

HOW TO OUTLINE A ROMANCE NOVEL

WITH SAVANNAH GILBO





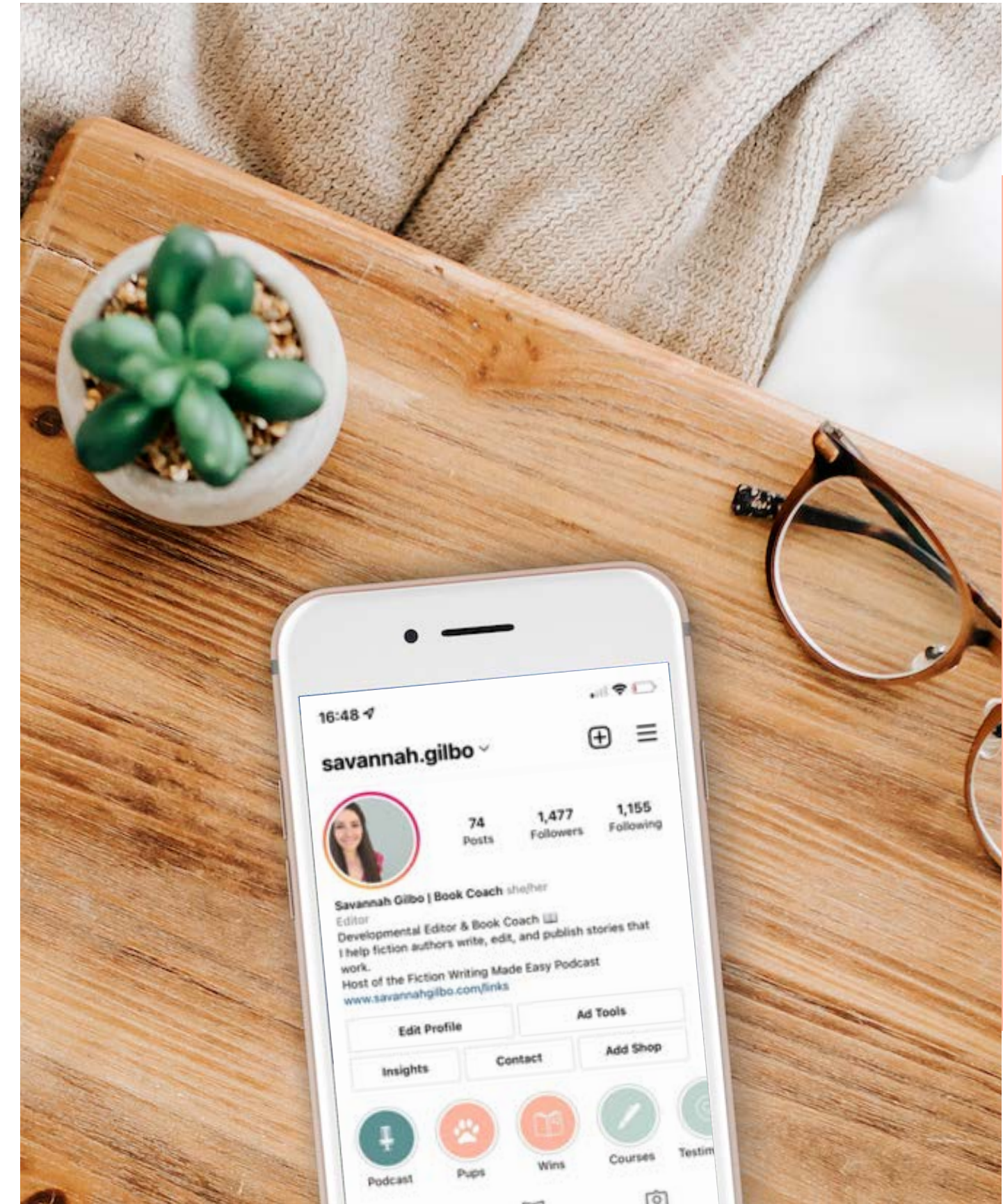
Certified Developmental Editor (Story Grid) & Book Coach (Author Accelerator)

Host of the top-rated Fiction Writing Made Easy Podcast

Really proud dog mom! I have three pups (and I'm obsessed with them)

Let's Get Social!

During the training, make sure to share on your Instagram stories and tag me at **@savannah.gilbo** so I can re-share your post!



