling mothers can all play a role in the story, but they cannot create page-turning tension in and of themselves. The central conflict must do the work.

Winding Things Up: Play Fair

It isn't enough to set up a believable conflict in your story, you also have to resolve it. A conflict, however believable, is not successful if it does not end in a way that satisfies the reader.

That does not mean the resolution should be predictable. The resolution should not rely on divine intervention, the wise third party who sets everyone straight, or the clock striking midnight. The conflict must be resolved by a change that occurs in each character that sets them on the path of mutual love and cooperation. Think of it like focusing a camera; the characters are muddled, and must reach clarity in order to reach their happily ever after. For example, Hank and Greta must realize that their goals are not mutually exclusive – that they can join forces, and reach their goals together.

By making sure your two main characters have a believable conflict, you'll keep readers turning the pages to the end.