

Gina Denny

Editing Services
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Developmental Edit – [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Hello, [REDACTED]

Thank you so much for letting me read your work. It was such an honor to spend some time with [REDACTED] and the difficult things they've had to overcome. Your core story idea is a fantastic one. It's deep and twisty without being overwrought, which is a difficult line to walk.

I like the usage of multiple tenses. The past tense for the past, present tense for the present. If I'd heard someone describe it that way, I'd have thought it was gimmicky, but it really works. It feels smooth and natural, and it serves the story extremely well.

I left comments in the margins, mostly with questions and suggestions. Every single suggestion is just that: a suggestion. You know your story best, so you have the best vision for the manuscript. My feedback centers on basically these things: [Structure and Pacing](#), [REDACTED] [Wound](#), [Dual Timelines](#), [Grounding Details](#), and [Deep POV](#).

Structure and Pacing

Your query letter calls this a romance, and in your emails to me you called this a romance, so I will give all my advice based on that. You have all the beats for a romance, but many of them are happening at the wrong times. Romance is the genre with the absolute strictest rules for structure.

- The Meet Cute is the Inciting Incident, so it happens between 5-10% of the way into the book. Even if the characters know each other already, we don't see them interact until that Inciting Incident.
- The couple has to face an Insurmountable Challenge somewhere in Act II. They might lie to themselves and pretend they can keep dating, but the writing is on the wall, and they will break up—either by choice or by force—before the end of Act II.
- The Darkest Moment is the couple not together. This has to happen between 75-85% of the way into the book. Yours happens at 86%, but then she sits in that unhappiness for a long time.
- The resolution is the couple coming back together. Romance is the only genre that *requires* a significant denouement. Most romance novels spend at least 5% of the book in the denouement, some as much as 10%. You have *almost* 5% of the book in the denouement, and the scene at the reunion feels very rushed.

While 90,000 words is not automatically a problem, it is a little on the long side, and I don't think it needs to be. I'm going to talk specifically about alternating timelines later on, but for the purposes of structure and pacing, I'm going to talk about the size of the two timelines. The "now" section of the story is the section with all the tension in it. We know right from the start—no matter how you decide to tell this story, with my suggested structure or not—that University [redacted] and University [redacted] will break up, so that story is over before it even starts.

I recommend cutting quite a few scenes from the university storyline. You needn't feel obligated to maintain a 1-to-1 (or anything close to it) ratio between the "now" story and the university storyline. That flashback can be told out of order and it can be much smaller, word count-wise, than the current-day story. I recommend focusing only on the most necessary pieces, the pieces that directly support [redacted] current arc.

Attached to this email is a spreadsheet. If you look at the bottom of the spreadsheet, there are two tabs. One says, "As Is" and the other says, "Suggested." This is my suggestion of how you could make some of these structural changes in your manuscript. When you look at the "As Is" tab, you'll notice there are a lot of blank boxes. "Scenes" are scenes that feel like they're pushing the plot forward and "Sequels" are scenes that feel like a breather, like the characters are regrouping. You've currently got a bit of an imbalance with several "scenes" in a row and several "sequels" in a row.

I recommend moving some of the flashbacks around to alleviate this, cutting some flashbacks, and reducing or increasing the emotional interiority in other passages to make them feel either more or less like they're driving the plot forward. For instance, currently, when [redacted] bumps into [redacted] at book club, it doesn't feel weighty. It feels like you wrote a scene so that she could say she "keeps bumping into him." But if you increase the interiority, give them some meaningful eye contact, have him say something that makes her think he's genuinely sorry for how he left her, and have her be reminded of [redacted] without falling to pieces... suddenly that scene is super important.

The good news here is that you have very, very few new scenes to write. I recommend writing one new scene (it's highlighted in yellow) and moving two things in pretty significant ways (they're denoted with *** in the box). Otherwise, I recommend using scenes you've already written, just in a slightly different order to hit the required romance beats.

[redacted] Wound, Belief, and Arc

[redacted] feels (unfairly, but that's the way these things go) that [redacted] abandoned her. [redacted] "left" without a warning and it carved a scar on [redacted] soul. That scar changes the way she behaves with everyone. This would do one of two things. Either she's excessively clingy, terrified that people will leave her and abandon her, or she's aloof and distant, sure that if she pushes them away first then no one can ever hurt her like that again.

She's closer to the second one, but not quite. But I'm also not entirely sure that's the vibe you want, to be honest. She comes across as a typical woman who sometimes gets sad, not as someone who is wrestling with grief and trauma. University [redacted] is a little more sad, but she trusts easily and welcomes people in pretty quickly (considering).

The hook always mirrors the resolution, and since the end of this story is about [REDACTED] overcoming her trust issues to welcome [REDACTED] into her heart fully, blending her two different forms of grief into one form of healing. That means the beginning needs to show us a version of [REDACTED] that is raw, hurting, and deeply untrusting of anyone, for any reason. The midpoint should show us a version of [REDACTED] who is cautiously optimistic. She took a leap in trusting [REDACTED] in both timelines—and while it wasn't a disaster, it wasn't a major success, either.

This means that the final resolution, the way [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] reconcile, hinges on the fact that [REDACTED] needs to learn to separate her grief from her other emotions. But it also means that [REDACTED] needs to change his behaviors. He cannot be confessing to additional dishonesty during their reconciliation. If you want him to confess to “tricking” her into approaching him at the beach party, that information needs to come much earlier.

