Plot In The Romance Novel

While the developing romance between your hero and heroine is a critical element of your plot, it is not, in and of itself, the plot. Your heroine should have an overriding personal goal to achieve or problem to work out. Your hero has goals and/or problems of his own, and if they are in direct opposition to the heroine's goals, so much the better. You should also have thought of several obstacles that you will place in your characters' paths to prevent them from obtaining these important goals.

Anatomy of a Plot
Your plot will unfold as your story dictates; there are no absolutes when it comes to the number of pages, chapters or scenes it takes to make a romance novel. There are, however, guidelines--benchmarks you can use to keep yourself from wandering too far afield. If you've been studying your chosen category, you should have an idea what, if any, requirements publishers have for word length. Even if it isn't explicitly stated by the publisher, reading recently published books in your category will give you an idea of "average" length. This is not to say that you can't write a book that is substantially shorter or longer than what you see on the bookstore shelf. But the more you can conform to a publisher's preferences, the better your chance of a sale--especially a first sale.

Once you've determined a target word length for your novel, you can use the following guidelines to start outlining your plot. It bears repeating that these are only guidelines. We don't want you to force your story to conform to this, or any other arbitrary design. But if you know, for example, that publishers in your category prefer manuscripts of 55,000 to 60,000 words (about 240 manuscript pages), you'll know you're heading for trouble if you're on page 80 and the hero and heroine still have not confronted the first major plot complication. You may need to tighten your narrative and trim some fat, or you may find the story you want to tell simply can't be told to your satisfaction in 60,000 words--in which case, you'll head back to your market book for a new list of publishers to study.

For purposes of this supplement, we've divided the "average" romance novel plot into four more or less equal parts:

Part One: The Opening
The first quarter of your plot should "set up" all the important story elements: the setting, the main characters, and those characters' primary personal goals. This part usually ends with the first major complication or plot point--the point at which your protagonist confronts the first major complication in the pursuit of his or her personal goal (remember, this is not the pursuit of the romance!). At this point, the character(s) will assess (or re-assess) their goals and work to find a way around the complication.

Parts Two and Three: The Middle
The next section, roughly half of the total manuscript, makes up the middle of your story. We're going to keep dealing with quarters, though, to help you identify the actual midpoint of your story (the middle of the middle, if you will). This whole middle section
is where you'll get to the real meat of your story. Characters are trying to achieve their personal goals, in more or less constant conflict with each other, outside forces, and their own internal flaws. Somewhere around the true midpoint of your story the characters re-affirm and restate their commitment to their personal goals in spite of the conflicts they've encountered up to now, (this is where in Gone With the Wind Scarlett vows "As God is my witness, I'll never be hungry again.") and plan (or revise) their strategy for achieving those goals. The midpoint is also where things can change dramatically for the hero and heroine. The middle ends about three quarters of the way through the novel with the crisis point. Frequently, but not always, the crisis point in a romance novel includes the separation--temporary, of course--of the hero and heroine.

Part Four: The Resolution and Ending
This last part can be further broken down into two elements:

1. The climax--the protagonist's goal is in sight, but not in hand--everything possible is at stake, and he or she is forced to make a life-changing choice. The climax may include a Black Moment as well--where it looks as if the hero or heroine has indeed lost everything (by making the choice required, or by presenting one final, seemingly insurmountable obstacle).

2. The resolution/reward--the hero and heroine are rewarded for the choice(s) made during the climax. The lovers are reunited or--if the choice in the story's climax brought them together, the thing sacrificed in that choice is restored in some way. A romance novel always has a happy ending where the hero and heroine make an emotional commitment to each other. The resolution should tie up any other loose ends as well, but it should be short, since it is by definition anticlimactic.

