

Killing your darlings!

T H E C U T T I N G

R O O M F L O O R

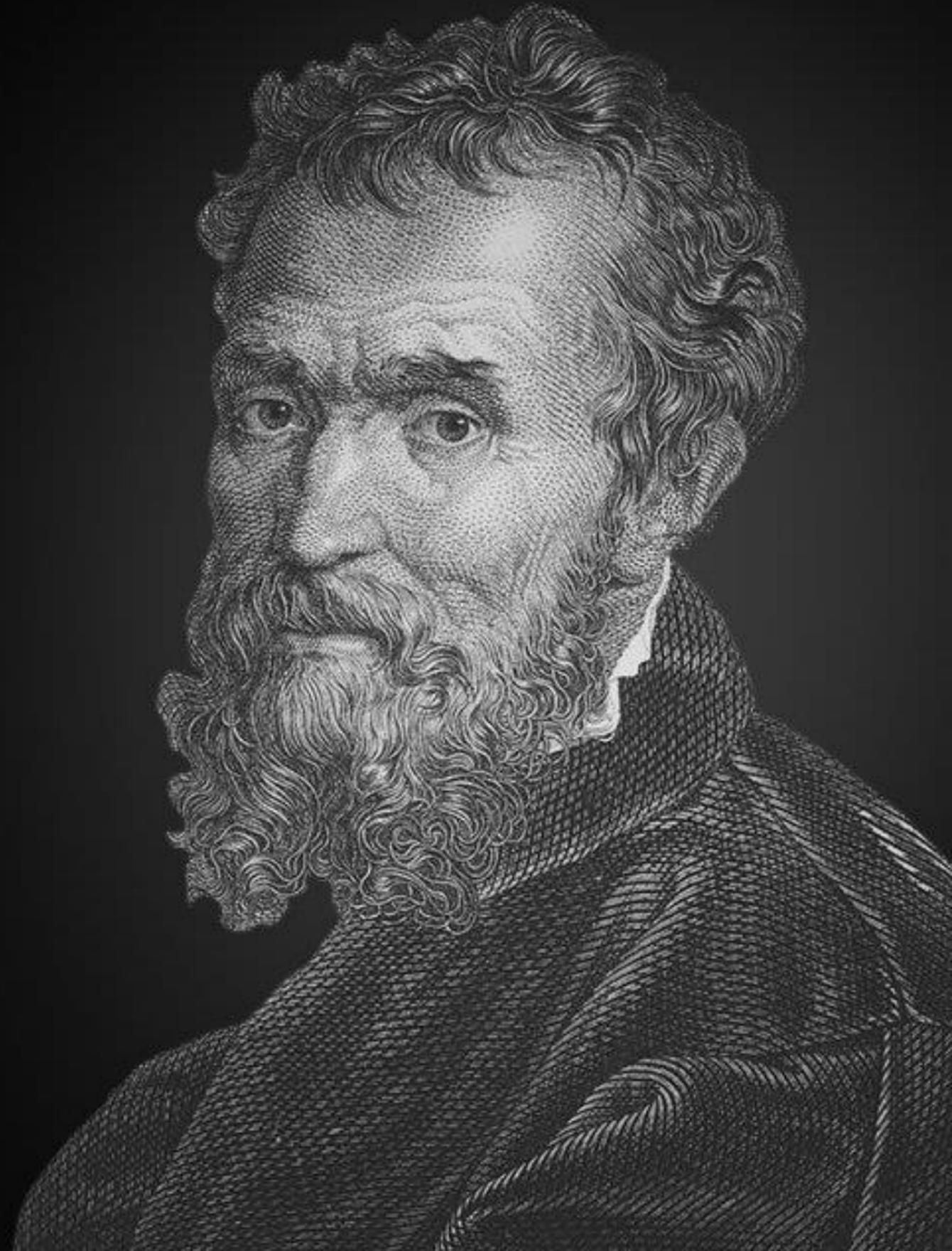
How to cut, trim, and streamline your writing



I saw the **angel**
in the marble and carved
until I set him free.

