

# Romance in a Short Story



**W**hen writing romance in a short story or novella format, the limited word count constrains how much relationship development your story can contain. While the elements that signify romance between characters are the same irrespective of the length of the story, the time or environment it can play out in is that much smaller.

This article will explore the scale of your story, and then delve into the elements that can be used to craft romantic developments between your characters.

## How Big is Your Play Area?

When setting out to write a short fiction romance, it is important to think about a story that can fit the shorter word count.

- How much do your couple have to resolve? Can you establish and resolve those conflicts convincingly in a shorter word count?
- What situations can be accommodated within such a short time frame or small environment?
- Can the situation be resolved within the word count, or will it be able to be left in a positive place where the reader can safely assume the couple have the will and means to sort themselves out from that point.

Here are some ideas for ways in which you can keep your story short and focused on the characters and their relationship.

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**Limited Space and Time.** To keep the story focused on the characters and fit within the short format, it can be helpful to limit your story to a short snippet out of the lives of the characters that may only last half an hour, or an evening. Having as few a scenes as possible keeps it simple and saves having to build the world around the characters. You can make the space very small by forcing the characters together in a very tight setting such as a stuck lift.

**The relationship doesn't have to start from scratch.** You can use a backstory where the characters already have some shared history to help focus the story and allow you to jump right into the action. You don't need to spell out this backstory, just hint at it, but have it in your own mind as you write. You just need to give the reader enough to understand the characters behaviours and motivations.

**Use dialogue and physical cues** to help your characters establishing, confronting, and resolving their conflicts through their interactions with each other rather than rely on internal dialogue.

## Creating Romantic Feelings Between Your Characters

The same methods for crafting the chemistry between two characters apply for short fiction as for full length novels. In its most basic sense, chemistry is how two characters interact with each other. It's an energetic exchange between two people in a relationship, whether that relationship is romantic or not.

### Develop Your Characters

To make your characters and their relationship believable, you will need to develop fully fleshed-out characters with their own goals, motivations, and inner obstacles. In a short story you won't have the space to explain this to the reader but you will need to have it clear in your own mind so that it can flavour the characters' interactions, and hint at deeper back stories.

Don't be afraid to dirty up their past a little. Give them scares, flaws, emotional baggage. Basically, make your characters relatable.

### Look for Opportunities for Opposition and Harmony

In developing your characters look for opportunities for opposition and harmony between them. This will allow both characters to knock the rough edges off each other and demonstrate their strengths, their weaknesses, their beliefs, their vulnerabilities, and their personalities.

Look for areas of opposition and harmony in these key areas:

- Goals and ambitions
- Motivations
- Opinions about relationships (romantic or not)
- Communication and/or confrontation style
- How do they behave in front of each other vs how they behave in front of other people
- Shared interests and similarities
- How they express and want to receive love
- Amounts of power and control
- Expectations of themselves, others, and/or situations

Out of this character development and design work, the three elements that can help create chemistry between the characters are; vulnerability, desire, and resistance.

- **Vulnerability** refers to the willingness to show emotion or let one's weaknesses, insecurities, fears, and/or hopes and dreams be seen by another
- **Desire** refers to the strong feeling of wanting to have something or wishing for something to happen (in this case, with another person)
- **Resistance** refers to the refusal to accept or comply with something, or the attempt to prevent something by action or argument

As you develop your characters, identify how your characters will be vulnerable with each other, what they like about each other (both physically, mentally, and emotionally), and their reason for not being able to be together, this is what will help you create the push-pull dynamic that makes for fantastic on-the-page chemistry.

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### Creating Tension Between the Characters

Romantic tension is the suspense created by how two potential romantic partners orbit each other before their union is certain.

It grows from the question: *When will these two characters get together?*

From our character development we will have the elements that create the tension.

- Desire brings your characters together.
- Resistance pulls them apart.
- And vulnerability operates in the middle—bringing them closer together and sometimes keeping them apart.

To build tension and reader engagement in the story, you need to lead the reader on by doling out the information in small chunks that lead towards the answer to *When will these two characters get together?* Keep them hungry.

