

How to Sell to Harlequin's London Office (Harlequin Mills & Boon)

This workshop covers the following:

- ❖ What do the London editors want?
- ❖ Targeting your work
- ❖ Getting professional: the right approach
- ❖ The series Harlequin Mills & Boon publish

What do Editors want?

Ultimately, our editors are looking for three things from aspiring authors:

- Believable characters
- Compelling stories, well told
- Unique writing voices

[Editors' Tip: your voice is your unique selling point; editors want to see innovation rather than emulation!]

Targeting your work

Finding the right series is like finding a husband. It requires serious thought and effort before you jump into bed, or even connect with your keyboard.

- If you have simply written 'a romance' and sent it to Harlequin Mills & Boon, because we publish different series aimed at a variety of audiences, the chances are it won't fit anywhere.
- Narrow down which series fits your writing values and style. Your story needs to fulfil the promise of this series.
- Be sure to do plenty of market research; read as many current novels in your targeted series as you can. Note the emotional themes that are finding favour with readers and how the author creates a satisfying romance between two well-rounded characters in a soundly-constructed plot.
- At the same time, keep your eye open for upcoming emotional trends, whether in romantic fiction or culturally. These can provide opportunities for would-be novelists in a competitive market-place.

[Editors' Tip: once you're ready to submit your work, make sure you follow submission procedures. Outline clearly in your covering letter at which line your story is aimed.]

Getting Professional

Building long-term relationships requires commitment. Our editors are looking for great writers, for sure. But they also are looking for great writers who will grow. A successful growth author is a professional.

- We're in for the long haul. At Harlequin, we acquire authors as well as books. We buy talent with the intention of building long-term personal relationships.
- Share, listen and learn. If the editor offers you feedback, her intention is to give you constructive advice. Try to take it gladly and use it to benefit your future writing.
- Don't rush it! Focus on one manuscript at a time, with the aim of making each better than the last. Seeking publication via multiple submissions across different series or publishers will lessen your ability to learn, dissipate your energies and sap the intensity of your voice.
- Deal gracefully with setbacks. Rejection hurts but it's an unavoidable part of becoming a great writer.

[Editors' tip: get to know yourself as a writer. What are your writing strengths? What are your areas of interest and experience? Can you be honest with yourself and identify your weaknesses?]

Harlequin Mills & Boon: what do we publish?

At our London office, we acquire five of the globally successful Harlequin series: Presents, Modern Heat, Romance, Medical and Historical.

There are some fundamental elements that we look for in all submissions to all our series:

- Global voices; we are seeking writers who can reflect universal emotional truths and shared aspirations that will speak to women around the world.
- Compelling first chapters which emotionally engage the reader and compel her to keep turning the pages.
- Heroes and heroines to whom women everywhere can relate; empathetic characters with believable motivations and emotions are key.
- Gripping emotional conflicts which are sustained until the last page.

Here are some specifics about each of the series we commission:

❖ **Harlequin Presents** (50,000 words)

Presents is the epitome of international glamour, sophistication and passionate emotion. Its heroes are ultimate alpha males: ruthless, driven, decisive, powerful, affluent and focused on the heroine as the ultimate prize – until they realise they wish to settle for love.

The tone is always fast-paced, dramatic, exciting and intense. Popular emotional themes are marriages of convenience, secret pregnancies, mistresses, Mediterranean heroes, royalty and revenge.

❖ **Modern Heat** (50,000 words)

Aimed at the 18-30 age-group, Modern Heat is for women who enjoy a sparkling, smouldering, entertaining read. The heroes are very much 21st century guys - alpha but sensitive and slightly younger than in Presents – and the heroines are equal to them in every way.

The tone of Modern Heat is fast-paced, urban, sophisticated and very sexy - these books are hot, hot, hot! The stories are also under-laid with a hint of wit and humour. Themes include working together, mistresses and unexpected babies.

❖ **Harlequin Romance** (50,000 words)

Romance is the home of traditional, contemporary romance - but that doesn't mean old-fashioned! Its stories are feel-good with the power to make the reader laugh and cry. The Romance hero is strong, powerful and dependable - a rancher, a sheikh, a prince or an ethical business man.

Settings are international and emotional depth is crucial - each story should capture the essence of the highs and lows of falling in love. From feel-good chick-lit to three-tissue reads, there's scope for a wide range of voices. Sensuality is low: couples can make love before marriage without explicit detail.