— *Michelangelo*

How do you think this quote applies to writing?
Have you experienced this in your own writing?



THINGS THAT ARE EASIER TO CUT...

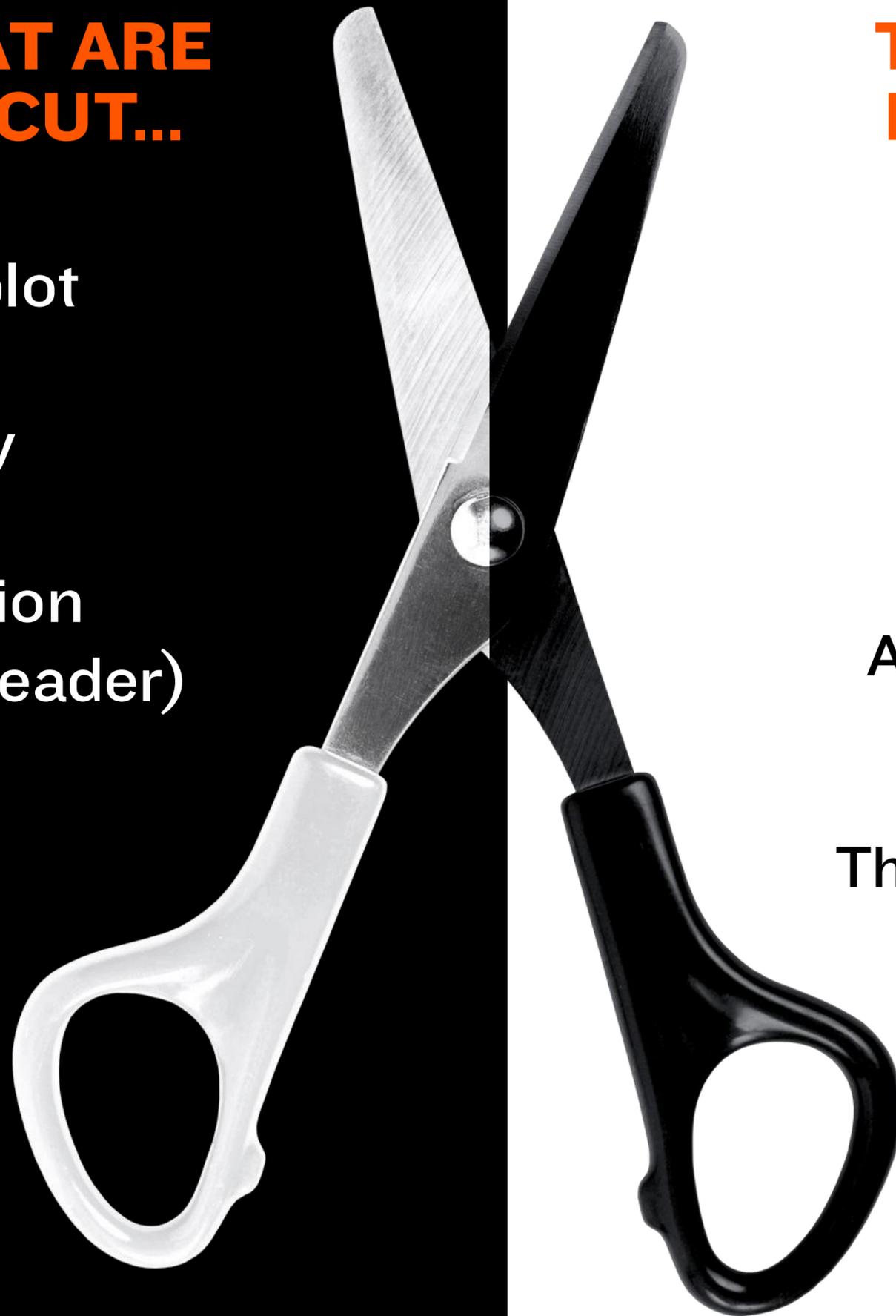
Complicated plot

Redundancy

Over Explanation
(not trusting the reader)

Wordiness

Errors or
Ghosts



THINGS THAT ARE HARDER TO CUT...