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DOWNLOAD!

**How to Outline
a Romance Novel**
A QUICK START GUIDE FOR WRITERS




BONUS: ROMANCE QUICK START CHEAT SHEET | © SAVANNAH GILBO, ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

The Quick Start Guide to Outlining Your Romance

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I'm going to show you **how to outline your romance novel** so that you can write your draft in the most efficient way possible



- ✓ Why most outlines don't work (and why so many writers run out of steam halfway through a draft)
- ✓ How to break your story down into smaller chunks so that you can avoid feeling overwhelmed or lost
- ✓ The key scenes (and movements) a romance novel needs in each act of your story in order to work
- ✓ How your outline can help you trigger change and reveal character (yes, even at the outline stage!)
- ✓ An example from *The Duke and I* by Julia Quinn

About This Training...

The goal of this training is to **unpack the romance genre** so that you can see how a romance novel works on an act by act basis.

No matter where you fall on the plotter / pantsers spectrum, keep an open mind during this training and **take from it the tools and techniques that makes sense to you!**



WHAT IS A STORY *REALLY*?

A story is about how what happens externally affects someone who's in pursuit of a difficult goal and how that person changes internally as a result.

Why Most Outlines Don't Work (and What to Do Instead)

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Why Most Outlines Don't Work

Most outlines don't work because they focus too much on the external plot, **and not enough on how or why things affect the protagonist.**

An effective outline will do the following:

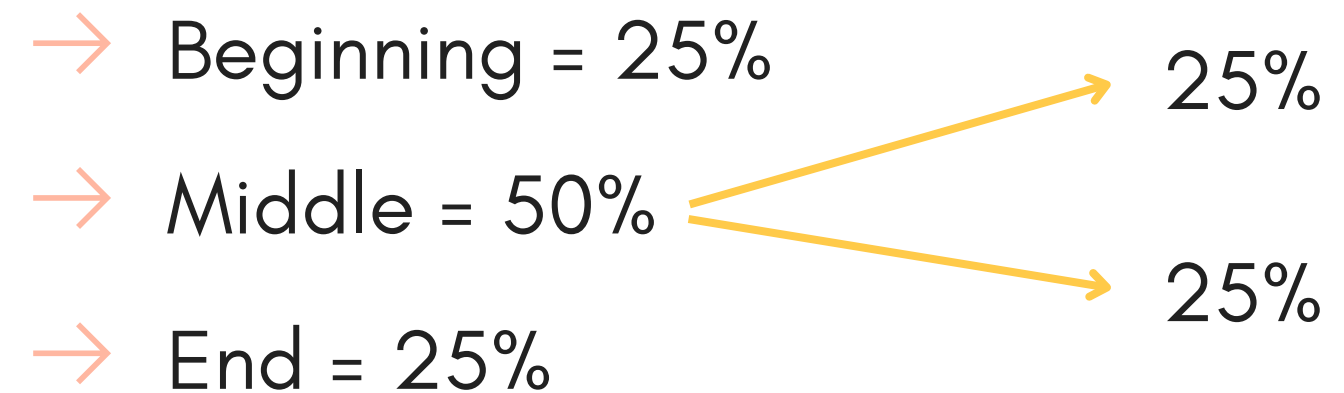
- Weave the external plot and internal character development together
- Allow you to see the entire arc of change from beginning to end
- Identify whether your protagonist has enough agency (or not)
- See the overall cause and effect trajectory from scene to scene
- Express a meaningful point or takeaway (your theme)



Let's talk about story math!

40 scenes x 2,000-words each = 80,000-words

Most stories break down like this:



Unless you have a compelling reason to veer away from it, I would use this as a template.

Goal: TBD depending on the genre

Inner Obstacle: A flaw, wound, or misconception about TBD

ACT ONE

ACT TWO-B

ACT TWO-A

ACT THREE

Outlining a Novel With the '5 Commandments of Storytelling'

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Act Goal: What does your POV character/s want to achieve, accomplish, learn, or do in this section of your story?

- An Inciting Incident – unexpected conflict
 - complication
 - complication
 - complication
- A Turning Point – peak conflict
- A Crisis – difficult choice between X and Y
- A Climax – the decision
- A Resolution – feelings/consequences/results

At the end of each act, ask yourself:

“Because of what just happened in this scene, what will my character do next?”

