

A few more things to know about the romance genre...

Infidelity/Cheating/Multiple Partners

Infidelity is usually a no-no in romance for your hero and heroine. They cannot cheat on the other in the story. It's almost always a deal-breaker for readers in romance. Even making someone a cheater in their past is a risky proposition. To pull that off, you'd have to have one masterful backstory to create sympathy for that character. (There can be exceptions. SPOILER ALERT *Every Summer After* by Carley Fortune broke this rule and, for me, it worked. The cheating was in the couple's history far in the past. But read the reviews on the book and you will see for many readers, it was a "you're dead to me as an author" thing, so it's still a risk.)

Your characters may have been cheated *on* but usually they are not the cheater.

Also, in general, the hero and heroine don't sleep with anyone else except the love interest on the page. They can have a promiscuous past, but once they meet the love interest, they only have eyes for each other.

Erotic romance caveat: In erotic romance, there are menage relationships. There are situations where one partner might allow (with explicit permission) the other to sleep with someone else. In my erotic novella, *Still Into You*, the hero and heroine are married and they decide to go to this BDSM resort and have a "weekend off" from their marriage. So, it's not cheating because this is something they've discussed and consented to. But even then, I didn't have the hero sleep with anyone else. In menage, of course, there are three romance characters so they can all sleep with each other and it doesn't break the cheating "rules."

Safe Sex

If you are writing a romance set in contemporary times, safe sex must be addressed. Otherwise, it will pull the reader right out of the story because who can enjoy a love scene if you're worried about the characters catching a disease or getting pregnant? Plus, showing characters not addressing this makes them look risky and dumb.

Some writers worry that the mention of a condom will "ruin the romantic moment" but this can be worked in so easily that readers will just move right over it. They're used to the mention now. They're expecting it. So something as simple as, "He pulled a condom out of the bedside drawer and rolled it on" is all you need.

If there is no way to access protection or they are going to forgo it, the couple needs to address it on the page. Oftentimes, later in the book when they are regularly sleeping together, I'll have the couple have a brief conversation about why they're going to stop using protection. Her: "I'm on the pill and have been tested since my last relationship." Him: "Me too. Well, not on the pill but the testing part." This shows the reader that they are being smart about the decision. Worrying that you have a disease or have gotten pregnant is not sexy. Don't put your couple (and readers) in that position.

Consent

Romance today is not the romance of old. Romance novels are no longer "bodice rippers" where the hero forcefully takes the heroine and shows her what she "really wants" despite all her protests. No. Both characters must be fully consenting. Your readers need to see/hear the yes from each of them. It must be clear that both partners want this (even if they may not like each other.) There should be no gray area. Don't be afraid to have your hero (and/or heroine) outright ask, "You want this to happen?" Or "I need to hear you say you want this." It can be a great, sexy tension builder in a scene. "Tell me you want this."

And anytime your characters say no (or a safe word if you're writing BDSM), the other character honors that without question and stops.

BDSM romance note: I think some people have the misconception that BDSM means one of the characters can be domineering and force the other character to do things simply because one is the submissive partner, but that's not the case. BDSM is very focused on explicit consent to the point that contracts (verbal and often written) are worked out beforehand. What is allowed. What is not. What is the safe word. What is the slow down word. What are the safety precautions. So BDSM does not give you a pass to write a scene that lacks consent.

Dark romance caveat: There is a subgenre of erotic romance sometimes referred to as "dark romance" or "dubious consent" romance. In these romances, there is often a rape or scene of force at some point early on between the hero and heroine. The hero usually starts off as a genuine villain. These are dark books and not for the faint of heart. They are also clearly not traditional romances. However, readers know what they're buying when they pick up this subgenre.

Feminist/Pro-Woman

Ultimately, romance is a genre written *primarily* by women for women. Despite what those who don't read it may assume, it's very much a feminist genre. In these books, women are smart, powerful, and passionate. They direct their own lives, embrace their sexuality, and find a partner who treats them with respect. The love interest does not "save" them and fix their lives. The love relationship is an augmentation to an already strong woman. Don't write heroines who need a partner to survive (or vice versa.)

LGBTQ+

Though you may see me use hero/heroine in some of the lectures, romance has a robust selection of LGBTQ+ stories. If you're not familiar with these stories, I encourage you to explore the fantastic world of LGBTQ+ romance.

Diversity

When building your characters and the people around them in the story, don't fall into the trap of defaulting to everyone being the same--most often this means books full of white, straight, Christian, able-bodied, cisgender, neurotypical people. Think more deeply about your characters, even those brief side characters your main characters encounter. (This is something I'm continuously working on as a writer because my own personal defaults are easy to fall into when I'm just trying to get through a first draft and need to throw in a side character for that scene. So, this takes extra awareness.)

And build *real* people (even though they're fictional.) If you are not an #ownvoices writer, be very careful you don't fall into writing stereotypes when you're writing someone with a different identity/experience from you. This often means researching. For instance, if your character's best friend is going to be on the autism spectrum, you need to either have experience with people on the spectrum or do your research. If the hero is going to be Muslim, you better be familiar with the religion and customs or talking to people who are. Yes, it's more work. *Do the work*. Defaults and stereotypes are lazy writing.

If you are self-publishing, you may want to hire sensitivity readers who will read your manuscript and check for biases. (Most larger traditional publishers are now using them.)