### More Things to Define the Relationship

We've created a pair of characters with depth, flaws, and some potential chemistry. Now we can look deeper at the relationship and give some more qualities to make it more realistic, and give it a bit of zing.

**What do the characters actually like about each other?** This is where you can look at how they're similar or different and what that means about the way they think about each other. There will be other qualities that the characters may like about each other; openness, supportiveness, ability to stand up for themselves and others, bags of money.

**What keep them apart?** If they're in a relationship already (with each other that is) then there may not be anything keeping them apart. There may not even need to be any reason that they can't get together – that depends on the story you want to tell. There are a heap of reasons your characters may not be able to get together; feelings of inadequacy, family, doubt, geography, work, disapproving friends etc. The reasons can be internal or external. It can be resistance from just one side or from both. Whatever the reason, it can be used to stretch out the time it takes the two characters to get together.

**Use dialogue to portray the type of relationship the characters have.** These can be things like banter, private jokes, trading insults, quarrels. The use of dialogue will provide insights into the way they think, their sense of humour, and whether one character dominates the conversation, as a few examples.

### Bringing the Characters Together

It is important to get your characters alone together as much as possible. This is particularly important in a short story format where you have to limit the number of settings and other characters to avoid blowing out your short story to a three volume epic. Situations where they have to rely on each other help strengthen the relationship.

Here are some examples of **close proximity settings or situations**.

Shared office  
Elevator  
Supply closet

Neighbours  
Escape pod  
Boss / employee

Sports partners  
Dance  
Long distance bus trip

Another method to draw characters together is letting them learn something from each other. It could be a secret or it could be something that changes their perspective or a belief. Even a small change can create a very strong moment between the two characters.

A shared secret, vulnerability or insecurity that no one else knows is a strong bonding tool. Trust is important to romance building. Being able to open up and share is an important aspect in building chemistry.



### Writing Challenge for January 2025

Write a story or a short snippet that shows the interactions of two characters where there is chemistry or the potential for chemistry to develop. If you are after a prompt, there are no shortage of them on the web, but here are some that should hopefully lend themselves to a short story format.

- They have been friends since they were kids vacationing together every summer – but now it's getting serious. They might not be just friends anymore...
- She has a secret thinking spot on the roof of a nearby building. When she goes there after learning she lost her job, she discovers someone sitting there.
- Two people meet after finding out they've both been dumped. As they try to plot their revenge on their exes, they discover maybe they have feelings for one another.
- The older couple in a photograph she discovers look familiar – but she doesn't know who they are. One of the people looks a little like her, only older. Could it be a view of the future to come?

### Some Useful Lists

#### Polar Opposites

Dominant vs. Submissive

Rich vs. Poor

Dour vs. Happy

Failure vs. Success

Loner vs. Life of the Party

Predictable vs. Unpredictable

Talkative vs. Quiet

Athletic vs. Clumsy

Cynical vs. Optimistic

Introvert vs. Extrovert

Adventurous vs. Cautious

Cooperative vs. Uncooperative

Broad minded vs. Narrow minded

Patient vs. Impatient

Generous vs. Stingy

Confident vs. Self conscious

Hardworking vs. Lazy

Helpless vs. Self reliant

Reserved vs. Affectionate

Friendly vs. Standoffish

Debater vs. Peacemaker

#### Shared Similarities

Competitive

Fun-loving

Same goals or accomplishments

Athletic

Strong Willed / Stubborn

Debaters

Controlling

Reckless

Addicts

Emotional pain (Trauma bonding)

Loss of a friend or family member.

Ambitious

Calculating

Skeptical

Intelligent (Power Couple)

Problem Solving (Power Couple)

#### Reasons for the Characters to Like One Another

Can see through the mask they wear every day.

Sees them for who they are outside of their money or status

He doesn't judge her for the things she does.

He helped push her out of her comfort zone.

He helped her to stand up for herself.

Makes them feel safe.

Showed them something that changed their mindset.

Believed in their life's work

Sees the world differently.

He likes how protective she is over him even though he's more than capable of taking care of himself.

She's positive even when things are at their worst.

She's like sunshine in his dark world.

He likes the way her mind works to solve problems.

He's someone she can rely on.

She accepts him for who he really is.

### References

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