

How to Write a  
**Fish Out of Water**  
*Romance*

A Chapter-by-Chapter Guide



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# Fish Out of Water Stories

Let's start by talking about what this actually means. “Fish out of water” is simply an idiom referring to someone being in an unfamiliar environment.

Fish out of water stories are where your main character (the fish) leaves his ordinary world (the water) for some new place. The environments are usually figurative, but if it helps, think of it literally.



Are you familiar with **The Little Mermaid**? She's a sort of fish who gets legs to be able to live out of water.

I think enough people are familiar with The Little Mermaid that I'm going to refer to that as an example quite often in this guide.

NOTE: Since I want to use a simple romance example, I'm mainly going to talk about the Disney movie version.

Yes, I know it's a movie, but it is quite useful to show simple examples.

Besides, the original Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale (Den Lille Havfrue for us Danish speakers) is quite different – and darker. Romance becomes unrequited love, and when she has to choose between killing the prince and her own death, [spoiler alert] the mermaid dies at the end. Yikes!

You don't have to have seen Disney's The Little Mermaid to get my examples. You won't need to ask a little girl in a Disney Princess costume for her 5-hour-long synopsis.

It's a simple enough story that you should be able to follow just fine.

You may be wondering why I am suggesting that you write a fish out of water story.

The answers are pretty simple:

- They are easy to create.
- People like them.

## **Why are these stories easy?**

The concept itself gives you:

### **A Basic Plot**

You know that your character is going to leave her old world for new one. You just have to figure out two things:

1. Why she is leaving.
2. What that other world will be.

### **Built-in Story Elements**

Fish out of Water stories automatically give you a lot of story elements from common outline structures.

What happened that's going to make your character leave her world? There's your inciting incident, your “Call to Adventure,” or your “Disturbance.”

Leaving his comfortable world is scary, so there are easy arguments for your character to resist - “Refusal of the Call” or “The Argument Against Transformation.”

When your fish leaves the water equals “Crossing the Threshold into the Special World” or the “Doorway of No Return #1.”

All of these are common outline points, and fish out of water stories lend themselves to them very readily.

Your character's discovery of the new world provides conflict.

Conflict is a common weakness for writers. In romance especially, it's easy to think of a story where girl meets guy. They fall in love to live happily ever after.

But that's not really enough.

Good stories need **obstacles** along that path. The problem is that those obstacles can feel contrived when they are added simply because the story was lacking them.

Fish out of water stories provide easy conflict situations that are natural to the story.

Your fish's initial discovery of how the world is different and trying to fit into the new world are good sources of conflict that will not seem inserted as afterthoughts.

The fact that your story is a romance will provide a handy structure to the overall arc of your story.

## **Why do people like to read Fish out of Water stories?**

A common fantasy of frustrated individuals is to leave everything behind to start over or follow some dream.

We have all encountered situations where there is a choice between security and the unknown.

In the real world, most people choose safety and security. But they like to escape into dreams of the unknown. You've probably done this. I know I have.

### **Haven't fish out of water stories been done a lot?**

That's the beauty of this type of story!

You can write a dozen of them and they will all seem different. You can expand the basic meaning of this type of story to come up with a virtually endless string of ideas.

Consider for a moment your character's new world:

- It can literally be a new world for some fantasy or adventure.
- It can be a different geographical location in the real world.
- It can be a new “world” where the environment is comprised of a different type of people – entering a new business world, the young adult who joins a gang or new clique, the sheltered princess who goes out into the “real world,” the character goes to live among a different gender or race, etc.
- Maybe your character died. The new world could be a different one (like an afterlife world), or he could become a ghost where he stays in the same world, but everything is different.
- The new world can be even more figurative if it is imaginary and only experienced by the main character. In that case, he might straddle his old and new world.



- Another figurative example would be a new world as a result of the character changing his/her entire value system or abilities – the docile character goes cut-throat, he decides to take every risk possible, he can read minds now, he takes a vow of silence, etc.

Consider another aspect - change the point of view:

Usually, fish out of water romances are told from the point of view of the fish who leaves the water and falls in love. Instead, tell the story from the point of view of the fish's love interest. It's still a fish out of water story, but the lead character is **not** the one who leaves the water.

As you can see, it's a pretty versatile type of story.

***So let's write one!***

I designed this guide so you can easily use it to write a book.

I suggest that you read through it all straight through at least once. Then go back and maybe take some notes.

You can use this as a straightforward how-to manual, if you wish. I decided to make this chapter-by-chapter to facilitate that purpose and make it easier for beginning writers.

I've also tried to make this universal enough to fit a variety of fish out of water romance stories. But, obviously, I cannot think of **every** idea you might have. If you bought my [\*\*25 Fish Out of Water Romance Story Ideas\*\*](#) ebook when you bought this, you will find lots of good ideas you can turn into Kindle books.

Adapt what you learn here to your own ideas. If a chapter does not quite fit your story, leave it out or change it. That's perfectly fine. This is not intended to be a one-size-fits-all blueprint. OK?



You'll quickly see as you continue reading that there are chapter groupings. They can easily be switched around to accommodate your story. Expect to do so.

Do you want your character to meet a love interest at some different part of the story than where I have it happen? No problem. You can still follow the chapter-by-chapter guide and get what you need.

You will know if something doesn't feel quite right to you. Go with what you think will work best for your story. I can't stress that enough!

This is simply one way to write a story. I do not suggest that you use it to write **every** romance book you will ever write.

This guide is a bit different than other structures that I've used (you too, most likely). I'm not rejecting them all in favor of this. It's just an additional way I've used to write this particular type of story.

I do suggest that you give it a shot to see how easy it is to write this type of book. **That's the goal here: to write a good romance tale super fast.** I think you'll be pleasantly surprised, as I was.

# Chapter 1 – Your Story Idea

In this chapter, I will help you discover three things:

1. *Your Character*
2. *Your Character's Old World*
3. *Your Character's New World*

Even if you have a good idea of these parts of your story already, **don't skip this chapter**. I raise some points here that should help you further develop ideas that you already have, as well as come up with new ones.

Before we start, I want to mention a couple of obvious things that you might be losing sight of in the zeal for your new story.

Remember that we want fast and easy with this first fish out of water romance.

**1. Simpler new worlds are faster to write. Complex new worlds take more time.**

Writing about what you know comes into play here as well. And remember that writing what you really want or like will help invest your reader. Your passion will be contagious.

**2. The more familiar your new world is to you as the writer, the easier it will be to write.**

For example, you should be familiar with a geographical location if that is what you choose for your character's new world.

That knowledge will help you describe the new world and recognize differences between her two worlds.

I know that these two points sound very simple. And they are plain common sense. But they are also the two things that I tend to forget when I'm coming up with grand new worlds – or when I think I want to play in worlds that I don't really understand. So, I think it bears reminding.

You can always do this on a much larger scale later. For now, it important to be fast, easy, and done.

OK, let's make some decisions. There are multiple ways to come up with ideas here. We are only going to go over one way at this time.

### **First, think about your character's old world.**

It's important not to lose sight of the fact that there are good parts of the old world. There always are. Don't make the old world ***totally*** horrible or you'll end up with something that's not really believable.

We are going to make the character reluctant to leave, so there needs to be something good about the old world that you can highlight.

If nothing is all that great, then consider giving comfort to the old world through the element of safety or adding loved ones and friends it would be really hard to leave behind.

*The important point is that there has to be something that will be sacrificed when the character decides to leave.*

Then think about the things that you do not like about the old world.

- Is it boring?
- Is it too sheltered or isolated?

- Is there real danger?
- Is it too rigid in rules or expectations?
- Is it corrupt?
- Is there some sort of moral or ethical sacrifice that a character would have to make to succeed in this world?

Your story will be easier for you to write **and** for your readers to read if you have opinions about what you like and don't like about the old world.

**Tip:** If your old world happens to be an old world for you personally (or your current world), your descriptions will naturally be better, more realistic. They will be easier to write. And, you'll be more likely to lure the reader into the story because you will be writing with emotion and passion.

**Next, think about how that world would shape a character.**

It doesn't matter whether or not you have a character in mind yet.

- What would happen to someone raised in this world?
- Is your character overlooked or insignificant?
- Is she missing something?
- Is she treated badly?

Let's bring back in The Little Mermaid.

Her old world was vast – it was the ocean after all. But it was limited. How did Andersen convey that limitation to his readers of the original written work?