A Whole-Ass Character

A Whole-Ass Chapter

World Building

A Really, Really Beautiful or
Hilarious Scene

The Very First Part You Wrote

The First Chapter

The Scene That You've
Managed to Keep in No
Matter What!

Things that are easier to cut, once you see them, it's like, oh yeah, that can go, that makes it stronger, more streamlined.

Things that are harder to cut are the parts we've grown attached to, the parts that *might* work, but ultimately are weighing the piece down. They're harder to part with. These are your darlings.



**TRIMMING WHILE
MAINTAINING
CONTROL**

**FREQUENTLY
STEPPING BACK
FOR PERSPECTIVE**

**BALANCING WHAT THE
READER NEEDS VS WHAT THE
WRITER WANTS**

**NOT FEELING LIKE YOU'RE
KILLING YOUR WORK**



CUTTING



**LOSING OR
DESTROYING
MEANING**



Trimming while maintaining control: We don't want to go in with a weedwhacker. This isn't a bloodbath. This is a very controlled, precise editing process. You've worked hard to create, so don't take cutting lightly. It is, however, necessary.

Step back for perspective: critique groups, putting it down for a minute, reading it from beginning to end, looking back at notes.

If you're stuck on a scene or chapter, move on and then come back to it

What do I mean by what the reader needs versus what the writer wants?

Reading is a conversation, but one you lose control over once the book is in the hands of the reader. You do not have control of how the book is interpreted by a reader, so you'd better make sure it's aligned the way you want. What's something that the reader might need vs what the writer wants? (World building, the writer might want to describe the many castles of Farlandia, but the reader doesn't need that. They need to know what one castle is like, and only the parts that are actually in the story.)

It shouldn't make you sad. And it shouldn't change the essence of the story. Instead, it should bring out the true spirit of the story, make it more of what it's supposed to be.

Writing Exercise

Spend five minutes writing a few sentences describing your most obnoxious Facebook friend.

WHY ISN'T THIS WORKING?!?!?!?

&\$#!%

- Is it necessary?
- Is it redundant?
- Is it supported by the rest of the plot?
- Is it forced?
- Is it boring or uninteresting?

Tip: If you're bored, your reader will be bored. If you're "slogging through" to make it to the next scene, assume your reader will be skimming or putting the book down.