“What is the inevitable result of the choice my character just made?”

This will become your character's next act goal, and this is how you create that sense of narrative drive from one scene into the next scene.



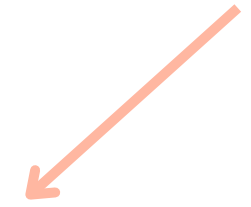
Example: All Genres / Generic Outline

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Goal: TBD depending on the genre

Inner Obstacle: A flaw, wound, or misconception about TBD



ACT ONE

II - Inciting Incident
TP - Turning Point
CR - Crisis
CL - Climax
RE - Resolution

ACT TWO-B

II - Inciting Incident
TP - Turning Point
CR - Crisis
CL - Climax
RE - Resolution

ACT TWO-A

II - Inciting Incident
TP - Turning Point
CR - Crisis
CL - Climax
RE - Resolution

ACT THREE

II - Inciting Incident
TP - Turning Point
CR - Crisis
CL - Climax
RE - Resolution

Goal: TBD depending on the genre

Inner Obstacle: A flaw, wound, or misconception about TBD

ACT ONE

II - Inciting Incident → one scene
TP - Turning Point → one scene
CR - Crisis → one scene
CL - Climax → one scene
RE - Resolution → one scene

ACT TWO-B

II - Inciting Incident
TP - Turning Point
CR - Crisis
CL - Climax
RE - Resolution

ACT TWO-A

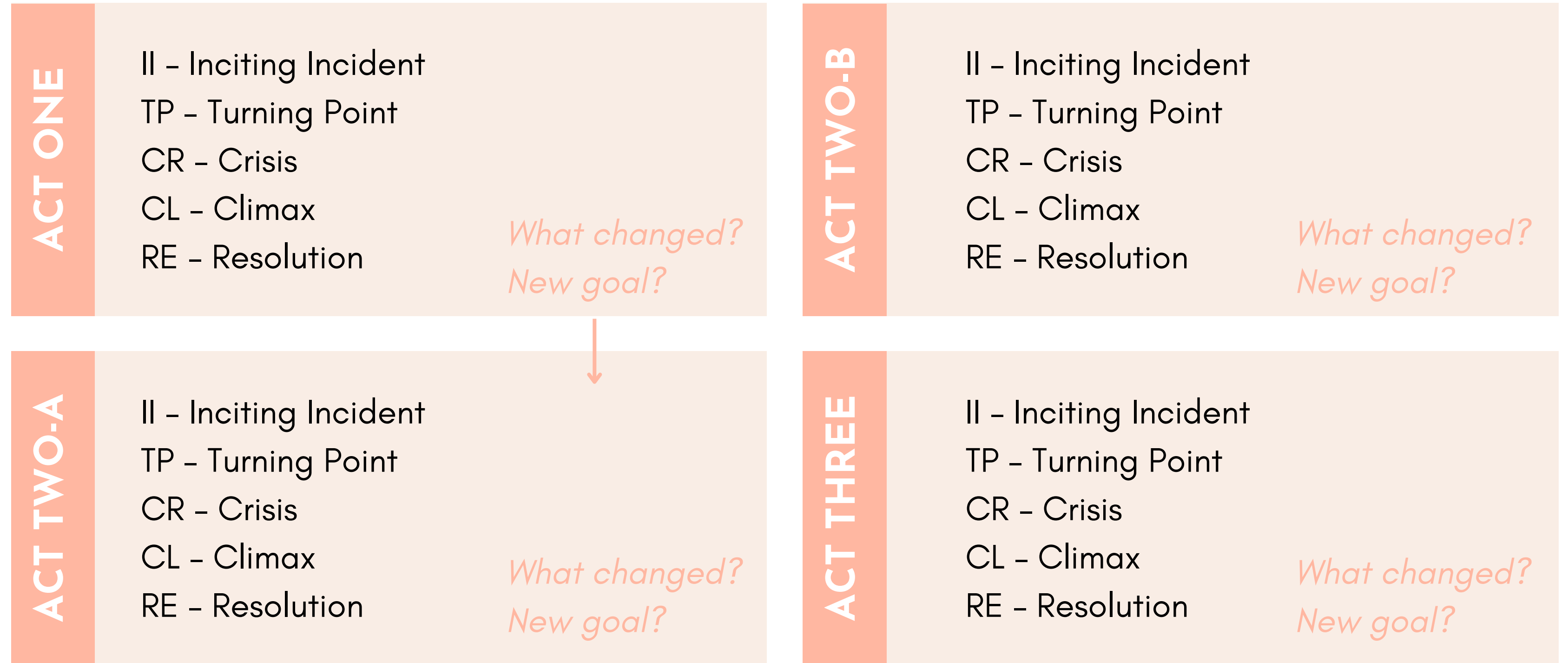
II - Inciting Incident → one scene
TP - Turning Point ↘
CR - Crisis → one scene
CL - Climax ↗
RE - Resolution → one scene