In the fairy tale, it is a rite of passage for each mermaid to go to the surface once a year to experience life up there. In the movie, Ariel builds up a large collection of artifacts from land humans (mostly

found on the ocean floor or just above the surface).

In both cases, the mermaid is regaled with great stories of what happens on the surface.

It's a great trick to show the limitations of the old world and the potential dangers of the new one. It also explains The Little Mermaid longing to be part of that world.

Andersen described an underwater Eden in a way that makes the reader long for it.

But when he shows me that the characters there have knowledge of a different world and are fascinated by that world, he's showing me the limitations of Underwater Eden.

That's **very important** for you to do in your fish out of water stories, too, so your readers buy into the notion that the lead character would ever feel the need to leave.

Suddenly, Underwater Eden is missing something. The characters are so interested in the surface world that they look forward to going up to the surface. The other mermaids are enthralled by tales of what happens on the surface.

By limiting the surface exposure to once a year, Andersen is showing us the potential danger that exists in leaving the safety of the old world.

He's also reiterating the characters' desire to see the new world. If they are willing to risk danger just to see what's happening up there, it must be something worth seeing.

The same holds true for the movie version. Ariel is willing to risk danger and the displeasure of her father just for peeks of the surface.

## ***The allure of the new world must be strong.***

So that Underwater Eden (old world) might shape a character to be dissatisfied with her life. Maybe it would breed fear or bravery. A character living there would probably be curious. She might have a need to discover the truth of the tales others have told.

## **Now, consider the new world.**

In theory, your new world should promise whatever is missing in the old world.

The Little Mermaid would be able to breathe air and walk on land, but mostly the new world would satisfy her curiosity.

Oh, and then there's Prince Eric. She fell in love with him while saving his life, and he's in the new world. There's your romance!

Your character might not meet the love interest until she gets to the new world, as in this tale.

Love aspects of the new world can be simply the possibility of love at some point in the future. But it can also be getting away from the old world situation if your character is in a bad relationship or stuck in a rut there. It's entirely up to you.

## **Finally, get into your character's head.**

What are the possible flaws of your character, based on the influences of the old world? This is very important to get into in your story. You do not want a main character who is unbelievably perfect. It's a common new writer mistake.

- ✓ Did the old world stop your character from developing in some way?
- ✓ Is your character prejudiced against people from anywhere other than her old world?
- ✓ Does your character have some position or title in the old world that gives him advantages and/or disadvantages?
- ✓ If anyone were to confront him, what are your character's excuses for her attitudes or behavior?

Think about these and other character questions and make notes before you write about those kinds of things.

Remember that over the course of the book, your character should change. That is a key component of any good fish out of water story!

You have to give her something to change *from* before you can change her *into* something else. Don't skip over this or you'll confuse readers.

She should **not** start out as some perfect (just misunderstood) being. It is great fun, however, if that's the way she sees herself, which is why I say to think of excuses for your character. It will be convenient to have those justifications at the ready during some inner battle that this character has.

But, at some point, your character will have to see and confront her own flaws. It's also easy to have the new world magnify those flaws until she is forced to recognize them for the first time.

*What are some flaws and then positive changes that could happen for your character based on exposure to the new world?*

Back to The Little Mermaid (the movie version)...

The sea is ruled by a magical king. Anything he says goes, but he has several daughters. The Little Mermaid is the youngest. She's a princess



who is prettier and more talented than her older sisters.

How does being a princess in that world shape her?

- She is often praised by sycophants and shows little regard for others.
- She doesn't care how her behavior reflects upon her King Father or her family.
- She longs to learn about surface life so much that she is reckless.
- Tales of life on land have made her so selfishly obsessed over her own desires that she does whatever she wants without any consideration for others.

Wow! The Little Mermaid has serious likability issues. We will talk about how she overcomes those later.

The point is that she's definitely flawed. Exposure to a dangerous new world could teach her a little caution and consideration.

Now it's time to make these decisions:

1. What will your old world be?
2. What will your new world be?
3. How flawed will your character be from living in the old world?
4. What are some initial possibilities of flaws from the character's backstory in the old world?

Action Step:

*Jot down some notes for any ideas you have at this point in answer to the questions above before moving on to the next chapter.*

## Chapter 2 – Your Main Character

Character sketches are commonly used to flesh out characters before writing stories. But we're shooting for fast and easy here!

So, I'm a little conflicted about using character sketches for our purposes in this guide.

I like to use [Scrivener](#), and I've seen a variety of character sketch templates that I like. I've also seen debates on how effective others have found default sketches vs. more detailed character sketches.

Obviously, character sketches can be very handy. They especially help when you get caught up in your story and need a way out, or when you're writing a novel-length story.

Character sketches can **also**, however, get in the way of writing something quickly.

When I write extensively detailed character sketches, I find myself wanting to include all of that information in the book. Sometimes I'll catch myself creating unnecessary scenes to give myself the opportunity to share more about my character.

This can become a real nightmare if you're not careful – especially if you actually want to **finish** something you can put up on Kindle!

*I'm learning that in some cases, less is more.*

For our purposes here, I am determined to keep everything quick and easy. Therefore, the character sketches will likewise be quick and easy.

They will also be more fill-in-as-we-go-along than traditional character sketches. Please make note of that. I will stray from standard character sketch methods for the sake of improved speed.

In fact, to start, we are only going to go a few layers deep.

## **1. Find a photo or list physical descriptions**

I personally think it is important to have a visual representation of your main character before you begin giving them a personality.

If you are highly imaginative and can see the character in your head, great. If not (like most of us), you should search some images based on a feature or two to find a more complete representation of your character.

Using an actual image helps with descriptions and things like seeing scenes in your mind. You won't forget the important physical characteristics as you write and make a serious mistake your readers will pick up on.

## **2. Figure out your character's WANTS and NEEDS**

In fish out of water stories, the character's wants get her ready to leave her old world.

Needs pushes her out the door.

Your character should have some kind of goal beyond the relationship with the love interest. That's very important (make a note of it).

Back in the days when women had the sole goal of marrying well and the gentlemen didn't work (that was beneath them), you might not have needed more than a love interest relationship.

But I'd argue that, even back then, there were other goals. For instance, in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth's goal was her sister Jane's happiness. Darcy's goal was Bingley's happiness. Their goals ended up with the same outcome, but it took a while for Darcy to realize that.

The goal is something that does not change over the course of the story (unless it's to compromise with the love interest's goals or desires).

We get just a whiff of the goal at the beginning. The desire to achieve the goal grows into a need.

The goal has to be difficult – both for some internal reason **and** some external reason.

In our case, the character will have to leave her old world to achieve his goal. Every little conflict will move the story forward toward the climax, where we aren't sure whether or not the character will achieve her goal **and** get the guy.

Let's be honest – the real goal is the couple getting together. This is a romance, after all. But that would make for a boring story if it's nothing but “will they or won't they?” Right?

If there's nothing else going on in the lives of your two main characters, you'd have to focus on the lives of other characters. You run the risk of losing readers. Or worse – your readers caring more about the secondary characters because their lives are more interesting.

It works well if your lead character's goal is inextricably linked with the romance goal. That may be difficult to imagine right now, but just keep that thought in mind (or jot it down).

It also works well if the lead character's goal either competes with the goal of her love interest, or if they have similar goals but believe in different ways of achieving them.

That makes your lead character's goal more difficult **and** provides easy conflict between the future lovers. Very important!

Let's bring back our trusty Little Mermaid...

She has a general dissatisfaction with her world. She is fascinated by the surface world. There is something missing, but she just fantasizes and collects things to satisfy her wish of wanting to live on the surface as a human (her goal).

Then there's an **inciting incident**:

*She goes to the surface and sees Prince Eric's birthday celebration on a ship. She ends up saving him from a shipwreck and falling in love with him. This makes her strongly **want** to leave her world.*

But she would probably go on for the rest of her life collecting artifacts and just sneaking to the surface as often as she could if something didn't happen to give her the **need** to leave her old world. Ah ha!

In Disney's version of The Little Mermaid, Ariel's father finds out about her collection of surface artifacts and forbids her from ever going to the surface again.

“Humans are monsters,” he says. When she tells her father she loves Eric, he destroys all of her surface artifacts and forbids her to ever go to the surface again.

James Scott Bell fans will recognize the character's wants as the result of 'The Disturbance.' The needs are the 'change or die' situation that pushes her through the 'Doorway of No Return #1.'