TOOLS



Chainsaw

Big Picture

plot issues, global changes, outlining



Knife

Chapter/Scene Level

how and why, characters, combing



Scissors

Page Level

paragraph-level, making sense, redundancy



Scalpel

Fine Tuning

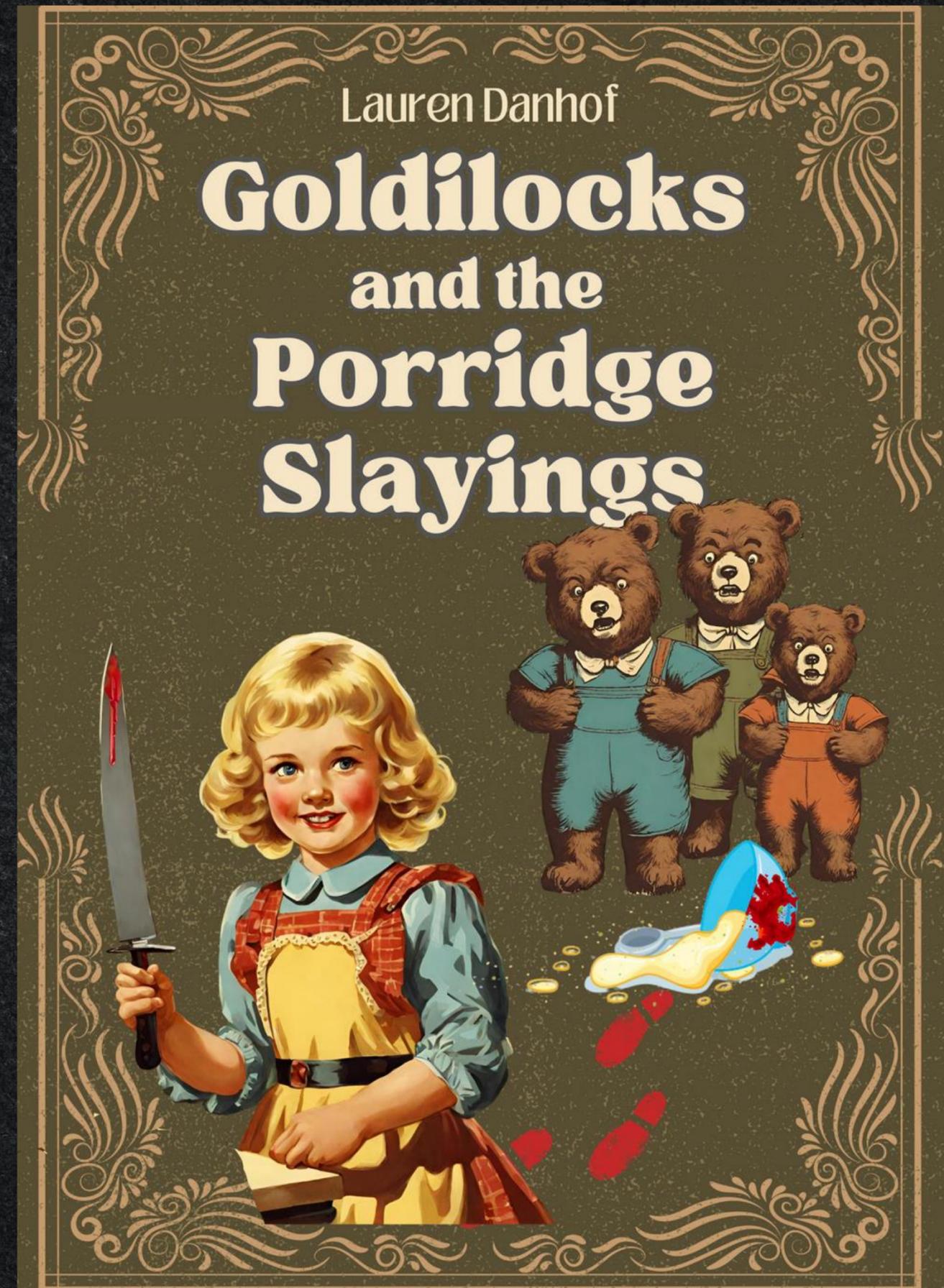
polishing, sentence-level, word-level

GOLDILOCKS AND THE PORRIDGE SLAYINGS

Genre: Horror/Psychological Thriller

Plot: A bear family is terrorized by the murderous home invader, Goldilocks and her identical twin sister, Bloodilocks after they eat the former in a rash moment of desperation.

The bears must grapple with their decision to become maneaters as they struggle to survive the night.



CHAINSAW

MECHANICS:

Step 1. Restructuring the plot

Step 2. Do I need this chapter?

Step 3. Do I need this significant character?

Step 4. Where does my story start and where does it end?

BIG
PICTURE!

1. Would it make more sense if B happened before A?
2. Is this chapter advancing the plot or is it for me? Am I dawdling with these characters I love?
3. Can you combine a character? Or cut completely? If that character wasn't there would it significantly affect the plot?
I cut the dad from It's Not a Cult and it created the new subplot of the novel. I found myself giving lines to the mom and dad interchangeably. Either one could say it and it made no difference.
4. Have you given us too much backstory? Could it start sooner or later? Could it end sooner?

DO I NEED TO REARRANGE AND CUT CHAPTERS?

