Intensive Genre Workshops
Build A Romantic Suspense

For this example, we're using a romance between two people. Our villain has committed a murder, and our romantic couple need to solve the murder before the murderer kills them!

We may have given you a sheet to lay your cards down on. You can put them in any order you wish. DON'T DEAL AHEAD. Every card poses new decisions that you need to make as we build this romantic suspense.

FOR ROMANCE PLOT DRAW:

- 1 Setting card
- 2 stock characters - what does each notice in the setting?
- Assign a baggage to each stock character. Why does this damage make them present to the world in their stock persona? For funsies - pick two fears and figure out which character has that fear, or make up one of your own that is triggered because of their baggage.
- 1 Conflict card - How will this trigger their baggage?
- 1 Awkward Situation card - The meet cute - How will they handle it?
- 3 trope cards - try to use all three for the romance subplot. Which ones are the best for the baggage?

Because we're writing Romantic Suspense, these are our sleuths. Be warned, your romance readers will eviscerate you if one of them is actually the villain.

Let's take a minute to sketch out how their baggage will create fears and triggers, and then how the love interests (LIs) can trigger those in the other person. For example, if one LI was in a natural disaster, they may want to always have an escape plan. Pairing them with a LI that goes with the flow will trigger their baggage..

How will the conflict trigger each other's baggage? For example, Belle wants to leave her provincial place, but the Beast needs her to stay put in order to fall in love and break the curse.

FOR SUSPENSE PLOT DRAW: (keeping the above cards)

- 2 stock + 2 baggage - again why do they portray themselves as stock persona based on their baggage?
- 3 conflicts - you now have 4 characters and 4 conflicts. You don't have to use all of them, but use the conflicts to connect characters. Think of it as creating a knot of conflicts.
- How do they relate? Which characters have conflicts with the others and why? Remember, they all need a good reason to murder or be murdered.
- Pick a murderer! Don't pick the most obvious choice. This exercise works best if you choose a murderer at this step. You're not being graded. You haven't even written the story. Nobody will know. Pick one character to be the murderer, please.
- Why are all these people at the setting?
- What secrets do they want to hide?
- Pick a crime and a doorway. You can use both or just one. This event can be the result of a choice from the doorway. Consider using it as a red herring or the murderer has committed it. How do the characters react to the crime?
- Speaking of red herrings - why not pick another stock character, baggage, and a fear card, just in case. And no, they can't be the murderer.

Let's talk about suspense. Sheila has come up with a brilliant way to look at the differences between mystery, suspense, and thriller. They are all about crime. They all promise some kind of justice. Consider crime as a verb for a minute, as in “to crime”. In mystery, the crime is in the past - it’s been committed and the sleuth is looking to solve who, why, or how it was done. Thrillers are crime in the future. So that leaves us with suspense being crime in the present.

> ***The intention of the main crime is in the present tense.***
> ***Good suspense rests on the threat of imminent criming, often with notes of doubt. Is my husband trying to kill me? Will the plan for the perfect heist go off without a hitch? Is my nanny a serial killer? Suspense pairs really well with romance because it plays on the ‘will they/won’t they’ tension.***

Putting it all together

Here’s my top twelve list of things readers and publishers expect. There are more so read your genre.

1. Our sleuths are the love interests. Throughout the story they will heal their past baggage and realize they are worthy of unconditional love.
2. The love interests (LI) are the only people who are perfect for each other, based on how they deal with their baggage and how they encourage the other LI to heal. Ya’ can’t heal nobody. Ya’ can’t fix ‘em neither. They must learn their lessons and heal themselves. Also, in case you weren’t aware, YOU are absolutely deserving of unconditional love just by being born.
3. You can have law enforcement involved, but our sleuths are the heroes and therefore must solve the crime before law enforcement does.
4. Justice must be served! It doesn’t matter which kind - meaning you can use the legal system or let Karma handle it. Some kind of justice must prevail or be mourned.
5. This is suspense, so our villain will be upping the stakes and lives are in danger. This typically occurs three times in books because humans like things in threes.
6. There is a definite villain. Yes, you can have a minor villain and then the sleuths discover the big bad villain after that. Even in paranormal stories we need to know that the evil force has been dealt with.
7. The villain must be intelligent, or your sleuths are weak.
8. The villain is proud of their baggage and how it created the person they are.
9. No new clues after the midpoint. The sleuths begin to take action and reinterview old suspects, often uncovering their lies that made them a suspect but not the villain.
10. It must end on a happy-ever-after for the LIs, otherwise it’s just a suspense with romantic elements, like most of Robert B. Parker’s books.
11. Follow your tropes. Mindy Klasky’s already done the work for us. You can find what the tropes entail at: https://www.mindyklasky.com/index.php/for-writers/romance-tropes/

We love the cards because we can set them out and rearrange them as needed. Try answering the following questions. Take notes, but be aware that this exercise is truly an exercise. Even if this doesn't quite work, answering these questions will help you make the connections needed for a romantic suspense. Also, consider why things don't work. Also, thinking of your current work-in-progress, what cards are in your story? Are you missing any?

We have 5 stock characters to play with, and now's a good time to start taking notes.