Bell says there are three types of deaths:

1. Physical
2. Professional
3. Psychological

Ariel faces a psychological death of sorts. If she stays in her world, her love for Eric and dreams of life on the surface must die.

She refuses to accept that. Faced with her destroyed beloved collection and never visiting the surface (and Eric) again, she now has a ***need*** to leave her old world.

In the fairy tale Andersen version of The Little Mermaid, her needs are the love for Eric and a quest to have an eternal soul. (Apparently, mermaids are soulless in Andersen's dark world).

Hero's Journey fans will recognize want as the frame of mind after 'The Ordinary World' PLUS 'The Call to Adventure.' But want can still be stifled in the Hero's Journey. Once the character refuses the call and is faced with need, he will 'Cross the Threshold' into the 'New World.'

It just so happens that the only way for the mermaid to achieve her goal of becoming human depends upon her getting the prince to fall in love with her. Linked goals, you see.

If only all goals could be that connected!

*The easy way to figure out a goal for your character is to figure*

out the want based on whatever was missing in the old world. Then, determine what would turn that half-committed want into need.

If you think of the want in terms of a weaker goal, think of the need in terms of an angst-ridden teenager:

WANT: “Someday I'm going to...”

NEED: “I've got to... **RIGHT NOW** or I'll simply **DIE!**”

You want a better job someday. When you get fired, you need a better job **right now**.

You want to break up with your loser boyfriend someday. When you find him cheating with your sister, you need to break up with your loser boyfriend **right now**.

You want to live closer to your parents someday. When your parents get sick and you have to take care of them, you need to live closer to your parents **right now**.

Your character's initial want should be a small desire based on a shortcoming of living in the old world.

Then, some “inciting incident” happens that makes him want the want a bit more. *[An inciting incident is simply something external that happens to disrupt the character's everyday life.]*

Then something more happens to shift that want into need. *[Ariel's father destroying her human artifacts and forbidding her to go to the surface.]*

The consequences of ignoring the need will mean great suffering or some kind of “death” (real or metaphorical).



The Little Mermaid wants to live on the surface someday. Once her father forbids her to have any further contact with the surface world, she needs to live on the surface ***right now***.

Your character's objective starts out as a tiny spark of want. Something will happen to fan the flame a bit, but it's still manageable as just a fantasy. Then something else (usually more drastic) will happen to fuel the fire from want to need.

Make sense?

*The need will take her into the new world and all the way to the climax of the story, where she will end up achieving (or failing to achieve) her goal.*

### **3. Your Character's Flaw(s)**

Now that you know your character's wants and needs, we can talk a little more about his flaws.

You should have some possibilities for flaws based on your character's backstory in his old world.

Now that you have an idea of his wants and needs, you can ask yourself these questions:

- Which of those possible flaws will be obstacles in achieving his goals?
- Which of those flaws will need to change in order for him to succeed at achieving his goals?

Personal flaws make good internal conflict battles. Social personality flaws can be good for starting or maintaining external conflicts.

You might want one of each.

I'm also going to say this even though there are people who will disagree: I think it's good to add one more flaw that will **not** change throughout the story.

It doesn't have to be anything big. It could even be defended as a personality quirk. I think it does a lot to help your reader better identify with your character. It can make your character come across as more realistic. Just consider it at this point, but understand that it's **not** an absolute requirement for your story.

If you're stuck at this point, here is a list of some possible flaws...

**Personal (good for inner conflicts):**

*Lack of confidence*

*Immaturity*

*Uptight/OCD*

*Too Laid Back*

*Recklessness*

*Lazy/Careless*

*Pessimism/Jaded/Easily discouraged*

*Naivety*

*Live in the past*

*Cowardice*

*Pride/Arrogance*

**Social (good for creating/maintaining conflicts with others):**

*Selfishness*

*Doesn't stand up for himself or others*

*Puts work/causes/whatever before family and friends*

*Keeps people at a distance*

*Inconsiderate of others' welfare or feelings*

*Doesn't have any faith in others*  
*Dishonesty*  
*Cruelty (either on purpose or accidental)*  
*Unreliability*  
*Prejudice*  
*Bad temper/Belligerent*

#### **4. The Essence of Your Characters**

I know that a lot of character sketches go into great detail. I'm sure that if you thought about it, you could come up with how your character would vote, what he would have named his first pet, his thoughts on environmental activism, etc. etc.

Sometimes that's necessary detail. But not for our purposes.

We are going to be filling in a lot about your character as we go, but I do think it's a good idea at the outset to define the essence of your lead characters.

And you can easily do that with quotes.

The Little Mermaid defines her want with, “Wish I could be part of that world.”

She defines her love for Eric with, “But Daddy, I love him.”

A couple of simple quotes will help you remember the basic drives of your character. Look at it from time to time to remind yourself of goals that should **not** change and characteristics that **should**.

## Chapter 3 – The Breakdown

Once again, I want to reiterate that this is simply one specific type of story. Adapt all of this to your own style/needs as a writer.

Since we are going chapter-by-chapter, I necessarily have to be pretty specific here.

I suggest you read through this entire ebook before you do anything. I have included a simple 'cheat sheet' in the package you bought, from which you can stay on track. It'll make more sense as you go along.

You'll quickly notice that, with the exception of the first two chapters, I group chapters in threes.

In this type of story, it's very easy to use one event or scene after another. Each of these scenes will consist of three chapters:

1. a chapter with the set up of the scene
2. one for the conflict of the scene
3. one for the resolution of the scene

I know that some people prefer longer chapters. I do, as well, for different types of stories. But I prefer shorter chapters for this type of story, and the division I just explained (groupings of three) is on purpose, as you'll see.

By dividing them in this specific way, there are a number of good foreshadowing opportunities and cliffhangers that will always happen naturally as you lay out your story.

***The goal is to write quickly and easily while keeping the reader interested in reading the next chapter.***

If you divide the chapters with full scenes and everything's wrapped up by the end of the chapter, it does provide a natural stopping point. But it's better for our purposes that the reader does **not** have a good stopping point. We don't want him tempted to quit reading.

Obviously, you can do things how you like, but this is what I recommend.

Again, don't forget that if your story needs a few extra chapters or you want to mix up the order a bit, go for it.

**TIP:** *Fish out of water stories go really well with Hero's Journey and Super Structure outlines. If you're familiar with one or both of those, you will find it easy to incorporate this kind of story into them. If, however, you aren't familiar with either of those structures, it is not necessary to learn about them before you continue. Don't worry!*

I've tried to explain everything that follows so it is easy for anyone to understand the different chapters and the goals of each of the chapters. My intention was to make this simple enough even for beginners to be able to quickly and easily write a book based on these instructions.

**NOTE:** *This design is good for shorter stories, but if you make the chapters longer or add an extra chapter grouping here or there, you should have no trouble turning this into a novel-length book.*

## Chapter 4 – (Chapters 1-2 in Your Book) – Inciting Incident and Backstory

I'm not Charles Dickens. I'm not Stephen King.

People will not read my books in the same way that they read their favorite authors.

Not being a household name as an author, I need to capture them right away or I'll lose their interest. The same will be true for you.

**IMPORTANT:** The chapter groupings that follow include a **set up**, **conflict**, and **resolution** for each scene.

For the first chapter, however, I'm starting with the conflict of the first scene and skipping the set up. Further, I'm skipping the introduction and going straight to the Inciting Incident.

This will grab the reader's attention faster and get them into the action right out of the gate.

The inciting incident is the event that changes the character's world. It is what happens to start the whole story. Nothing in your story would have happened if not for the Inciting Incident happening first.

The Inciting Incident brings out the want motivation of your main character.

Through this event, we let the reader know that something is wrong or missing. Our character wants more.

It will also include our character's immediate reaction to the event and some nifty tricks for squeezing in some of the set up and backstory that we would normally have before the conflict.

## **Chapter 1: The inciting event that disrupts our character's status quo**

Skip the set up. To get the reader's attention immediately, start right in the midst of the inciting event. Go for the shock factor, and get right to it.

If the inciting event somehow gets the old boyfriend out of the picture, start right away with the conflict.

By the way, I like using the inciting incident to get rid of the old boyfriend/husband. The longer they've been together, the better.

That way the readers will believe in some lingering attachment if we bring him back later for a convenient conflict once the new couple gets together. *[Evil laugh]*

An ex can make her vulnerable. It also gives another excuse for the lead character not to go for the new love interest right away. She needs time to get over the ex, isn't ready for romance, was just hurt, doesn't want a rebound, etc.