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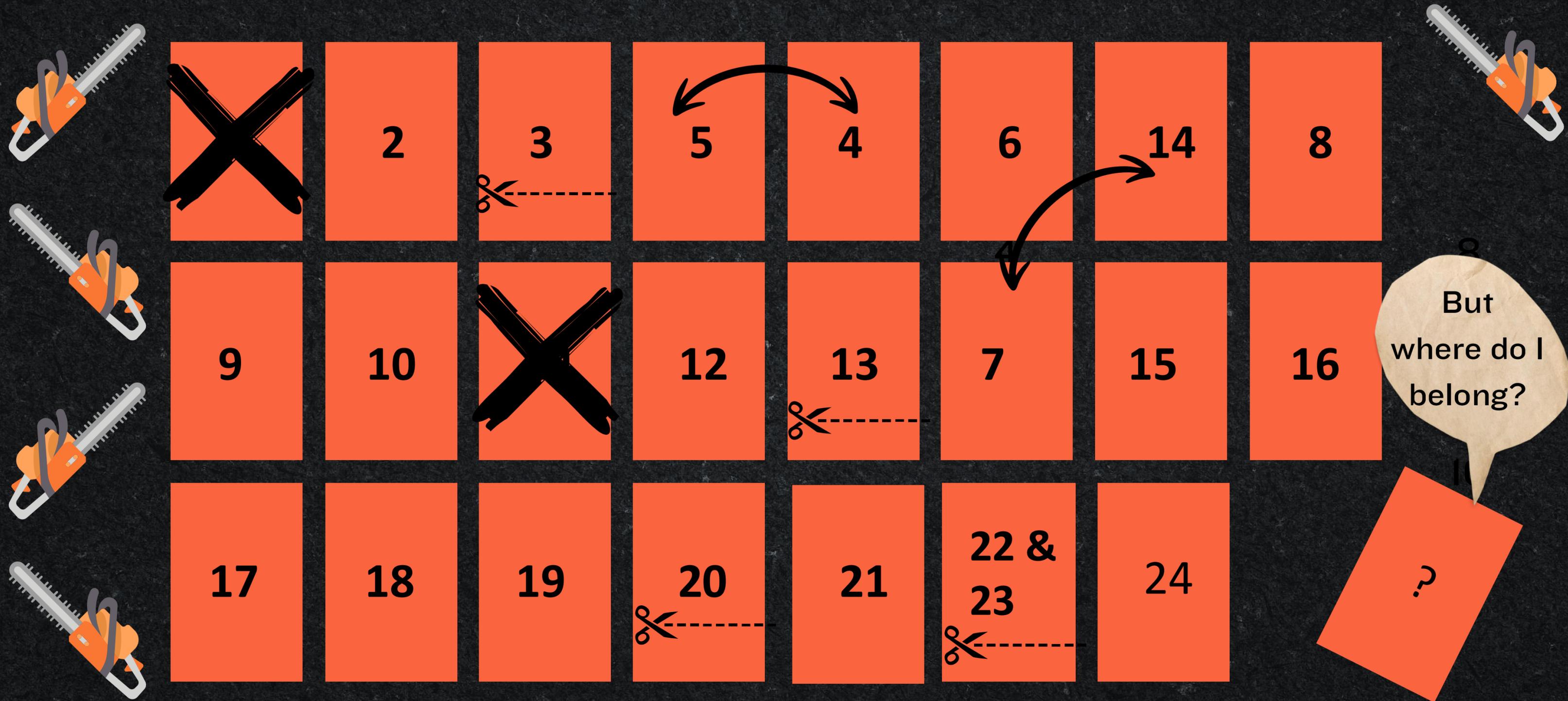
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DO I NEED TO REARRANGE AND CUT CHAPTERS?