ACT THREE

II - Inciting Incident
TP - Turning Point
CR - Crisis
CL - Climax
RE - Resolution

Goal: TBD depending on the genre

Inner Obstacle: A flaw, wound, or misconception about TBD



Example: Romance Genre Act Breakdown

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Goal: Find or avoid love (or an intimate connection)

Inner Obstacle: A flaw, wound, or misconception about love

Romance

ACT ONE

II - Inciting Incident
TP - Turning Point
CR - Crisis
CL - Climax
RE - Resolution

ACT TWO-B

II - Inciting Incident
TP - Turning Point
CR - Crisis
CL - Climax
RE - Resolution

ACT TWO-A

II - Inciting Incident
TP - Turning Point
CR - Crisis
CL - Climax
RE - Resolution

ACT THREE

II - Inciting Incident
TP - Turning Point
CR - Crisis
CL - Climax
RE - Resolution

Goal: Find or avoid love (or an intimate connection)

Inner Obstacle: A flaw, wound, or misconception about love

Romance

ACT ONE

II -

TP -

CR - Love vs. inner obstacle?

CL -

RE -

value-based choice



ACT TWO-B

II -

TP -

CR - Love vs. inner obstacle?

CL -

RE -

ACT TWO-A

II -

TP -

CR - Love vs. inner obstacle?

CL -

RE -

ACT THREE

II -

TP -

CR - Love vs. inner obstacle?

CL -

RE -



The event of your plot should be specifically designed to confront your main character with their internal obstacle again and again.

As they continually make bad choices because of their internal obstacle, they'll set in motion negative consequences that will pile up **until they can't ignore them anymore and have to change.**

A character arc is how your character changes over the course of the story because of the external conflict they face.

Who your character is at the beginning of the story must be in direct conflict with who they are at the end of the story.

So, you need to know two things:

- How does your character start the story?
 - They believe **the opposite of your story point** is true.
- How does your character end the story?
 - They have **learned your story's point, and integrated it** into their life.



Romance

Goal: Find or avoid love (or an intimate connection)

Inner Obstacle: A flaw, wound, or misconception about love

ACT ONE

- II -
- TP -
- CR - Love vs. inner obstacle?
- CL - Protagonist chooses fear
- RE -

alone > attraction/repulsion

ACT TWO-B

- II -
- TP -
- CR - Love vs. inner obstacle
- CL -
- RE -

no longer platonic > broken up

ACT TWO-A

- II -
- TP -
- CR - Love vs. inner obstacle
- CL -
- RE -

attraction/repulsion > no longer platonic

ACT THREE

- II -
- TP -
- CR - Love vs. inner obstacle?
- CL - Protagonist chooses love
- RE -

broken up > committed/HEA

Example: Romance Genre 5 Commandments Per Quadrant



ROMANCE ACT 1 (*Setup + Bring Couple Together*) *alone > attracted/repulsed*

Goal: Find or avoid love (or an intimate connection)

Inner Obstacle: A flaw, wound, or misconception about love

ACT ONE

- II – Present the opportunity to meet protagonist's need for love and connection
- TP – The lovers meet; and they either feel attraction or repulsion (*key scene*)
- CR – Will the lovers run away from the attraction? Or reluctantly engage?
- CL – The lovers agree to engage in a temporary way (*key scene*)
- RE – The lovers see/feel/experience an instant reward for their choice

ROMANCE ACT 2-A (*Falling in Love*) *attraction/repulsion > no longer platonic*

Goal: Participate in arrangement so that they can find or avoid love/intimate connection

