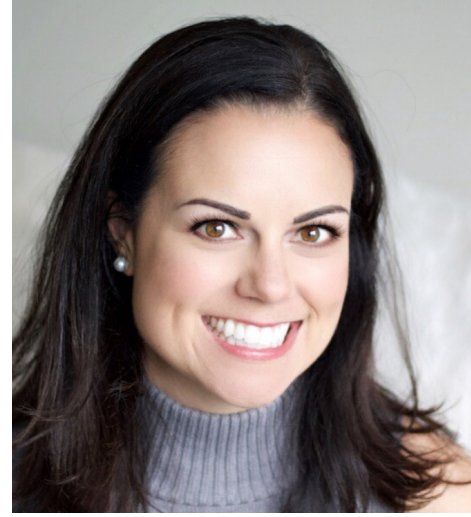# How to Get Started Writing Your First Romance Novel

for beginners

LAUREN L LAYNE

hello, friend with writing dreams!

My name is Lauren Layne, and I've always wanted to be a writer. Finally, in 2011 I gathered all of my courage, and sat down, not just to start a book, but to *finish* it. It was published by Penguin Random House in 2013. Since then, I've written 30+ books, and have transformed my life from 9-5 drudgery working for someone else, to writing full-time for myself. I love writing, but one of my other passions? Helping other writers launch *their* writing career! I know what it is to have that dream, but for that dream to feel so *hard*. And you know what? It *is* a little bit hard. I tell you that not to scare you off, but to reassure you that if it feels difficult, that's 100% normal, and you're in good company. And I'm here to hold your hand and walk you through those first wobbly baby steps towards starting the book of your heart and pursuing your dreams. Also, spoiler alert: the secret to being a writer? All you have to do is *write*.

Lauren Layne

laurenlayne.com

01. Pick your subgenre

Since you picked up this guide for writing your first romance novel, it's probably pretty safe you've already picked your genre: *romance*.

But what about your *sub*-genre? Have you picked that yet?

Maybe you're an expert in the romance genre, either as an avid reader, or you've researched the industry, and are thinking, "Um, *of course* I know my sub-genre!"

But maybe you're just starting out. Maybe you have an idea for a love story, but are totally new to this, thinking, "Sub-genre?!" No worries, I've listed some of the common ones on this page to get you started.

I highly recommend getting clear on which sub-genre you're writing in *before* you get started.

It's easier to get to your destination when you know where you're going!

Popular Romance Sub-Genres

CONTEMPORARY

EROTIC

ROMANTIC SUSPENSE

NEW ADULT

YOUNG ADULT

REGENCY

SCOTTISH

VICTORIAN

OTHER HISTORICAL

INSPIRATIONAL

URBAN

FANTASY

PARANORMAL

MILITARY

TIME-TRAVEL

GOTHIC

FUTURISTIC

02.

Write your logline.

Also known as the "elevator pitch," your logline is a one-sentence summary describing what your story's *about*.

Sounds easy, right? In *theory*, yes. But you'd be shocked how difficult it can be to translate that fantastic idea in your head into a single sentence. Making it *compelling* is even more difficult.

Just ask any agent or publisher who's sat through a round of pitches. They'll likely tell you that a lot of pitches start out with, "Well, there's this girl ..." They can't sell *"well, there's this girl..."* to a publisher!

But don't go thinking the logline is just a sales gimmick to be figured out later. The person who will most benefit from a well-crafted logline is *you* because it helps you turn your *idea* into *story*.

Ingredients of a good logline:
· the protagonist
· the protagonist's goal
· the obstacle or antagonistic force

Note that the antagonistic force in a romance is rarely "a bad guy." It could simply be something happening to the hero/heroine that isn't in his/her plans!

Example of a logline:
An uptight business man hires a prostitute to be his escort at social functions—only to find himself falling in love with her.

The protagonist? The business man. His goal? Business-only arrangement with a prostitute. The obstacle? He's falling in love, which wasn't part of the plan.

The result? One of the most iconic and successful romantic comedies of all time.

DEFINE YOUR PROTAGONISTS

Now that you know what your story is about, it's time to get crystal clear on the *who*. Character is *particularly* important in romance, since readers are there to "see" two people fall in love. To tell that story well, you need to know who those people are!