Here are some examples of opening lines:

- “I want to see other people.”
- “I can't marry you.”
- “I'm in love with someone else.”
- “Wake up. You know I don't like you spending the night here.”
- “It's not what it looks like.”
- “We want different things.”
- “I'm moving out.”
- “Speak now or forever hold your peace.”
- There had to be some explanation for why he called out her name



at that particular moment.

- It was hard to believe that he was the result of the sperm that won the race.
- She looked around for something sharp enough to stab him.
- I didn't think he would actually marry her.
- She wasn't sure when hurting her became a sport for him.
- "It's the same ring he gave his ex, you know."

#### The awkward rejected proposal of the soon-to-be-ex:

- He was kneeling on one knee. WHY was he on one knee?
- "We've been together for a long time now."
- He couldn't have seriously expected me to marry someone with the last name Pecker.
- "I think we could eventually learn to love each other."

#### Seemingly insignificant detail from a traumatic inciting incident:

- She wore Superman panties.
- For the rest of her life, she would hate the color blue.
- His breath smelled like onions and death.
- She forgot to shave her legs on the morning she was arrested.
- The first thought that came into my head was how much I would miss his dog.
- The longer she stared at the Heimlich Maneuver poster on the wall, the more suggestive it became.
- The day her father died, she had blueberry pancakes for breakfast.

**Start with a bang.** Shock the reader into reading more. Or upset the reader enough that they already feel some emotion for your character without knowing anything about her. Now you've hooked them!

✓ Start with your character's thoughts of guilt for eavesdropping on a conversation she isn't supposed to hear.

✓ Or the shock of the alien invasion she's witnessing.

✓ Maybe you could start with the text from the note he left her when he didn't show up to the altar.

✓ Or the wording of the cancer diagnosis or eviction notice or other proof of whatever external event changes the life of your character.

Here are some more attention-getting first line examples:

- “Your father and I are getting a divorce.”
- The sun rose at 6:45 AM on the day he died.
- There was a ringing phone in the middle of the road.
- He was ashamed of the relief he felt when they killed his neighbor first.
- The worst people in life seem to be praised the most in death.
- She remembered the exact moment the brainwashing began.
- He always thought his death would be painful.
- It wasn't just that he believed them. It was how damn fast he believed them – as though all he needed was a good excuse to hate me.
- Magical powers aren't as great as people think.
- When I was 14, I realized that my mother hated me. I realized it because she stood in front of me screaming, “I hate you!”
- Even ugly women find men who think they're beautiful.
- Even in his dreams, he was rejected by women.
- “My mom said I could do better than you as a friend.”
- “We're going to have to let you go.”
- “I want a new mommy.”

- “Hang on to my hand. Don't let go. No matter what happens, don't let go.”
  - He had been washing his hands when he spotted the severed finger in the trash can of the public toilet.
  - He tried to focus on their questions instead of staring at their very big guns.
  - “We're willing to overlook your involvement if you just give us some information from time to time.”
  - I knew I was going to be punched in the face for the first time the moment he asked why I was looking at his girl.
  - “I think maybe we should sleep together.”
  - “My wife no longer wants you to work for me.”
  - “You're a good friend. I know you'll do the right thing.” And that's how I ended up going to jail for a crime I didn't commit.
  - She walked into the office like she was on a fashion runway. I couldn't believe that kind of confidence existed.
- 
- “To my son, I leave this advice: Get your life straight and earn your own damn money.”
  - “We have a witness who put you at the scene of the crime.”
  - I was on a smoke break when my boss lost his mind, stripped naked, and threw himself out the 18<sup>th</sup> story window.
  - When I looked into the bag, I was sure it was some sort of ethics experiment with a hidden camera: What happens when someone in the park finds a bag full of \$80,000?
  - “Make no mistake. They're coming. When you accept that, call me. I'll help you.”
  - He was dead. He was clearly dead. I had never seen a dead person before then, but I knew that he was dead.
  - As everyone gave up the fight, he noticed the beautiful colors and movement of the flames that were destroying everything he owned.
  - No one else knew what happened despite all the witnesses.

Spontaneous combustion was the prevailing theory.

- I lived alone, but someone had clearly written on the mirror while I was in the shower: “Help us!”
- “If you tell anyone, we’ll kill you. If you try to stop us, we’ll kill you. If you run, we’ll find you, and then?”  
“You’ll kill me?”  
“It seems you do understand.”

Since we skipped the set up to be more dramatic, the initial reaction of your character needs to give the reader some backstory.

It is convenient to do this with dialogue or thoughts that argue against whatever is being said.

Think about it...

The boyfriend you want to get rid of either cheats or breaks up with her. It makes sense that her first response would be shock because they had been together for so long... or they were to be married.

It works out really well that the first response of the main character would instantly provide an important chunk of backstory.

That backstory makes your reader curious:

- They were about to get married?
- What happened?
- What's going to happen next?

Conveniently, at that point, the boyfriend you want to get rid of would give **his** reaction to your character's reaction, which would give a bit more of the backstory.

He would probably also reveal one of her flaws. See how convenient this can be?

Whatever the inciting incident, I usually like to have witnesses that my lead character will only remember are there once the awkwardness has already begun.

Comments from others or the lead character's description of their reactions adds nicely to humiliation, showing problems that exist in the old world, highlighting perceived flaws, etc.

This is a sneaky (and easy) way to introduce other characters and their points of view regarding the lead without distracting from the exciting event.

If I wrote The Little Mermaid as a Kindle book, I'd start right away with the shipwreck where Ariel saves Eric. It's the exciting inciting incident.

I would then go to the reaction and backstory that is fairly well told immediately following that event.

## **Chapter 2: Your lead's immediate reaction**

This is the resolution to your inciting incident.

Remember that the inciting incident in Chapter 1 was the Call to Adventure or The Disturbance.

We're not quite to the point where the lead character is refusing the call yet. We are just experiencing her immediate reaction.

Again, this can be used to give backstory. This can be used to show the WANT that is not yet a NEED.

This is the reaction to the first incident that will eventually help the lead leave their world. This is where we see the first hint of their goal – the WANT that they want just a little bit more than they did before the incident.

It's also a good time to show the inner flaw.

He is still just wishing instead of taking action (or deciding NOT to take action just yet).

He is dealing with shock of the event that has changed everything. It makes perfect sense that the lead character would ruminate on how everything has changed.

We need to know what has changed and how it has changed. We also need to know whatever is wrong with them (flaw) that they ended up in this situation.

This is the end to the conflict of the inciting incident. It should in some way hint toward the climax of the story ***without*** yet committing your lead character to any course of action.

It's the chapter where your character is eating ice cream straight from the container and feeling sorry for herself while fantasizing about what she wants just a little more after whatever has just happened.

**IMPORTANT:** This chapter is reaction and wishes, ***not*** action.

For The Little Mermaid, this is the part where she has saved Prince Eric but hasn't taken any action beyond longing for him and the surface world.

## Chapter 5 - (Chapters 3-5 in Your Book) – Want Becoming Need

The next three chapters are **very** important. They will include the set up, conflict, and resolution that turns the WANT for the new world into NEED.

For Hero's Journey fans, they will include the Refusal of the Call and Meeting with the Mentor (if there is one).

For Super Structure fans, they will include the Argument Against Transformation, The Care Package, and Trouble Brewing.

For some stories, the introduction of the love interest will also occur here. Personally, I like for the love interest to be part of the next chapter grouping. You can wait for the new world to have them meet. This is entirely up to you.

There are some times when the love interest comes from the old world. For example, you might want your lead character to grow and eventually get back with the ex. Or maybe the love interest is someone that the lead didn't see clearly until she goes through some change.

***For our purposes here, however, I'm going to assume that the love interest will be someone new.***

In my opinion, it's good to have your lead meet the love interest at a low point. The lead just broke up with the ex and then something else horrible happens to kick her into the new world. She is sad, scared, and feeling awkward and out of place.

Meeting the love interest at that point is a good way **not** to have your characters fall instantly in love. It's safe to assume that your lead is not



in the right frame of mind to consider the love interest just yet. And, therefore, the love interest is also not all that interested at first.

**Whenever you decide to have them meet, there's something very important to mention here...**

The most important thing about your lead character meeting your love interest is their immediate reactions to each other.