Inner Obstacle: A flaw, wound, or misconception about love

ACT TWO-A

- II – Inkling of desire/attraction beyond *just* physical attraction (*maybe this could work*)
- TP – Lover reveals true self in other's presence; desire deepens (*this could definitely work*)
- CR – Will the lovers give into temptation or deny themselves to avoid intimacy?
- CL – Lovers give in; one or both communicates their true feelings (*key scene*)
- RE – Things are no longer platonic for the lovers

ROMANCE ACT 2-B (*Retreating from Love*) *no longer platonic > broken up*

Goal: Deal with the consequences **so that they can find or avoid love/intimate connection**

Inner Obstacle: A flaw, wound, or misconception about love

ACT TWO-B

- II – The seed of doubt/fear is planted (*maybe this wasn't a good idea*)
- TP – Doubt/fear expressed in real-life (*this was definitely not a good idea*)
- CR – Continue to engage or retreat from love/intimacy to protect inner obstacle?
- CL – Worst fear realized; Retreat from relationship; lovers break up (*key scene*)
- RE – The lovers see/feel/experience the initial pain of being apart

ROMANCE ACT 3 (*Fighting for Love*) *broken up > committed/HEA*

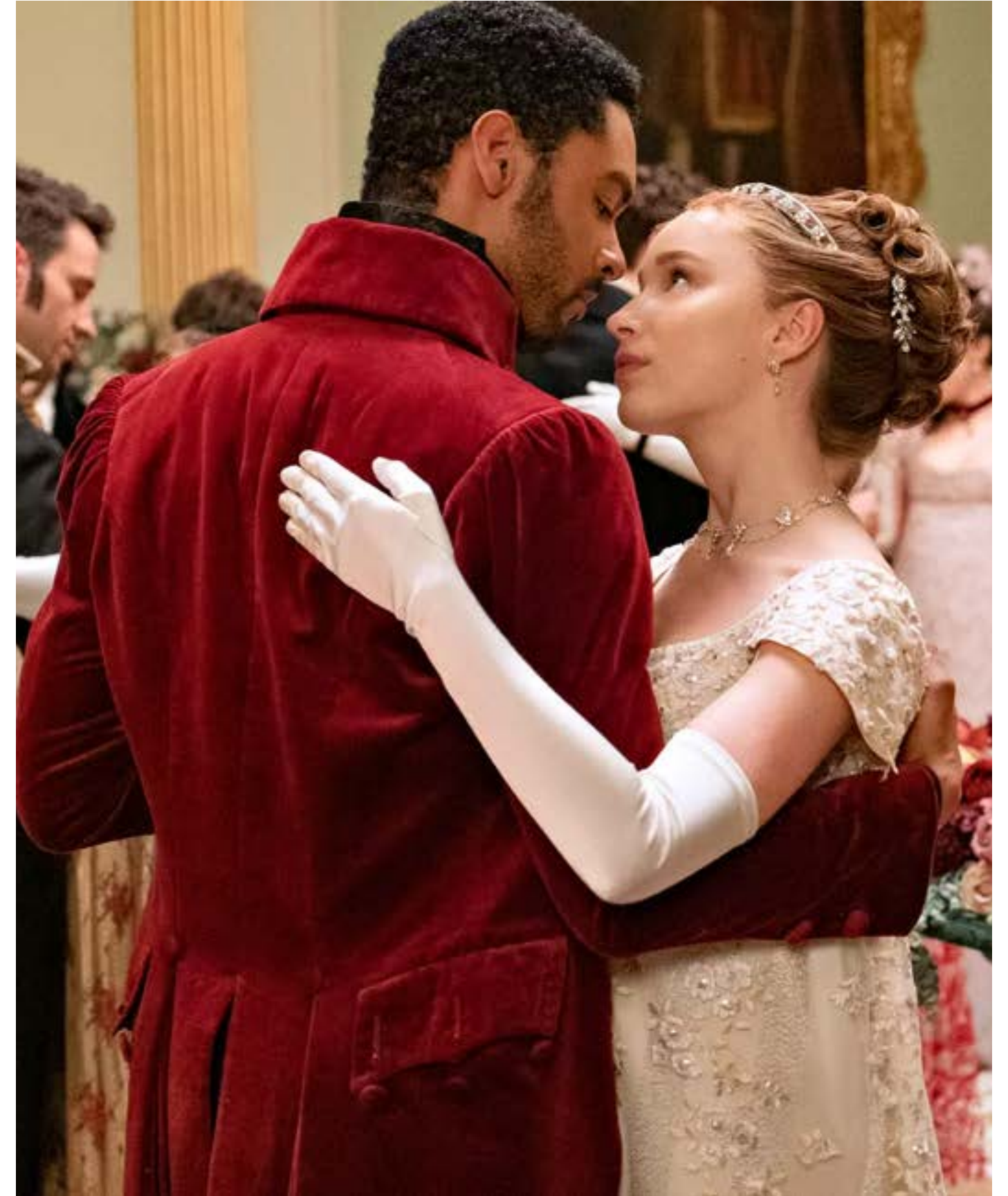
Goal: Commit to (and win back) love/intimate connection