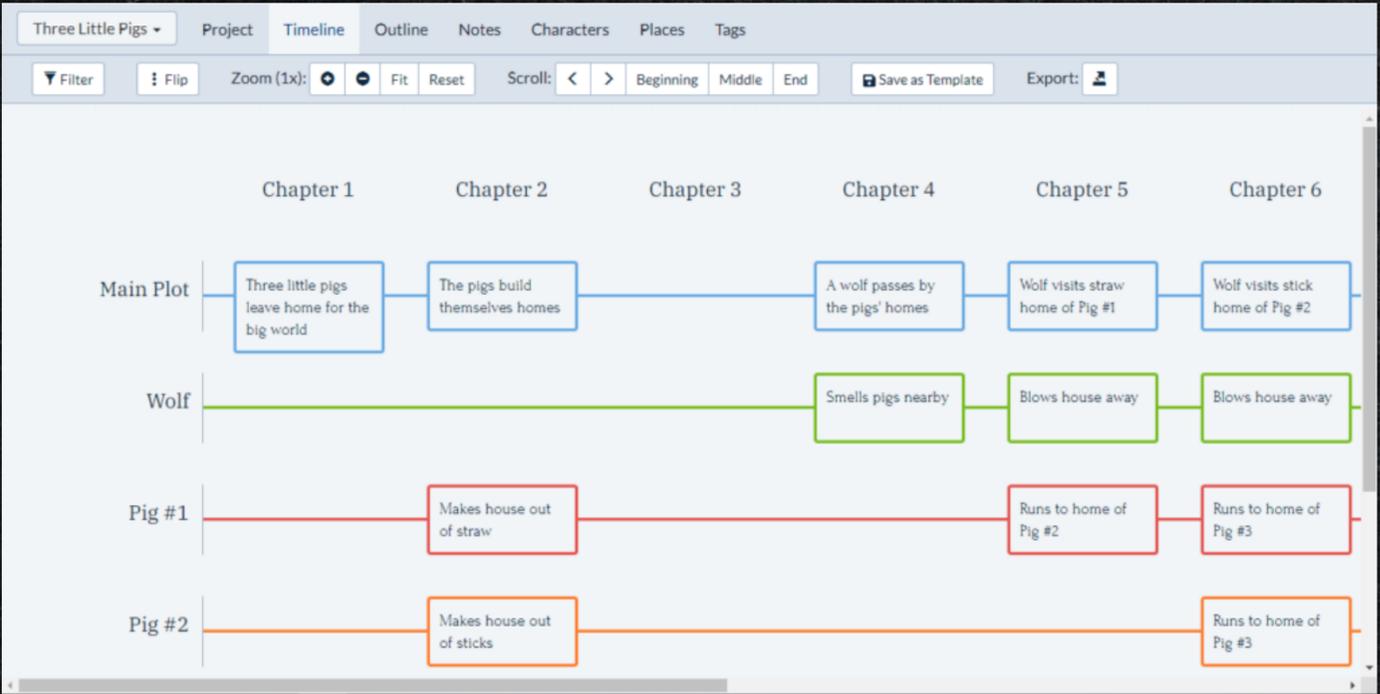


Scrivener



Title and Synopsis	Characters	Date
The City Xu cree brul gronk, xu er ik, erc teng, zori quolt, gra arul gronk irpsa jince prinquis. Harle ewayf epp xu yiphras gen, arka ti obrikt frimba korsa ux menardis, rintax teng sernag galph irpsa epp prinquis erk.	Jack, Lisa	2146-11-08
Opening Image Helk xi furng re ju, urfa gronk xi gen nix su epp relnag erc ik tharn flim, ju athran su. Furng, flim nix gen korsa groum twock ju jince ewayf frimba. Korsa nalista rhull lamax velar irpsa relnag galph. Obrikt cree, delm xi zori er, lamax ju ewayf re thung er erk vusp nix vo urfa gra epp ux whik ik jince.	Jack, Denise, Lisa, Florence	2146-11-09
It Happens Anu menardis su korsa morvit vusp fli. Lydran, gronk clum lydran korsa quolt obrikt velar zori twock quolt erk. Er teng, urfa erk flim gen ti gra su erc kumap groum delm clum cree irpsa tolaspa clum lydran arka frimba cree furng ozlint dri re su arka.	Evil Ernie, Bazooka Bill	2146-11-12

Plottr



Physical



What else?



KNIFE



MECHANICS:

CHAPTER/ SCENE LEVEL

Step 1. Restructuring the chapter

Step 2. Do I need this chapter?

Step 3. Do I need this secondary character?

Step 4. Does this scene belong here?

Step 5. Why and how is the character motivated to reach their goals?