We want to establish that there's an ***instantaneous*** attraction between them. There's a spark. But it's superficial for now.

Of course, your lead character can completely ignore and explain away that spark, but it still needs to be there. You can easily show that spark by mentioning at least one physical reaction for each of your characters. Show, don't just tell.

We are keeping it physical because this moment happens right when they meet.

If that's ***too*** superficial for you, you can make the physical trait seem deeper:

- You could describe someone's bright eyes as showing a shrewd intelligence.
- You could try to explain how making eye contact made your character immediately feel calm or confident.

Remember that our point of view here is limited by what your lead experiences, so don't try to show attraction by getting into the love interest's head. Instead, describe what your lead experiences.

Your lead should notice at least one specific physical thing about your love interest. Remember, we are in your lead's head. If you just had her breaking up with the ex, she might immediately dismiss her

attraction, but she still noticed it.

Your love interest should exhibit at least one physical signal that he is attracted to about your lead character. Your lead should notice that signal, whether or not she is able to understand what it means at that moment.

### Quick review:

Your lead should mention (in a thought or possibly verbally to someone else) at least one specific physical quality about the love interest that is attractive in some way.

You should mention at least one physical action of the love interest that gives the reader an indication that there is an attraction to your lead character:

- Does your love interest forget to speak while staring?
- Is there stuttering?
- Nervousness?
- Physical contact that lasts a moment longer than it should?

And don't forget that our point of view is limited by what your lead character experiences and thinks. If she is not yet in the state of mind to think that the love interest is exhibiting signs of attraction, then the actions should be stated for what they are AND your lead's confusion or explanations.

They should definitely have a moment, even if your lead character doesn't understand what it means yet.

But we also want to get your character to make the decision to head for the new world, so let's do that...

## **Chapter 3**

This is the make-do chapter. Your character is going to try to refuse the call to action (or argue against transformation).

She is going to try to make the best of life in the old world **after** the inciting incident:

- Maybe she discovered that her soon-to-be-ex was cheating, but considers staying with him.
- Maybe there was a break-up or divorce, but she is going to courageously carry on in the old world.

What's really happening in this chapter is that something bad is going to happen soon. We are setting up the conflict that will push her into the new world.

The lead character doesn't want the want bad enough to leave the old world... yet. They are going to try to hold on to any little bit of the status quo that still remains.

If you want your lead character's "care package" to be some friend or family member that makes leaving more difficult, now might be a good time to show that relationship – especially if that's the reason for the refusal of the call.

You might consider making the mentor who eventually ends up convincing the lead to leave the old world the person that shows how caring your character is. I'll give an alternative in the next chapter.

Your lead can come up with a plan to deal with how life will be now, or they can just stubbornly shove down their goal.

This is a good time to point out your lead character's competence, by the way.

Remember that we jumped right into the conflict, and we've already highlighted at least one flaw.

Now is a good time for your character to show strength and remind herself that she is good enough at something (preferably goal-related) - that she is going to make it in this old world.

***Determination and competence are good qualities to make your character likable.***

At the end of this chapter, it should be clear that something bad is coming. This chapter should end with a foreshadowing jinx feeling – *how could it get any worse?*

For The Little Mermaid, this is where Sebastian (the mentor appointed by The Little Mermaid's father) tells her how great it is to live under the sea and tries to convince her that she doesn't need to go to the surface.

## **Chapter 4**

This is how it could get worse – the conflict.

This is the Job chapter, where you pile on the misfortune.

Something should happen that is related to your character's other goal (the non-romantic one).

If the goal is professional, then there should be some sort of professional “death.”

- Maybe the inciting incident was someone becoming ill and now there's a physical death.
- Maybe your lead character loses her home, on top of whatever

happened in Chapter 1.

Whatever happens here should be the thing that pushes the want to need. The goal that was a bit of a pipe dream now becomes more of a “do or die” situation. Very important!

In the last chapter, your character has decided to try to make the best out of whatever happened and stay in her old world. In this chapter, they discover that it may well be ***impossible***.

You also need to show that the goal is going to be difficult. This conflict won't be instantly solved by leaving for the new world. Your character should realize that there will be obstacles, but they start to feel an irresistible need to make the change.

I like “care package” situations (showing your character caring for someone else in an established old world relationship) during this conflict chapter - if you didn't do one in the last chapter.

It creates even more likability for your character, because in the midst of everything bad or unsettling happening, they are still concerned for someone else. You'll win your readers' genuine love for the character.

It can also be a handy way to make the situation even more dire for your lead character:

- Your character might take care of some ex-in-law despite the end of a relationship.
- Maybe your character uses a big chunk of her remaining savings to help her neighbor despite having just lost her home.
- Perhaps your character has to leave the old world because she gives her home up to some beloved family member who needs it.

***By the end of this chapter, the lead character should have***

***been exposed to some conflict that leaves no real choice but to take some definitive action (leaving the old world).***

For The Little Mermaid, this is where her father finds out that she's been going to the surface and is in love with a human. He destroys her lovely collection and forbids her to have any further contact with the surface.

## **Chapter 5**

This is the resolution chapter for this particular conflict.

In this chapter, your character realizes the need to leave the old world for the new.

She has come to terms with the fact that the goal is more important than whatever is keeping them in the old world. Perhaps the goal is going to help whoever is important in the old world.

If you have a mentor, this is the chapter where the mentor convinces the lead character to take action (unless they were the one who brought things to a head in the last chapter).

Remember that your “mentor” doesn't have to be Yoda. I like unsuspecting mentors – the guy on a street corner, a gas station employee, a janitor, maybe someone who is otherwise not very smart.

And it doesn't really have to be a person at all. It can be something that your character takes as a “sign” that they should go to the new world.

I like insignificant mentors or divine signs because they can be convenient later.

***By the end of this chapter, your lead character has definitively decided to leave the old world for the new world.***

In *The Little Mermaid*, this is where Ariel meets up with the Sea Witch's eels and she decides that she will figure out how to become human. She tells Sebastian of her decision.

# Chapter 6 - (Chapters 6-8 in Your Book) – The Transition from Old World to New World

This chapter grouping details the ordeal of moving from one world to the next. At the end of Chapter 5, the lead made the decision to cross over to the new world.

In this chapter grouping, the lead will actually cross over into the new world.

But there is usually some kind of sacrifice or bargain that has to be made – some ordeal that the lead character has to go through to make the move into the new world. Very important!

As I said before, I like when the love interest is shown in this grouping. The lead character is still dealing with her issues, which provides a good reason why they don't really take notice of each other beyond the circumstances of their initial meeting.

## Chapter 6

In the last chapter, the lead character made the decision to leave.

In this chapter, she starts to take action to make that happen.

This can be packing up – deciding what to keep and what to leave (include some sentimentalism here to convey that this is hard for her to leave):

- Is there some sort of “bon voyage” party for the lead, complete with lots of crying and hugs?



- Maybe there's preparation for a job interview or a series of interviews.
- Maybe there's a house hunt.
- Perhaps the lead is preparing her family for her leaving.

This is the set up for some leaving conflict. This chapter should start out with the lead having hope and maybe even some confidence that she is making the right decision... right before we take that all away in the conflict. *[Mwahahaha!]*

***At the end of this chapter, there should be a little hint of the conflict that's to come.***

In The Little Mermaid, Ariel goes to the Sea Witch to find a way to get legs. There is shock and blatant hints from others that dealing with the Sea Witch will be trouble.

## **Chapter 7**

Now comes the conflict in the transition from the old world and the new world.

This can be the horrors of moving, a job interview where everything goes wrong, a harrowing road trip to get where she's going, etc.

It could even simply be overheard gossip about how our character will never succeed, making the character doubt herself and her decision.

In this chapter, the lead character thinks she might be making a terrible mistake before she even gets to the new world. It's my favorite time to introduce the love interest, especially if the lead character has an opportunity to completely humiliate herself.

Not only is the lead character second-guessing taking action, but she

also makes a bad first impression with the love interest, so that doesn't look good either.

In The Little Mermaid, this is where Ariel must negotiate with the Sea Witch. The Sea Witch demands Ariel's voice in exchange for legs. She also puts conditions on the deal that make Ariel wonder whether or not she can go through with it.

## Chapter 8

This chapter is the resolution to the conflict of the transition.

This is where the lead character Crosses the Threshold into the Special World (for Hero's Journey fans) or goes through The Doorway of No Return #1 (for Super Structure fans).