Conflict
Conflict is the most important element of plot, the one ingredient that keeps readers turning pages. As a romance writer you have one advantage when it comes to planning the conflicts for your story: the most important conflict comes with the territory. Suzanne Simmons writes in Romance Writer's Sourcebook that the "essential, built-in conflict of the romance novel is the eternal struggle between male and female." ("Mind, Body, Heart and Soul: Creating Fully-Developed Characters in Romance Fiction")

But, just as the romance is not the plot, the romantic tension cannot be the only conflict in your story. In addition to the main story problem, your plot will be made up of a string of smaller conflicts and resolutions (packaged into scenes). The apparent resolution of each of these minor conflicts should lead to a larger, more complicated conflict. You should see a two-steps-forward-one-step-back pattern develop as you plot these intermediate conflicts and resolutions. Remember, if a goal is too easily achieved, it loses its emotional impact; anything worth having is worth fighting for. Since the romance is such an important plot element, it should not proceed any more smoothly than any other element of your story. If your characters come together (or stay together) too easily, you will cheat your reader of the pleasure of an emotional resolution where the lovers finally declare their love and commit themselves to each other.
Foreshadowing
You can set reader expectation and maximize the tension in your story by the judicious use of foreshadowing. Romance writers frequently use foreshadowing to hint not only at the romance to come, but also at the story's important conflicts. Let's look at some examples from published romance novels.

In the following excerpt from *Over the Moon* (Betty Cothran--Zebra Romance), the author foreshadows the romance fairly heavily, but she also slips in a more subtle hint of a source of future conflict: Steve's adult daughter Melinda.

"Roswell. Rebecca Roswell. Not much time for introductions earlier when you had your hands full." She extended a hand. "And you are?"

"Steve Jordan." He laughed and shook her hand firmly. "But I think it's fair to say my leg was more occupied than my hands." He nodded toward the tiny clown now seated on the floor giving the whole crew his undivided attention. "I appreciate your help, but my grandsons and I can clean things up before my daughter gets home." The deep resonance of his voice demanded attention and conjured up a warm feeling in Rebecca's well-hidden heart.

"Don't be silly," she cut him off. "It's my job. Besides, I've met your daughter, Melinda, and she's going to kill you if she comes home and finds this." A sweeping gesture took in the soggy mess in the kitchen. She stole a glance at the broad-shouldered man, then looked away when she realized he had caught her staring.

"I couldn't possibly expect you to--"

"Now, look here, I'm a Hallmark kind of firefighter."

The scarecrow looked puzzled at her remark.

"You know," she said, and playfully winked, "Willow Ridge cares enough to send the very best."

He didn't laugh, but instead flashed Rebecca a dazzling smile. His sense of humor might be lacking, but something about his dark, wide eyes and full lips made up for it. This man definitely evoked a response in her--first with his low, sexy voice and now with his five-alarm smile.

In this narrative passage from *Elizabeth's Gift* (Donna Davidson, Signet Regency Romance), we see the beginnings of change in the hero's feelings for the heroine, whom he has considered up to now to be a troublesome child. The author also gives us further hints as to the nature of Elizabeth's gift, which is soon revealed as second sight and the ability to read the minds of others.
Before he could escape from the room and articulate his bone-weary needs to anyone, Elizabeth smoothly intervened, affectionately shooing her aunt and cousin into the parlour, briskly dispatching a hot bath to his room, and bidding him wait for her return. She reappeared moments later with a tray bearing a perfect hot toddy, concocted exactly as he liked it. With a few soft words, she had provided the secret cravings of his imagination.

He'd tried to pull back the reins of his runaway annoyance and express the proper appreciation, but as he opened his mouth to bestow a fitting word of gratitude, she looked directly into his eyes, without a touch of proper feminine respect, and smiled a knowing little smile. Gad, he would have liked to have smacked the impertinent expression off that plain little freckled face, but the lightest blow would have left nothing but a pile of skinny broken bones and no triumph at all.

Now, contentedly alone, his aching muscles soothed by the warm bath and his admittedly unreasonable temper appeased by Elizabeth's intuitive knowledge of just what comforts a man needed, he could certainly overlook the fact that, although she was nothing like the sweet, biddable child he remembered, her forward behavior did in the end rescue him.

**Where to Start**
Phyllis Taylor Pianka, in *How to Write Romances* (Writer's Digest Books) suggests beginning with a "critical situation" that establishes a major point of conflict. Here are just a few such situations Taylor Pianka cites as common in the romance novel:

- The hero and heroine come from opposing backgrounds; their relationship is discouraged or forbidden by their families
- The hero and heroine are in competition for the same thing
- The hero and the heroine have completely opposite goals (he wants children, she does not) or one's desire cannot be fulfilled by the other (she wants children, he is sterile)

Think of your own story in terms of the critical situation that will provide the basis for the conflict to follow; now throw your characters headlong into that situation and you've got the first plot point on your outline.