

Score a V-Day victory

Been dating a few weeks? A while? Forever? The right Valentine's Day gift at the right time can yield dividends right where it counts.

by Sarah Rose

I Yes, women are slaves to the liturgical Hallmark calendar, Cupid is stupid, and the perfect girlfriend thinks any given Tuesday is as romantic as the next. Also, she's allergic to roses and offended by restaurants that jack up prices for a saint beheaded 1,746 years ago in Rome. **↑** Now that's off your chest, follow this formula guaranteed to make her swoon at every stage of your relationship on this completely imaginary yet crucial annual event. Valentine's Day is a function of time, or, $f(x) = \text{dirty weekend}$.

First three months

■ The guidelines are simple. Candy + flowers. Try to make a good impression: E-cards are not actually cards. Buy no flowers from a hospital gift shop after your grandpa's hernia operation. Her chocolates can't be purchased at the same store as your condoms. The bare minimum is plenty: You can't go wrong with long-stem roses. Arrange Necco conversation hearts into a sentimental poem. Right now you can win by merely showing up. It will never be this easy again.

Three to six months

■ You've a) used the word "girlfriend" out loud, b) found her stray underwear in your gym bag, and c) taken yourself off

Tinder. Welcome to incipient intimacy. To the baseline of flowers + candy, add The Nice Dinner. This meal has to be special, romantic, memorable. Somewhere quiet—if a DJ is spinning beats to dry-hump to, save it for next weekend. If money is an issue, cook. You know that signature dish your last girlfriend liked? Do that. Think ambiance, candles, wine—and, hey, how about that, she's already at your place when the bottle's empty! Another easy win.

Six months to two years

■ You've met her folks, deleted pics of your ex, and she has several nude selfies of you with your face in them. Welcome to peak Valentines, do not screw up. Or try to break up.

(She has those dick pics, genius.) Step up everything from the first two stages—flowers (hbloom.com) + candy (payard.com) + Champagne (veuve-clicquot.com) + dinner—and add The Very Thoughtful Gift. Does that mean expensive? No, tailored to her taste: Tickets to her favorite band, his and her cooking classes, the *Sex & The City* director's-cut box set. Mind the danger zones: Jewelry = proposal. Lingerie is the gift men give themselves, so save that breakaway lace bra for your birthday.

Two years 'til death do you part

■ You can't remember the last time you bought shampoo, you say "we" when you really mean "I," and every given Tuesday really is as romantic as the next. As n approaches infinity, Valentine's Day is a "Where's Waldo?" whack-a-mole game. Do not buy household gifts: Trash compactor ≠ romance. Do not ask her what she wants, she wants everything she did before, only better, more, and harder. The thought does not count. You can't

win, but the stakes are lower. She isn't going to leave you, just make your life miserable till you get it right. Just kidding! This is such a layup: You've spent years banking a roster of excellent ideas from which you have to pick only one: Candy-heart haiku. Candles and oysters. Romcom marathon. The happiest couples are those who remember the beginning, science says. And if in doubt, jewelry is the HOV lane to a woman's heart. Happy Dirty Weekend.



Guys, don't follow your heart. You abhor Valentine's Day, but she adores it. So unless you're cool with sleeping on the couch, make it a special occasion.

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