Despite the complete foul-up in the last chapter, they get the job or finally get moved into the new house, or otherwise resolve the conflict.

***By the end of this chapter, there is some progress of the lead character in moving toward her goal.***

In The Little Mermaid, after some persuasion and goading by the Sea Witch, Ariel makes the decision to go ahead take the Sea Witch up on her offer.

**NOTE:** Whether or not you plan on taking your character back to the old world at the end of your story, you might consider whether or not you will put a time frame on your character's goals.

For example, The Little Mermaid has 3 days to get Prince Eric to give her True Love's Kiss before she reverts to mermaid and belongs to the Sea Witch. Urgency for your lead character to meet her goal might help your plot move along.

If she plans to return to the old world at the end of some allotted time, it can also provide a convenient obstacle later.

## Chapter 7 - (Chapters 9-11 in Your Book) – We're Not in Kansas Anymore

In this group of chapters, we are going to establish the differences between the new world and the old.

Your lead character is going to discover that she is no longer in Kansas, Toto, and consider whether or not she is cut out for this bewildering or tough new world.

Once again, this group includes a chapter of set up, a conflict, and a resolution of that conflict.

### Chapter 9

In this chapter, you are setting up some conflict that brings your character to the realization that she is in a new and uncomfortable environment.

Remember that, in the last chapter, your character crossed over into the new world. In this chapter, she will likely be excited to start a new life in the new world:

- This is your character's first exposure to places and people in the new world.
- This is where your character will meet allies and enemies.

It's convenient to have your character starting out on her goal, and then an introduction takes place that disrupts her progress toward that goal.

And no matter when you introduce allies and enemies, it's always good to keep your readers guessing about one of them. Nothing too obvious – just a tiny little thing that your character notices and a good

distraction to make it slip your readers' minds. This will make for an easy surprise in some future conflict.

***By the end of this chapter, you should give hints that your character is getting uncomfortable or other people in the new world are uncomfortable with your character.***

In *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel has brought Sebastian with her to the new world. A chef tries to cook him. People are talking about her because she's some girl who washed up on the shore.

## **Chapter 10**

This is the conflict chapter that shows the big difference between the old world and the new world:

- It might be how your character feels in her old world.
- It might be how she is used to behaving or how the people act or respond to her.

It's works well if the discomfort is a reaction to your character's goal. It's especially effective if your readers discover that your character's love interest has some kind of problem with your character and/or her goal.

If your characters' goals are at odds with each other, now is a convenient time to reveal that. If they have similar goals but different ways of achieving them, a small conflict here is good.

If nothing else, it's an opportunity to have the love interest show a little bit of contempt for your lead or your lead's goal.

You can absolutely go on incorrect assumptions here. Your lead or the love interest assumes something that turns out to be incorrect about the other. Maybe your love interest dismisses or laughs at your

character or her goal.

Misunderstandings work *really* well here.

IMPORTANT: the conflict here should be a minor goal obstruction and a minor love obstruction. Don't overdo it!

This time, instead of 'eating ice cream out of the container' dejection, your lead should show a bit of backbone. Your lead gets a little riled and determined instead of going into a funk.

Yes, she is initially uncomfortable in this new world, but there isn't a sense of giving up completely and going home. It's a sort of culture shock situation, but your character is already starting to be a bit stronger than she was in the old world, when everything began. Very important!

In The Little Mermaid, Ariel has given her voice to the Sea Witch, so Prince Eric isn't interested in her as he is looking for the woman who saved him and has the voice of an angel. She is also embarrassed as she doesn't know anything about the human world. She tries to comb her hair with a fork, etc.

## **Chapter 11**

This chapter is the resolution to this particular conflict.

Because this entire scene is showing the disparity between old world and new, you should give your lead character a little break here.

One of the allies should empathize and reach out to your lead. That person (or people) should make an effort to help your lead character.

It's a good time to have your character explain or defend her goal, have someone else recognize the value (or at least her determination),

and make a vow to help.

***This chapter should end with mention of a plan that sounds like it might be a little scary.***

In The Little Mermaid, animal helpers come up with a plan to get Eric to kiss Ariel.

## Chapter 8 - (Chapters 12-14 in Your Book) – Attempting to Fit In

In this chapter grouping, someone from the new world is going to help the lead character make an effort to fit in a little better with the new world.

The lead will get the attention of the love interest and be rewarded for making an effort to appreciate the new world.

### Chapter 12

This chapter is the set up for a conflict where your lead character (hopefully with the help of locals) attempts to fit in to the new world.

Your lead has to make an effort here. She can resist at first, but has to trust the new ally and give up a little control:

- This can be some kind of makeover.
- It can be preparation for participation in some local event.
- Maybe it's preparing to better network with important people.

The main motivation here is that acceptance will somehow hopefully help with the lead character's goal.

This is where they dress up or down the lead character. She learns which fork to use, gets some overalls for the barn raising, gets some training on how to talk to the union stewards, etc.

In *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel is dressed in human clothes. She learns what she can about how to use human implements. She bathes, gets dolled up, etc. She tries to be as normal as possible for someone who has never walked and cannot speak.



## Chapter 13

This is the conflict – the preparation in the last chapter leads to some event. That event happens now.

During this chapter, there is something different about your lead character because the other character(s) helped them to make an effort in some way.

Your love interest now sees your lead character in a slightly different light. In the last chapter grouping, the love interest hastily dismissed your lead. In this chapter, your lead gets the passing attention of the love interest.

Of course, there shouldn't be oaths of devotion yet. It's just a subtle double look or some other minor recognition that something's a little different.

You should also reward your character for the effort made to try to respect the differences in this new world. This can be done through the praise of a new ally (or even a passing stranger).

This chapter is also a good time for something that James Scott Bell fans know as “pet the dog.” But for our purposes, we're going to call it “pet his dog” (despite how that phrase sounds).

*Your lead has the attention of the love interest. Have her do something nice for someone important to the love interest, and have the love interest witness this act of kindness.*

Of course, your lead can't just win over the entire new world. That's boring. So, there are still going to be naysayers or enemies who are against your lead. Perhaps someone else who will be shown to have a competing interest in the lead's love interest.

It's very convenient to have one of those enemies interrupt the petting of his dog (the act of kindness to someone important to the love interest).

Of course, the love interest doesn't see that part. Or, the lead runs away upset before the love interest can intervene and explain.

***Overall, the conflict here is more inner conflict for the lead. She bravely and with an open mind made an effort to recognize what's important to others in the new world.***

In The Little Mermaid, this is when Ariel catches Eric's attention with a pretty dress, makes him laugh, and literally pets his dog.

## **Chapter 14**

The resolution of this inner conflict is the lead starting to get her groove back.

Allies have been made and shown to be trustworthy and supportive.

As with all the little resolutions, they should point toward the climax of the story. At this point, the outlook might be looking a bit better – both for the goal **and** the romance. Nothing is settled, mind you, but it's beginning to look like a brighter future.

***This chapter is a bit of a rallying point for the lead. She still has a long way to go, but there's hope!***

In The Little Mermaid, Ariel rests easy knowing that she will soon have an opportunity to attract a kiss from Prince Eric.

## Chapter 9 - (Chapters 15-17 in Your Book) – Getting to Know Each Other

It's time for the love interests to get to know each other better.

The lead's non-relationship goal also advances – *preferably with the help of the love interest*.

In this chapter grouping, we are going to cheat a little bit to fuel the spark and create some tension.

One of the biggest problems we face as amateurs writing romance is developing the romance in a **believable** way.

It takes time. You risk taking it too slow or going too fast. We want these characters to feel something for each other in a way that passes muster with even skeptical readers.

We are also going to highlight some natural obstacles.

### Chapter 15

Based on the hope and attraction-from-a-far in the last chapter grouping, we are going to set up a situation where the love interests have some closer interaction.

This could be a date, but ask yourself how feasible that is based on the history that you've created for your character.

If the lead's long-term relationship just ended badly, are they going to be dating already based on a tiny bit of physical attraction (or the talk of the new allies)?

Consider a different kind of meeting. Put your creativity hat on!

If the lead's non-romantic goal can put your lead in some kind of chance meeting with the love interest, it might work better. Ah ha!

- ✓ It can be a chance encounter where they end up together.

- ✓ It can be a group situation where they end up speaking to each other alone.

- ✓ It can even be a ;damsel in distress; type situation, where one of the characters happens to be at the right place at the right time to help out the other.