Don't worry if you don't know *everything* about your characters to start out. You may find they reveal themselves to you as you write the first draft. I know I usually do!

But you do need to start with *something*. I always know *at least* the following about my protagonists before I type *Chapter One:*
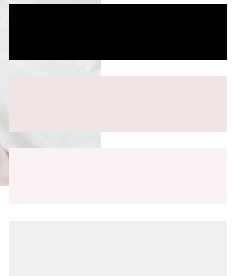
- Name
- What she wants
- Why she wants it

You don't have to get fancy with it! Jotting down the answer to the above 3 bullet points on a Post-It note works just fine.

03

WRITING VIBES

You've got this.

WHERE DOES YOUR STORY TAKE PLACE?

I'll be perfectly honest, setting is the least of my concerns when I'm starting a first draft. In fact, my editors very often have to remind me to "add a sense of place" in the second draft. So in case the details of your setting are fuzzy, I'm here to reassure you that's okay! You can do your research, and make the setting pop later.

But you'll save yourself a lot of revision time if you commit to the "where" from the get-go. Chicago? Fictional small town? Bay Area suburbs? A ranch in Montana? Scottish moors?

If you're writing historical romance, don't forget to consider time. Regency London and Victorian London are different in crucial little ways that can majorly impact your plot!

04

05 | Pick your "scratch pad."

Whether or not you're a planner with a 3-ring binder outline of your novel, or a panster who shudders at the word "outline" (more on that later), you're going to have stuff that "pops up" as you write. There will be secondary character names you want to keep track of, facts you want to crosscheck later, bits of dialog you want to add somewhere (but don't yet know where), random ideas for plot twists you want to revisit in the next draft.

Decide *now* where you'll jot down all that stuff! I use the Evernote app, but you may prefer a Google Sheet, a legal pad, a fancy journal.

Don't skip this section and say you'll figure it out "later." Do it **now**. Trust me, when an idea hits you out of the blue (and it will), you don't want to have to pause and think, "Hmm, where should I just this down?" You should already know and be reaching for your scratch pad, whether it's digital or pen/paper!

> ❝
> What will you
> do with *this very*
> moment?
> Be average? Or
> be awesome?
> ❞

06

To Outline or Not to Outline

When I first started learning about the writing process, specifically the *pre*-writing process, I came away with the assumption that there were two types of writers:

Plotters & Pansters.

Plotters were the planners; the organized writers who liked to plan their stories and characters before writing a single word. Pansters were the "fly by the seat of their pants" writers; the ones who figured out the story out as they wrote, not beforehand.

For years, I thought I was a Plotter. I still sort of am. But I've also learned something:

Plotter/Panster is a *scale*, not an "either/or." Some plotters leave plenty to chance. Some pansters jot down a few key ideas before getting started. Even more of a surprise was discovering that sometimes it varies by book! Some books I'll write a thorough chapter-by-chapter outline. Other books, I'll be called to simply dive right in with minimal planning.

What's right for you? You'll have to trust your gut and your instincts, but on the following page, you'll find a few of my favorite outlining methods!
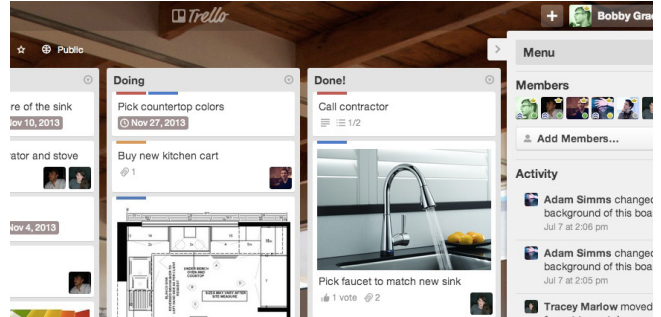
PreWriting Options

I actually *hate* the word "outine" as it pertains to novel-writing. It calls to mind those academic "roman numeral" style outlines that just don't make sense to me as a fiction writer! I prefer *prewriting*.