Inner Obstacle: A flaw, wound, or misconception about love

ACT THREE

- II – An opportunity to reunite/meet again (and receive love/connection)
- TP – One or both lovers make a proposal to commit (*I want this to work*)
- CR – Fully commit (and ditch wound) or give up a chance at love/intimacy?
- CL – Lover/s sacrifice their want as proof of their love (*key scene*)
- RE – Lovers reunite for their happily ever after (*key scene*)

Case Study: The Duke & I by Julia Quinn



Story Summary: The Duke & I

Simon Bassett's father has died making Simon the new Duke of Hastings. As such, he's returned home to find himself the most eligible bachelor in London with one huge problem: he does not want to marry—ever.

Meanwhile, Daphne Bridgerton is in the second year of her search for a husband—but she's only receiving attention from guys who she's not interested in, while the guys she *might* like all consider her to be just a friend.

When Daphne and Simon meet, Simon proposes a daring plan—let's pretend we're courting each other! That way, Simon can avoid all the "ambitious mamas" while Daphne can attract more attention from men (the Duke will make her more desirable). Daphne agrees!

Story Summary: The Duke & I (cont...)

Of course, it quickly becomes evident that the only way to fool everyone is to go through all the typical courtship rituals... and eventually real feelings start to develop. Simon wants to make Daphne happy; Daphne wants to make Simon happy. But of course, the only real way to happiness is for both of them to realize they need each other to be happy.

Simon has to realize that he loves Daphne more than he hates his father. And Daphne has to realize that she can't force Simon to change simply through marriage or getting pregnant. Instead of one person convincing (Daphne) or tricking (Simon) the other, it's their separation that makes them both realize what they truly want out of life—and out of each other.

By the end of the story, Simon and Daphne come to an agreement about what a real life (and love) together looks like. They commit and get their happily-ever-after!



Meet Daphne Bridgerton:

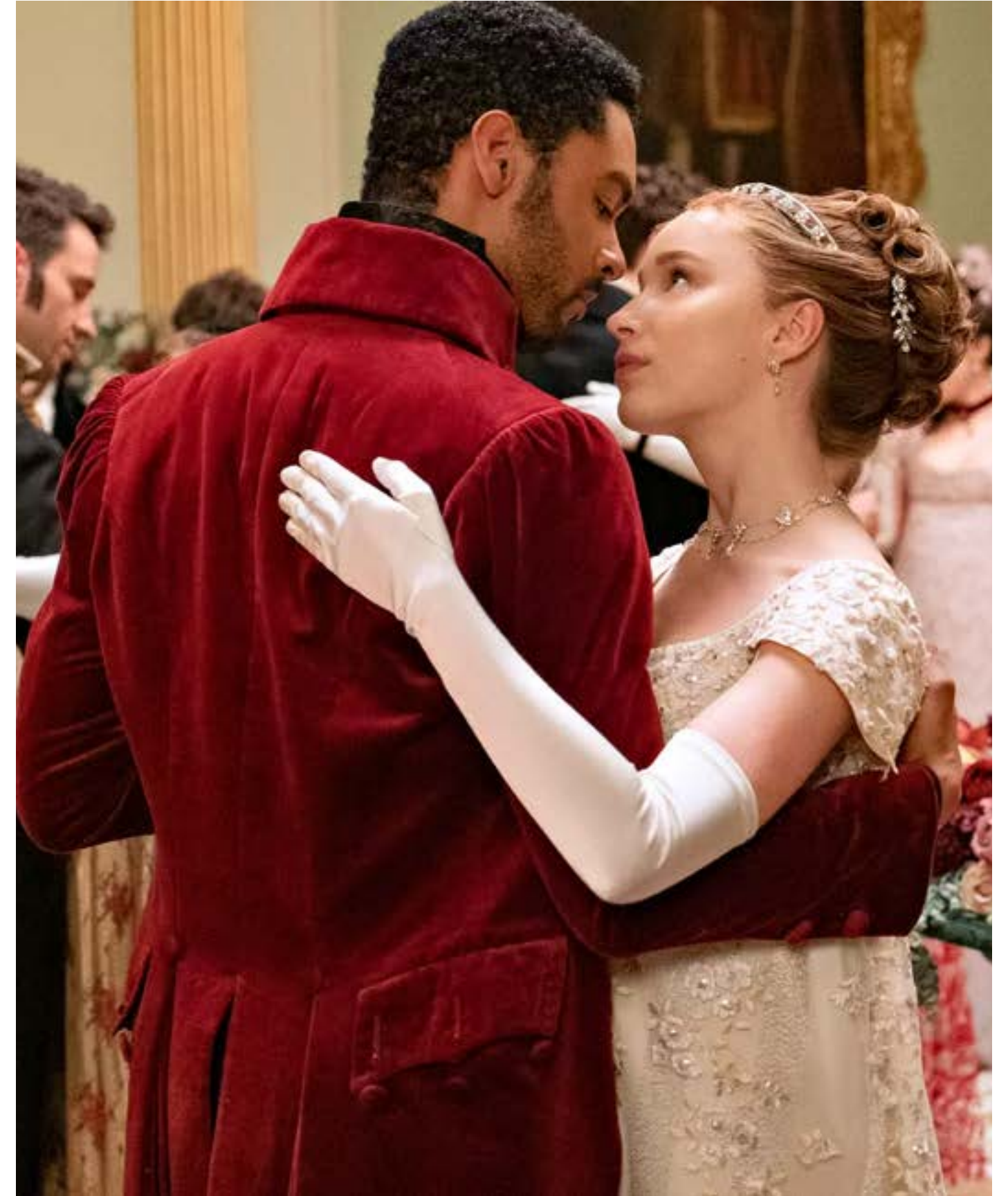
- Daphne is the oldest girl in the Bridgerton family (her brothers are super protective)
- Goal: find a husband during the current social season (It's her second season out); have a big family with LOTS of children
- Inner Obstacle: She's naive about love; She believes most men only see her as friend material, not wife material

Meet Simon Bassett:

- Only child; Newly appointed Duke of Hastings; has the reputation of being a rake
- Goal: He does NOT want a wife or children under any circumstances. He wants the Hastings name to die with him so that his father won't get the heir he always wanted
- Inner Obstacle: He doesn't know what he truly wants because he's too busy being angry at his father; He's self-conscious of his stutter



Case Study: The Duke & I (Act Breakdown)



Act 1 Goal: (Daphne) find a husband, (Simon) avoid becoming a husband

- Inciting Incident - Daphne learns that the Duke of Hastings has returned to London. Anthony mentions Daphne and invites Simon to dinner at Bridgerton house.
- Turning Point - Daphne meets Simon, and realizes he is *the* Duke that her mother warned her about. Simon realizes Daphne is his best friend's sister. There is instant attraction!
- Crisis - While dancing, Simon and Daphne realize their goals are incompatible—Daphne wants a husband and children, and Simon does not want any of that.
- Climax - Simon suggests a fake courtship to help them each get what they want (he wants to avoid the eager mama's, she wants more serious and worthy suitors). Daphne agrees!
- Resolution - The next day, half a dozen suitors arrive at Bridgerton house.

Act 2 Goal: Pretend to be in a fake relationship to get/avoid becoming a husband.

- Inciting Incident – Simon brings Daphne's mom flowers; Daphne realizes she'd be a fool not to fall in love with him. Simon realizes he's jealous of Daphne's suitors.
- Turning Point – During a trip to the Royal Observatory, Daphne sees Simon playing with her younger siblings and realizes he'd make a great father. He opens up about his mother, too.
- Crisis – At Lady Trowbridge's ball, Daphne realizes she's falling in love with Simon. When he arrives, Daphne boldly asks him to go for a walk in the garden alone.
- Climax – Anthony catches Simon and Daphne kissing at Lady Trowbridge's ball. He demands that Simon marry Daphne now that he's soiled her.
- Resolution – Simon refuses; Anthony challenges Simon to a duel. Daphne feels sick.