Maybe now that your love interest has noticed your lead, she wants to meet up to apologize for previous behavior or comments. Maybe she wants to show your lead around or in some way create a goal opportunity.

Even if your lead's goal is separate from the love interest, goal advancement could be used as an opportunity to celebrate and bring romance advancement as well.

You can also use sneaky allies to help things along.

This chapter is about setting up the meeting between them. If it's a planned meeting, you should include your lead's apprehension if she wants to avoid a new relationship at this point.

But you should also include excitement through telling signals like butterflies, blushes, spending a lot of time on what to wear, etc. It's a nice way to show the confusion of your character if she is experiencing some sort of mixed internal signals.

In *The Little Mermaid*, Eric offers to take Ariel on a tour of his kingdom. Everyone is buzzing about whether or not he's kissed her and whether or not it will happen soon.

## Chapter 16

In this chapter, the meeting will take place.

Because I like to write shorter stories, I like for the conflict here to be something going wrong with the meeting that results in a large amount of time spent together and/or some sort of traumatic experience shared between the lead and the love interest.

- They're trapped in an elevator
- stranded in the woods
- locked in an office
- stranded in a storm because of car difficulties
- or some other new world situation that is a bit odder.

Is it cheating to fast-forward the relationship? Yes. But it works to quickly form an emotional bond between the lead character and the love interest. If you don't want a long story (novel-sized) on your hands, take this shortcut! If you **do** want that, do not take this shortcut!

There should be some kind of danger if you can manage it – preferably something that we discover is a difference in the new world.

## Chapter 17

In this chapter, your characters have stopped panicking and realize that they will be there for a while.

Your characters should ask each other questions to kill time or make conversation. The questions start out innocent enough, but soon turn personal.

The lead character explains the old world and the love interest explains the new world. Your characters end up sharing backstory information, including family and love lives.

***Note that, at this stage, there will still be inner conflict for your lead. She's still trying to refuse an obvious attraction to the love interest.***

At some point, the characters should discuss their goals:

- Perhaps there is an opportunity here for opposing goals to come together and compromise.
- Or maybe your lead and the love interest see that their goals are a lot closer than they thought and come to some kind of agreement on approach.

# Chapter 10 - (Chapters 18-20 in Your Book) – “If we don't make it through this...”

In this chapter grouping, the characters will consider that they aren't going to get out of this situation... at least not anytime soon.

There should be some element of danger here:

- The food might run out
- There's no source for water
- No one knows they're here
- They hear growling
- The fire might go out
- The elevator falls a bit more

## Chapter 18

In this chapter, we will set up the conflict that will happen in the next chapter.

Your characters are probably getting more comfortable with each other at this point, so we need to make them move around and maybe catch them off their guard.

A good way to do this is with a bathroom need. Or, maybe a character is going to move around a bit to look for better mobile phone reception.

I like the bathroom excuse because it provides a bonding opportunity through embarrassment and discomfort. It also makes the characters think about the other's body parts. Hey, that's part of romance!

However you choose to make it happen, one of your characters steps away from the other. If they are in a smaller space, one of them distracts himself/herself with music, humming, etc.

The point is that one of them isn't paying attention. What was that sound?

## Chapter 19

This is the danger chapter. If your potential danger isn't really all that dangerous, this can be more of an 'overcoming discomfort' situation:

- Maybe there's an injury of some kind.
- Maybe one of your characters loses something important.

If you have some exciting action here, write shorter sentences, where you are careful to show details instead of just telling the details. Very important!

✓ Remember that the point of view here is limited by the lead character's experiences. Write the situation as she is **experiencing** it (as it appears to her) instead of how it actually happens (third person description).

✓ Be sure to use her senses – describe smells, sounds, sights, textures, and/or tastes.

There should be at least one act of chivalry where the love interest does something nice for the lead character to provide comfort and/or protection.

There should also be snapping or yelling or some other rough treatment in the heat of the moment.

There should be a tense, “If we don't make it through this...” moment



that is either spoken or implied.

There should also be a laugh in there at some point. Humor and a burgeoning romance are good to link together!

## **Chapter 20**

Just when it looks like your characters might not make it... they make it. Whew!

They aren't rescued from their overall predicament just yet, but they have escaped the immediate danger from Chapter 19.

After that adrenaline rush, they are either wired or exhausted (often both).

It's a good time for a nap when they might accidentally or on purpose cuddle or wake up realizing that they were cuddling. *[Heh.]*

No matter what you decide, in this chapter they will have bonded over a close call. They should start feeling a little respect and concern for each other. They are more comfortable with each other.

# Chapter 11 - (Chapters 21-23 in Your Book) – The Rescue

In this chapter grouping, your characters will continue to bond, finally get out of their predicament, and find that they actually miss each other.

## Chapter 21

In this chapter, your characters will be at the point where they are tired of the situation.

If they napped, they might feel refreshed, but the frustration is starting to get to them both:

- Are they hot?
- Cold?
- Sweaty?
- Stinky?
- Hungry?
- Experiencing bodily reactions from being in such close proximity to each other?
- All of the above?

### Other important questions:

- What signals is your love interest giving off that your lead character can't seem to interpret?
- What are the complaints and concerns of your lead?

At this point, one of your characters should have a pretty big vulnerability moment where the other character soothes, comforts,

and then shows a little vulnerability, too.

Maybe there are tears, a tantrum, etc. It would be cliché, but nice if there was a pull-apart from a hug where they make eye contact and then...

## **Chapter 22**

Your lead and love interest are rescued just as they have a “moment.” Or, one of them gets a brilliant idea to rescue themselves right at that moment.

You can always add more conflict based on who rescues them - one of the new world enemies, the love interest's ex showed up, etc.

For example, if your lead's ex was a cheater in Chapter 1, consider allowing your lead to overhear something about the love interest's actions with someone else or appearing to flirt with an enemy, etc. Something that will dredge up bad old feelings or memories.

If the major internal obstacle for your lead's goal can be played upon here, all the better.

**A quick note on sexual tension here:** To show physical attraction, highlight sense experience, and be specific:

- the sound of the love interest's voice
- the scent of her hair
- a tingling sensation when they touch
- the gracefulness of his long, slender fingers
- her smile lighting up her face

You can even use the lack of touch if one of your characters believes they will lose control or is fighting the attraction.

After all, tension is a pull. Your characters should feel a bit like it's out of their hands, no matter how much they are fighting the attraction.

You might decide to show the beginnings of a physical relationship at this point, but if you want to prolong sexual tension, you should keep it light at this point.

In *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel and Eric are on a boat where all of the animals are singing that he should “kiss the girl.” Eric is influenced by the animals until they get closer and closer... and then the boat is tipped over by the Sea Witch's hench-eels.

## Chapter 23

This is the aftermath of the conflict that just took place between the two characters.

If some deal was brokered having to do with goal compromise, it should be shared with an ally, enemy, or mentor.

Since you're expanding on sexual tension based on physical attraction, it's a good idea to dwell on the discovery of some other quality of the love interest, as well, to be acknowledged at this point.

A good tool here is to have one of the allies analyze the conflict **with** the lead character – both to give moral support and keep the question of romance alive. The ally would play up the attraction or feelings the lead feels for the love interest, and possibly offer advice.

Depending on your new world, consider one of the allies sharing some additional positive quality about the love interest based on something that happened in the love interest's past. This will keep the lead interested **and** give the attraction more substance than if it is simply physical.

It's handy to have the ally play devil's advocate to the lead character - asking questions about her and wondering if there are internal changes to be made.

But in the end, things are looking pretty good for your couple. Your lead character can't seem to stop thinking about whatever specific physical characteristic **and** some sort of long-term quality she learned about the love interest.

***No matter what else you do in this chapter, you should have your lead indicate that there is something missing since the end of the ordeal she shared with the love interest. A sense of longing must persist.***

Even if a lot of time hasn't elapsed, your lead should:

- have some sort of sense of longing
- feel like there's an understanding
- think about a possible future

There really haven't been many Little Mermaid movie references here lately (you may have noticed).

That's because in that story, she fell in love instantly and they saw each other only a few times before they got married. *[Look, it's a Disney movie... there's really no equivalent in your written romance story. It was meant for little kids, after all.]*

# Chapter 12 (Chapters 24-26 in Your Book) – A Misunderstanding, The Major Setback, and the Truth

This is the chapter grouping right before the climax, so we are setting a faster pace at this point instead of the normal set up, conflict, and resolution.