❖ **Medical Romance** (50,000 words)

Medicals offer contemporary romance stories in medical communities and international settings. It's the series where surgeons, midwives, nurses and paramedics meet and fall in love. The Medical hero is dedicated, honourable, caring and at the top of his profession.

Settings include MD surgeries, ER, special care baby units, intensive care, emergency response, IVF centres and maternity. But there are also opportunities to develop popular emotional themes - for example, royalty, Mediterranean heroes, sheikhs, secret babies, single parenthood and surrogacy. The focus of the story should be the development of a compelling central relationship. Sensuality can be high or low according to the emotional involvement of the characters and the medical setting should be present to provide a sense of place, drama and impetus.

❖ **Historical Romance** (75,000 words)

These richly textured, emotionally intense stories can be set in a wide range of historical periods, from Ancient Greece to the Second World War. Heroes are strong, dependable, commanding alphas and the heroines, spirited and wilful, or shy and unawakened.

Emotions are timeless, though in Historicals they should be believable within the conventions of the chosen time period - even though the characters may sometimes choose to ignore convention! Readers adore the Regency and Westerns, but a variety of periods are welcome, as are different levels of sensuality.

[Editors' Tip: further information on all lines can be found at www.eharlequin.com]

The importance of first chapters

First impressions matter! Think about your goals when writing a great first chapter. You want to:

- Grab your reader's attention
- Get her hooked in
- Keep her turning the pages and wanting more.

Let's be clear about a couple of things. In terms of word length, these are short books (50 - 75, 000 words total). So you haven't got time to warm up or wait for the hero to arrive! And, despite the quickness of the read, every reader expects to have taken a ride on an emotional rollercoaster by the time she finishes your book.

The London Editors' Golden Rules for Packing a Punch from the Very First Page:

- Make the writing of a synopsis of your story your very first task.
- Also be sure of who your hero and heroine are before you start and aim to get them together as soon as possible.
- Keep the focus on the hero and heroine and their developing romance as much as you can.
- Give your reader a tantalising taste of the emotional conflict within the first few pages.
- Give evidence of the emotional and sexual attraction between the hero and heroine too.
- Aim to unfold the back-story in bite-sized pieces throughout your book – not immediately, in one long, indigestible chunk!
- Use dialogue – when the characters speak for themselves, readers will be instantly engaged.

- Keep minor characters to an absolutely minimum and use them to support the unfolding romance – don't start giving them a life of their own!
- Keep an eye on your pace – it should be tight and fast from page one, with the aim of keeping the reader turning the pages.
- Aim to end your first chapter on a climax – and invite the reader to read on.

How to contact us:

Extended guidelines are available from Harlequin Mills & Boon, Eton House, 18-24 Paradise Road, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 1SR, United Kingdom, or from eHarlequin.com and millsandboon.co.uk

About the Editors:

Sheila Hodgson is a Senior Editor at Harlequin Mills & Boon Limited in London. During her 15 years in this role she has managed series and acquired romance fiction widely across the Mills & Boon imprint. She currently manages the Mills & Boon Medical line and the Mills & Boon anthology programme and acquires across Harlequin's UK acquired series Presents, Romance, and Medical and Historical series.

Prior to her work at Harlequin Mills & Boon Sheila was an acquiring and Managing editor working on general women's fiction, firstly at the Penguin Group in the UK, then at MacDonald & Co Publishers Ltd and spent a couple of years as a freelance editor, copy-writer and editorial consultant.

Sheila has been reading contemporary and historical romance novels since being introduced to them in her teens by her mother and grandmother. She feels privileged that her job allows her to indulge her romance reading and finds working with authors and seeing their writing careers develop hugely rewarding.

Tessa Shapcott is the Executive Editor of the Harlequin Mills & Boon series that are commissioned in London, England. Her special responsibilities are the Harlequin Presents, Harlequin Presents Extra and Modern Heat lines.

Tessa started her career in publishing by working for a literary agency, before moving on to become an acquiring editor for children's books, including teenage fiction. But Tessa had already begun a life-long love-affair with the Alpha Male Hero when her grandmother gave Tessa her own 1936 first edition of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* on Tessa's tenth birthday. When her career in publishing led to being employed as Editor at Mills & Boon, she

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knew she'd died and gone to heaven. Over twenty years later, she's still there and having the time of her life...