

THE SHOW STANDARD

A four-axis content rating system for narrative media

Spice · Heat · OMG · WTF

Version 1.1

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1. Premise

Narrative content — written, audio, visual, interactive — affects audiences across multiple independent dimensions. Existing rating systems collapse these dimensions into a single number, with predictable information loss. The MPAA system, ESRB classifications, chilli-pepper counts, and most platform-internal systems all share this flaw.

The SHOW Standard separates the dimensions of narrative effect into four independent axes. The axes apply to narrative content in any medium — books, films, streaming series, video games, audiobooks, podcasts, webcomics, fanfiction — because they describe what narrative does to people, not what format the narrative arrives in.

2. The Four Axes

Axis	Symbol	Range	Measures
Spice	S	0–6	Physical explicitness — on-page or on-screen intimacy and detail
Heat	H	0–5	Emotional temperature — longing, romantic intensity, intimacy of soul
OMG	O	0–5	Darkness of tone — heaviness, peril, grief, violence, psychological weight
WTF	W	0–10	Transgression — taboo content, off-limits dynamics, wildness of choices

Why four axes, not one

Spice and Heat are independent. A closed-door romance can be deeply heated with zero physical content. A mechanical erotica can be high Spice with low Heat.

OMG and WTF correlate but are not identical. A grief-heavy literary work is high OMG / low WTF. A step-romance is low OMG / high WTF.

Collapsing any of these into a single number destroys information audiences need to choose what fits them.

3. Spice — S

Physical explicitness. On-page or on-screen physical intimacy and detail. Spice is about the scene — what the body experiences.

Lvl	Label	Description
0	Untouched	No on-page/screen physical intimacy. Kissing only. Door fully closed.
1	Suggestive	Sensual moments, undressing, fade-to-black, implied intimacy.
2	Open-Door	On-page/screen intimacy with discretion. Sensation over anatomy.
3	Explicit	Fully on-page/screen, anatomically clear, multiple scenes.
4	Carnal	High-frequency explicit scenes, vivid detail. Intimacy is structurally load-bearing.
5	Hardcore	Hardcore erotic content. Kink, fetish, BDSM at standard intensity. Power exchange.
6	Saturated	Explicit intimacy is the dominant content, near-constant on-page/screen.

4. Heat — H

Emotional temperature. Longing, romantic intensity, intimacy of soul. Heat is about the relationship — what the room feels like.

Lvl	Label	Description
0	Cool	Romance is incidental or absent. Friendship, family, mission-driven stories.
1	Warm	Affection, fondness, light flirtation.
2	Glowing	Mutual attraction acknowledged. Lingering looks, hand-holding, first kisses.
3	Burning	Slow-burn intensity. Yearning, restraint, sustained emotional charge.
4	Blazing	Deep emotional intimacy. Vulnerable confessions, soul-bared scenes.
5	Wildfire	All-consuming. The relationship is the spine of the story.

Heat is independent of physical content. Christian fiction, slow-burn romance, and many family dramas can hit Heat 5 without a single explicit scene.

5. OMG — O

Darkness of tone. Heaviness, peril, grief, violence, psychological weight — independent of how explicit.

Lvl	Label	Description
0	Light	No darkness. Sweet romance, cozy, comedy, family entertainment.
1	Shaded	Mild edge — angst, grief, mild peril, morally grey choices.
2	Dim	On-page/screen violence, antiheroes, dark themes with restraint.
3	Dark	Genuine darkness — captivity, stalker dynamics, drug/trauma content, MC/mafia, war.
4	Black	Transgressive — dub-con, monster narratives, religious taboo, brutality.
5	Abysal	Extreme — explicit non-con as central trope, primal/breeding kink at darkest end. Content-warning gated.

6. WTF — W

Transgression. Taboo content, off-limits dynamics, wildness of choices — independent of how dark the tone is.

Score	Band	What it captures
0–2	Vanilla	Conventional content. No taboo dynamics. Standard tropes used straightforwardly.
3–4	Edgy	Mild transgression — age gap, complicating dynamics, mild moral ambiguity.
5–6	Wild	Taboo content — step-relationships, captivity-coded, antihero kidnapper, MC/mafia.
7–8	Unhinged	Strong taboo — dub-con romantically framed, monster/non-human pairings, primal kink.
9–10	Off the rails	Maximum transgression — non-con as central trope, debt-slavery, multiple extreme taboos.

7. Calibration

Representative works mapped to SHOW ratings — calibration anchors so creators and audiences can self-locate.

Work	S	H	O	W
Redeeming Love · Francine Rivers	0	4	2	2
The Notebook · Nicholas Sparks	1	4	2	2
Christian historical romance	0	5	0	0
Cozy mystery (light romance)	0	2	0	1
ACOTAR (series)	2	4	1	2
Fourth Wing · Rebecca Yarros	3	4	3	3
Penelope Douglas · Credence	3	4	2	6
Haunting Adeline	3	3	3	7
Soul Eater	3	3	4	8
Pepper Winters · Tears of Tess	4	4	4	9
C.J. Roberts · Captive in the Dark	5	3	5	10

Additional calibration notes (v1.1)

Redeeming Love (Francine Rivers) — S0/H4/O2/W2. Closed door, zero on-page intimacy. Intense emotional longing across a decades-spanning love story. Demonstrates Heat independence: H4 Blazing with no Spice.

The Notebook (Nicholas Sparks) — S1/H4/O2/W2. Fade-to-black intimacy (S1 Suggestive). High emotional heat from slow-burn reunion romance. Grief and illness themes (O2). Demonstrates S1/H4 pairing: intimacy present but not depicted explicitly.

8. How to Use the SHOW Standard

For creators

- Rate your own work using all four axes.
- Display the rating wherever you list your work — website, query letters, ARC packets, retailer descriptions.
- Use canonical format: "SHOW Rating: S3 / H4 / O3 / W3."
- Be honest. Under-rating misleads audiences who would love your work; over-rating drives off audiences who would love it.

For reviewers and content creators

- Use SHOW to give more precise information than single-axis ratings.
- Where you disagree with a creator's self-rating, say so — and explain the dimension.
- Cite the SHOW Standard with a link to modernmediamastery.com/show-standard.html.

For platforms, retailers, libraries

- Adopt SHOW as your content rating system, free, under CC BY-SA 4.0.
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For developers

See the SHOW Standard Developer README for data model, palette tokens, helper functions.

9. Attribution

Long form

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Short form

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10. Glossary

Closed-door — No on-page/screen intimacy beyond kissing. Maps to Spice 0–1.

Open-door — On-page/screen intimacy. Maps to Spice 2+.

Fade-to-black — Scene begins but cuts away before explicit content. Maps to Spice 1.

Dub-con (primary dynamic) — Dubious consent is the defining, central element of the narrative or relationship; coercive power, captivity, or force frames the romance from the outset. W7+.

Dub-con (incidental element) — Dubious consent appears as one element within otherwise lighter content; ambiguous framing, consensual-but-uncertain moments, or author-labelled kink dynamics (e.g. CNC roleplay between willing parties). W5+.

Content warning — Always recommended for OMG 4+ and WTF 7+.

End of the SHOW Standard, v1.1. · Modern Media Mastery · May 2026