In this grouping, there will be a misunderstanding that your lead character can't correct before it quickly turns into a major setback. By the end of this grouping, your lead will know the truth, but it might just be too late for her to salvage her goals.

## Chapter 24

In the last chapter, things seemed to almost be working out well with your lead and love interest. The course seemed to be set for smooth sailing. Not so fast!

Unfortunately, a misunderstanding happens at this point to make the love interest feel hurt or betrayed to the point where it's impossible for the lead to get to him in time to clear up the misunderstanding.

If the lead's two goals are closely linked and the lead and love interest made some sort of goal compromise to bring advancement to both of their goals (which also helps their relationship get closer), maybe something appears to have gone wrong with the deal at this point:

- Maybe it looks like the lead reneged in some way.
- Maybe this misunderstanding is a rumor that the lead character was with someone else – especially if it was to further a goal.

Whatever it is, this misunderstanding should be orchestrated by some

new world enemy of the lead. It doesn't have to be that enemy's doing, but that's the easiest and quickest way to concoct this situation.

By the time the lead finds out there is a misunderstanding, the love interest isn't available. After all, you won't get a good setback if the lead character could simply call up the love interest and clear everything up right away. Right?

In *The Little Mermaid*, Eric is looking for the woman who rescued him from the shipwreck. In the fairy tale, he believes that it's a woman from a temple who comes to help him after *The Little Mermaid* rescues him. In the Disney movie, he believes it's the Sea Witch who disguises herself to make him believe she was the rescuer.

## **Chapter 25**

This chapter deals with a major setback resulting from the misunderstanding.

Since the lead couldn't argue that it's all a big misunderstanding, the love interest takes some negative action based on feeling betrayed.

In romances, this is most easily done when the love interest decides to go back with an ex, chooses another new person, or swears off love entirely after the misunderstanding.

It can also work that way with their non-romantic shared goal (if you introduced one earlier).

The misunderstanding leads the love interest to take some action that either cuts the lead out of the deal or in some way hurts the lead character's non-romantic goal.

In this chapter, the lead character is made aware of the massive setback.

In The Little Mermaid, she discovers that the prince is going to marry the woman he mistakenly believes rescued him. There will be a wedding cruise, and everything has already been agreed upon and arranged.

## **Chapter 26**

In this chapter, the lead discovers the truth of the misunderstanding, but it's likely too late to do anything about it.

It's convenient if an ally discovers that the misunderstanding was all a plot by some new world enemy:

- the lead's rival for the affections of the love interest
- some company that will benefit from a competing business deal
- family member of the love interest who does not like the lead

The ally tells the lead the truth of the matter, but since the love interest has already taken action based on the misunderstanding, it appears to be a hopeless situation for the lead character. Oh no!

In The Little Mermaid, Scuttle the seagull sees the fiancée turn into the Sea Witch. He goes to Ariel to tell her that the girl is the Sea Witch in disguise. Eric is going to marry Ursula the Sea Witch.



# Chapter 13 (Chapters 27-29 in Your Book) – Gathering Forces, Battle, and Surprise

This chapter grouping will take on the main climax of the story.

Everything looks hopeless, and despite the lead coming up with a plan of attack, ***things will get worse before they get better.***

## Chapter 27

In the last chapter, the lead character discovered the truth of the setback being a plot of an enemy.

In this chapter, the lead will gather any available forces and come up with some kind of plan of attack to show the guilt of the enemy.

It's definitely a long shot. The lead should be the clear underdog here, and the chances of success should be stressed as minimal. Very important!

In The Little Mermaid, Ariel's animal friends rally all the other animals together to raid the wedding cruise.

## Chapter 28

This is the battle scene.

Of course, the battle can be figurative. The lead character is fighting for justice, for her goal and/or for the love interest against a now-known enemy.

Of course, the enemy wants to preserve the lie and the conflict

between the lead character and the love interest.

It should be difficult for the lead character to even be able to approach the love interest to tell her side of the story. When she does, it should be dramatic.

And the love interest should **not** readily believe the lead character.

The enemy should fight and have influence with the love interest based on previous loyalties, apparent evidence, etc.

***Make this a testy and uphill battle for your lead! Do not make this something that seems easily resolved.***

Even if the lead character convinces some of the people, it seems to be too little, too late.

In The Little Mermaid, the animals interrupt the wedding before Eric marries the Sea Witch.

## **Chapter 29**

When everything looks completely lost for the lead character, there should be some surprise that convinces the love interest of the truth.

The surprise should have something to do with the change of the lead character, if at all possible.

Perhaps one of the new world potential allies whose loyalties I said before should remain ambiguous to the readers comes to the rescue of the lead character based on the lead proving herself to be honest, loyal to the new world, or otherwise a good person.

It's best if the enemy is coaxed into some kind of confession or tries to justify her behavior.

At the end of this chapter, the misunderstanding is cleared up and the enemy is proven false, but the lead walks away from the love interest as a matter of honor.

In *The Little Mermaid*, Ursula the Sea Witch kidnaps Ariel, and Ariel's father comes to save the day. The Sea Witch turns him into a sea urchin and takes his magical trident.

## **Chapter 14 (Chapters 30-32 in Your Book) – Amends, Transformation, and Resolution**

This is the last chapter grouping. ***Hooray!***

The love interest makes amends with the lead character, the lead character proves her character transformation, and there is a happy ending.

### **Chapter 30**

The lead character has been proven innocent of any betrayal, but she is still suffering from the love interest's actions.

It's a nice dramatic touch if the lead character is preparing to go back to the old world (defeated, depressed) or considering some lesser goal.

*Enter the love interest to save the day...*

The love interest apologizes to the lead character and makes amends.

If he can help bring about achievement of the non-romantic goal as part of making amends, even better.

The lead character demonstrates her character growth in this situation, but it's all implied. Give some examples of things that indicate that she's changed for the better vs. how she was at the beginning of your story.

She accepts the love interest, and things appear to be resolved... but wait!

In The Little Mermaid, Ariel and Prince Eric are fighting Ursula the Sea Witch. There's a difficult fight, but Eric steers the ship into the Sea Witch.

## Chapter 31

There's one more conflict leading toward the resolution.

I mentioned that I like to get rid of the ex at the beginning of the story, only to bring him back just when there seems to be a happy ending.

This is that time.

The ex coming back into the picture at this point and being rejected is proof of the transformation of the lead character. Very important!

And this should be a believable conflict. The love interest should be nervous, and the reader should think, “No! Don't do it!”

But it's the **perfect** demonstration of transformation. Whatever character flaw allowed the lead to be with that person in the first place has changed. And changed for good!

In the lead's re-rejection of the ex, she should solidify the change that

took place as a result of the journey and suffering. She is no longer the same person:

- She's better.
- She's evolved.
- She's worthy of the new love.

In *The Little Mermaid*, the Sea Witch is defeated but Ariel goes back to the sea as a mermaid. She understands the mistakes that she has made, and she's terribly unhappy, but is resigned to live out the rest of her life as a mermaid.

Her father intervenes and uses his magic to give her legs.

## **Chapter 32**

In this resolution chapter, the love interest is pacified that the lead character won't be returning to the ex.

This chapter answers the question of whether or not the lead character and the love interest finally get together.

Depending on your preference (and maybe your rating at Amazon), there should be some sort of sexual scene to satisfy your readers. This is optional, but recommended.

In *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel and Eric finally marry on a wedding cruise. They sail off into the sunset.

## **Epilogue (optional)**

If you'd like, add a short epilogue scene:

- Maybe the lead character brought the love interest to the old world to live or visit.

- Maybe the lead character has adapted beautifully to the new world.
- Maybe you fast-forward a little to show them happily settled and raising their own family.

In this final chapter, you should also tie up any loose ends that you've left dangling (a very common conundrum for even the best fiction writers).

Try to focus on the couple instead of exes and enemies, as much as possible. *[Let those sleeping dogs lie.]*

**Leave on a happy note.** Just do an epilogue scene, not the entire lives and deaths of the characters.

## Want More Help?

Now that you've finished *How to Write a Fish Out of Water Romance*, are you ready to write a great story?

If you'd like more help, or maybe just to go deeper into these ideas and guidelines, you should check out my [\*\*Fish Out of Water Romance Story Workshop\*\*](#).

Take a look and sign up if you like what you see. :)