- How are the characters connected? They don't have to be related, and the connections can be revealed through the story. Ex: The mother of an ex-boyfriend who was so depressed he had to be hospitalized, and she blames the murder victim.
- Why are they all stuck in the same setting?
- What conflicts do they have between each other?
- What is the WORST possible thing that could happen to them based on their baggage? Ex: If the baggage is being trapped with a dead body, it could lead to claustrophobia. Having a scene where that character MUST face their fears makes for good tension.
- What secrets are they hiding? What lies do they tell to keep their secrets? This is especially important because in mystery/suspense/thriller EVERYBODY is lying to hide something embarrassing. That's why the sleuth must go back and reinterview the suspects. Ex: hiding the fact they are having an affair or were at the McDonald's drive through getting a shake and fries instead of at home, like they said.
- Give all the characters motivation for murder! Best advice is to make the motivation Our two sleuths can even have a motivation for the murder, but they can't be the murderer.
- For the romance plot line, look at the sleuths' baggage. What are three things that would trigger their baggage? Make it the worst thing possible and then make it even harsher.
- For the suspense plot line, look at the baggage for the villain. (Are you sensing a theme?) This character is proud of how the baggage formed them. The villain has a believable, logical reason to commit murder.
- For the red herrings, look at their baggage to determine why they would kill the victim.

Story Structure (pantsers use this to plan, plotters use this on revisions)
Romancing the Beat by Gwen Hayes is great for plotting a romance.
Mastering Suspense Structure & Plot by Jane K Cleland is great for plotting a mystery/suspense.

Romance Beat Sheet From Jami Gold's website

**Note: Beat sheets are guidelines and should not be considered as accurate to the percentage. But if your hook is 200 pages in, you need to revise.*

ACTS & BEATS DESCRIPTION

- **ACT ONE** Introduce protagonists, hook the reader, and setup the romance conflict (foreshadowing, establishing stakes)
- **Opening Image/ Hook** Opening scene or sequence of story; create empathy with characters by showing how they lack for something
- **Inciting Incident** Give a glimpse of how right the characters could be for each other (*Essence), but they're not ready yet (*Identity)
- **End of the Beginning**
    - *External Relationship Arc:* What happens that forces the characters to spend time together?
    - *Internal Relationship Arc:* What decision do the characters make that reflects their desire for each other?
    - **ACT TWO** The protagonists react to the new desire, but suffer from one step forward and two steps back
    - **Pinch Point #1** How does the Pinch Point affect their relationship?
- **Midpoint**
    - *External Relationship Arc:* What visible sign of commitment do the characters make to each other?
    - *Internal Relationship Arc:* How are the characters still in their Identity (and thus doomed to fail)?
    - **Pinch Point #2** How does the Pinch Point affect their relationship?
- **Crisis**
    - *External Relationship Arc:* What triggers the characters' fear about their relationship (& their retreat to Identity)?
    - *Internal Relationship Arc:* How do the characters realize the relationship can't succeed (at least with Identity)?
    - **Act Three** The protagonists summon the courage to overcome inner obstacles and remove their emotional armor w/the other
- **Climax**
    - *External Relationship Arc*: How does fear threaten the potential of the relationship one last time?
    - *Internal Relationship Arc*: How do the characters prove they don't want to continue without the other anymore?
    - **Final Image/ Resolution** Show how the characters are now fully in their Essence and perfect for each other

Thriller Beat Sheet

Build A Romantic Suspense

1. Hook (0–5%)
Start with immediate tension, mystery, or danger. A murder, a heist gone wrong, a surveillance camera blinking to life—something is off. Introduce the *threat*, *tone*, and *stakes* right away. *Ex: A love interest finds a severed hand in the park.*

2. Inciting Incident (5–10%)
The protagonist is pulled into the central conflict. This is personal, professional, or accidental—but it's unavoidable. The threat becomes real to them. *Ex: They recognize the hand—or worse, are framed for it.*

3. Key Investigation / First Clue (10–25%)
Initial digging begins. The love interests takes steps to solve, survive, or expose the threat. This often includes a clue that later turns out to be misleading or incomplete. *Ex: A suspect's alibi breaks… but it was too easy.*

4. First Confrontation / Complication (25–35%)
A skirmish or direct encounter raises the stakes. The villain (or their reach) is revealed, even if not identified. The situation gets messier or more dangerous. *Ex: The hero is attacked—or someone they care about is.*

5. Midpoint Twist (50%)
Game-changing revelation. A betrayal, a hidden agenda, or a shocking discovery reframes everything. The threat is bigger than they thought. *Ex: The real killer works inside law enforcement.*

6. Escalation / False Hope (50–75%)
Things accelerate. The hero seems to be gaining ground but is unknowingly being played. A false victory or quiet-before-the-storm moment often occurs. *Ex: The villain is "caught"… but the murders continue.*

7. All Is Lost / Major Setback (75–85%)
Biggest failure. The hero is outsmarted, captured, betrayed, or someone dies. This is the emotional and tactical low point. HAMMER THE BAGGAGE! *Ex: The hero's closest ally is killed in an ambush.*

8. Final Clue / Inner Resolve (85–90%)
The protagonist puts the puzzle together—often by reinterpreting an earlier clue. They accept what it'll cost to win. *Ex: A long-forgotten witness or item now makes sense.*

9. Final Confrontation (90–98%)
Action-packed climax. The hero confronts the villain or uncovers the full truth. Physical, moral, and psychological stakes collide. *Ex: Hero breaks into the villain's compound—or exposes them publicly.*

10. Resolution (98–100%)
Loose ends are tied up. Justice in some form is served.

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