Act 2-b Goal: Make the most of their marriage so they can get their HEA.

- Inciting Incident – After Daphne intervenes and stops the duel, Simon agrees to marry her (so as to not ruin her reputation) but says he can't give her children.
- Turning Point – On their wedding night, Daphne worries that Simon won't be able to physically consummate the relationship, but he assures her he can. They sleep together.
- Crisis – Daphne realizes Simon won't have children because of his father's rejection. It's not that he can't have children—he won't. Should I push him away or try to make this work?
- Climax – Daphne has unprotected sex with Simon while he's drunk; Simon freaks out. Daphne realizes Simon's hatred for his father is stronger than his love for her.
- Resolution – Daphne moves into a different bedroom; Simon goes to another property.

Act 3 Goal: Figure out how to move forward with each other so they can get their HEA.

- Inciting Incident – Simon receives a letter from Daphne saying that she is likely pregnant.
- Turning Point – Simon arrives in London, intent on getting Daphne back. Daphne challenges him to decide what he really wants in life, independent of his father. He wants happiness.
- Crisis – Daphne's brothers are waiting back at Hastings House, they want to take her to Bridgerton House. Simon tells Daphne he loves her for the first time.
- Climax – Simon and Daphne sleep together (unprotected this time). Afterwards, they discuss their future, and it includes children.
- Resolution – Daphne and Simon are committed and happy! In the epilogue, we find out they had children and live happily-ever-after.

Notice how every act forces both Daphne and Simon to choose between the possibility of love and their inner obstacle?

- Act 1: Should they enter into a fake relationship to secure a marriage?
- Act 2: Should they get married even though neither gets what they want?
- Act 2: Should they try to make the relationship work or be alone?
- Act 3: Should they get back together? Can they sacrifice for the other?

And notice how the decision each character makes in the climax of each act shows their character and what they value?

How to Connect the Dots When You're Ready to Move Forward

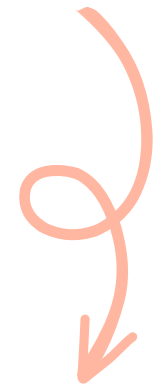
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Each one of your scenes has two parts: **the EXTERNAL and the INTERNAL.**

Scene #1:

- **External** = what happens
- **Internal** = how it affects your protagonist/how they feel



Because of that...

Scene #2:

- **External** = what happens
- **Internal** = how it affects your protagonist/how they feel



Each scene on your outline **needs to be linked by cause and effect** which is what these words “because of that” represent.

This helps you to ensure that:

- there are consequences to your protagonist's actions
- your protagonist has agency over what's happening
- your story is cohesive and engaging



This way of linking scenes really just guarantees that you are **giving your protagonist agency** rather than designing a plot and forcing them into it.

With each subsequent action, **the stakes get raised.**

And that's the whole point of the story: to put the character in a situation that tests them, challenges them, and **forces them to grow** in ways they wouldn't naturally have grown.

WHAT IS A STORY *REALLY*?

A story is about how what happens externally affects someone who's in pursuit of a difficult goal and how that person changes internally as a result.




Consider the difference between...

- *“Because XYZ happened, the next thing happened”*
- *“This happened and then this happened and then this happened and then this happened.”*

See how the first one feels purposeful?

And how the second one feels more random?



Now you know **how to outline your romance novel** so that you can write your draft in the most efficient way possible!



- ✓ Use the '5 Commandments' to help you flesh out the scenes of your story. Make sure they track the global story/story spine!
- ✓ In a romance, the key crisis moments will be LOVE vs. the protagonist's INNER OBSTACLE. Will they choose love or fear? Being together or alone?
- ✓ Link your scenes with "Because of that..." to create a nice cause and effect trajectory that will keep readers interested to find out what happens next

Time for some Q&A!

**Want to
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Club?**



BOOK NOTES

with Abigail and Savannah

Book Notes is a virtual book club for writers. The idea behind it is simple: first, we all read the same book. Then, we meet online to engage in a craft-based discussion so that we can share our learnings and improve our own writing, too. If it sounds like we're deconstructing our favorite stories to see how they work, that's because we are!

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