In genre romance, there's always a “grand gesture” that brings the couple back together. The grand gesture can be quite small, ironically, as long as it's meaningful to the couple. [REDACTED] bringing [REDACTED] food counts, but only if the rest of the scene supports reconciliation. That means all the sins have been confessed and forgiven. That means all decisions have been made. That scene is about declarations of everlasting love, kisses, and maybe some sex.

Dig through all of [REDACTED] interiority and make sure her arc is changing in a way that is consistent with the story arc. On the plot spreadsheet, on the Suggested tab, I included emotional beats for the entire story. These are brief summaries of how [REDACTED] arc in particular is progressing, but they also largely speak to [REDACTED] arc. In a romance, you can't have one without the other, and he's overcoming some pretty significant trauma and poor behavior, too. They're growing together. It's one of the very best things about your story, and I'd like it to be showcased more thoroughly.

Dual Timelines and Flashbacks

A dual timeline is difficult to pull off, but you are doing it really well overall. There are a few tweaks that can be made that will, I believe, make it even better.

With dual timelines, one of them is more important than the other. In your story, that's obviously the “now” storyline. The university storyline serves the “now” in a supporting role. That means we only need the scenes in the university setting that directly support the main storyline; the pieces without which we simply would not understand the main storyline.

The backstory does not need to be equal in size to the main story. It also does not necessarily need to be in order; it will be easier to let go of chronological order if there isn't a 1-to-1 ratio between the two storylines. If the novel only dips into the past every three or four chapters to pick up a single scene that enhances the main storyline, you'll feel less obligated to make it be specifically in the same order.

Because the flashback storyline is set when [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] are so young, and it's emotionally driven by something that happened even a year to two years prior, it reads like a YA story. It should! I'm not criticizing that; you're capturing the voice and the feel very well. But the overall tone of the novel is skewing too young as a result. This is a romance for the adult market, which

means your readership is adult. If the tone of the novel is consistently waffling back and forth between teen and adult, it doesn't feel quite as resonant. If there are scenes from the YA storyline that are playing a supporting role, however, then your audience is likely to see them for what they are, and maybe even connect with [REDACTED] more strongly because they can think back to a time in their youth that still has an outsized impact on them.

Grounding Details and Setting Descriptions

You've chosen a unique setting—I just don't know where it is. The university is, as far as I can tell, a fictional one and so is the small town. I assume you created fictional spaces so you could control the setting, which is a common technique and you're using it well.

But you could be doing so much more with it. Think about all five senses in every scene—sight, sound, smell, taste, feel—and incorporate them throughout the scene. Incorporate them into your dialogue beats, into the conversation, into the setting at the beginning of the scene. Have the characters interact with the settings more fully.

I'm not sure what the weather is, for example, in most of the story. It seems to be a vaguely sunny-ish kind of a day that is neither hot nor cold.

[REDACTED] returns to her college town. But you can't ever really go back, right? You call this out a little, that some things have changed, but you move on from that pretty quickly. I recommend having it be constant. If she goes to a restaurant in a university scene, I want to see her in that same restaurant in the current day, but the booth feels tighter and more grimy than she remembered. If she walks down a street in the university scene, I want her to do it in the current day but the trees are huge and the sidewalk is now cracked from where the roots are damaging the concrete. The brand-new ice cream shop is now the flagship of a flourishing local chain and it's packed every night with families, not just college kids. You get the idea.

In every scene, there should be grounding details that keep the reader firmly in place, and those details should be uniquely identified by [REDACTED]. Everyone sees an ice cream shop, but only [REDACTED] smells the roasting peanuts that remind her of [REDACTED] and only [REDACTED] catches Billie when she slips on the linoleum because her shoes are inappropriate for the winter weather.

Filter everything through [REDACTED] POV, in other words. Speaking of POV...

Deep Point of View

You'll see several comments in the margins about "more interiority" or "add interiority". Those are all in places where I would like to get more deeply into [REDACTED] POV and really understand what she's feeling.

To be clear: I do not recommend adding concrete statements about emotions. Adding, "I felt so sad." is not going to make the reader connect with [REDACTED] more.

Instead, consider describing the way emotions show up in her body. Think about heart rate, gut clenching, throat closing up, blood pounding in her ears, bile rising, lightheadedness, a hollow feeling inside, etc. Additionally consider adding in physical motions; you use these pretty well

now, but you're not consistently using them and you're not tying them directly to emotions often enough. Crossed arms, clenches fists, grinding teeth, frowns, furrowed brows, tense shoulders, relaxed shoulders, hands swinging, ponytail flicking while she walks, etc.

You're currently falling back on a few crutch phrases in this area: grin, smirk, whisper, and characters tend to smack each other playfully a lot.

Once you know how [REDACTED] body expresses emotions, you can pay closer attention to the unique ways other characters do, too. Not everyone should grin easily, not everyone will express emotions the same way. [REDACTED] can't know how [REDACTED] is feeling, but she can see his facial expressions and interpret them, which then makes her feel a certain kind of way. Dig into this more often, with more intentionality. Your reader wants to feel everything [REDACTED] feels; they do not want to be told what [REDACTED] is feeling.

These moves are going to feel a little overwhelming at first. But you have such a gift for blending together heartache and optimism that your story is worth the effort. You characters deserve the time and attention to make them as impactful as possible.

Thank you again for letting me read your work. It really is an honor. Thank you.

Sincerely,
Gina Denny