Index Cards

Go analog and jot down scene ideas on note cards. You can rearrange the order and add new cards as you go!

Trello

A digital version of note cards. In addition to scene planning, I also use it for my word count tracker and to keep track of characters.

Free Form

Nothing wrong with pulling up a blank document or notebook simply writing out scene ideas/characters as they come to you! Outlines don't have to be formal.

Romance Blueprint

Self-promo alert, this is a PDF created by me, and the prewriting tool I use for *every* single book.

07. Pick Your Writing Program

I gathered some writing app options for you here, but please, I beg of you: *do not get hung up on software.* Do not imagine that writing will miraculously be easier with the right app. Do not waste valuable writing time setting up a fancy document. Write on napkins if you have to. Use a free program if you have to. It doesn't matter where the words get written, so long as they do.

Apple Pages

For those with Macs, this makes a solid Microsoft Word alternative (it comes pre-installed on Mac computers). I often do revisions in Pages, and love the clean feel of the app, though I do notice a bit of lag-time when the manuscript gets above 200 pages or so.

Microsoft Word

I'll be perfectly honest, I personally can't stand Word. It's buggy, grumpy, and ugly. *But* even if you don't write you first draft in it, you'll likely need Word when it comes time to working with editors, as Microsoft Word is pretty ubiquitous in publishing. All my personal dislike aside, I did write my first five books in Word. It gets the job done.

Ulysses

My personal writing app of choice. I like that it's minimalist, with a focus on the words. I like that it allows me to drag and drop scenes without cutting/pasting. It's also Mac-only, and supports Markdown language, which freaks some people out.

Google Docs

I've never actually used Google Docs, so I can't vouch for it personally, but I'm putting it on the list, because it's my understanding that Google Dogs is a free word processor, which, really zaps all of our excuses, doesn't it? ;-)

Scrivener

A dedicated writing app with a major cult following, and for good reason. It is *powerful*, and Scrivener's feature list beats every other app on this list. A word of caution; don't let all the "tweaking" options in Scrivener let you put off the actual writing!

You are the boss of your excuses. You get to tell them when to *stand down.*

LAUREN LAYNE

08. Optional Steps

1

Create a Playlist

I always create a playlist for each new book I start, even though I rarely listen to music while I write. Picking songs helps me figure out the tone of the book and helps me *feel* the love story.

2

Set a Deadline

If the word *deadline* stresses you out instead of inspires you, don't set one. But I've found that writing projects with no deadline (even self-imposed) don't get finished.

3

Create a Schedule

As with #2, if this feels to rigid, don't do it. But I will also warn that if you simply wait for the muse to show up, you'll likely never finish the book. It can be helpful to set aside specific "writing windows" in your week, even if it's simply 30 minutes every Saturday morning.

4

Create a Wordcount Tracker

One of the most discouraging thing about writing a book is that *The End* can feel so far away! Tracking how many words or pages you write in each writing session helps you visualize your progress and maintain your jump-start your motivation!

5

Know Your Why

Real talk: There will likely come a moment where the book will feel hard, finishing feels downright impossible, and you'll want to quit. Take a moment now to write down why you started. Revisit it every time you feel like quitting.

6

Set a "Carrot."

"Reward" works too, but I love the visual of a horse chasing a carrot, even when his load is heavy. I set a carrot for each writing day (a glass of wine, FRIENDS reruns), as well as a carrot for typing The End of every book (a new lipstick, a weekend getaway). Sounds gimmicky, but it really helps when I'm unmotivated.

laurenlayne.com/for-writers

THANK YOU
FOR BEING HERE!

I am genuinely so thrilled you're beginning your writing journey. I know everyone's path is different, but I can tell you that for me, my only regret about starting (and finishing!) my first book is that I didn't start sooner. It's brought me nothing but joy and fulfillment, and I wish the same for you.

You can do this. Yes, it will be hard. But it will also be one of the most rewarding accomplishments of your life. And you deserve to feel the way you will when you finish.

LAURENLAYNE.COM

Looking for more?

Ready to take your story and writing game to the next level? Sign up for my Romance Writing 101 Class for access to my Trello board, video how-to, editing tips, and so much more!

LEARN MORE >