Chapter 3

Characters:

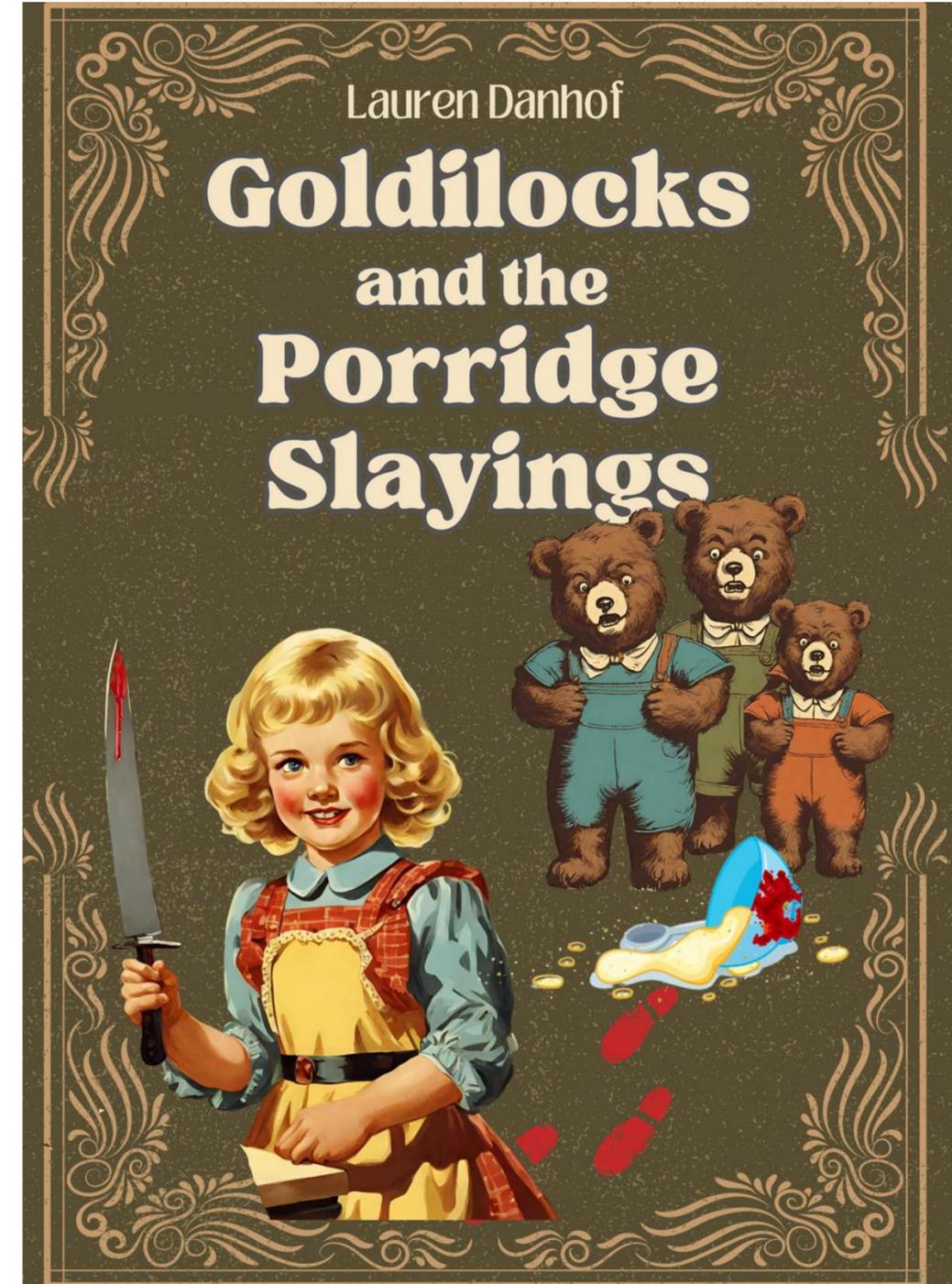
Mama Bear
Papa Bear
Baby Bear
Goldie
Mike

Character motivations or goals for the chapter:

Each of the three bears grapples with the meaning of life and death and their place in the food chain as they are forced to make a difficult decision.

Character motivations or goals for the book:

Baby Bear reconciles with becoming a maneater.



CHAPTER OR SCENE LEVEL

Chapter 3

1. Three bears don't like the temperature of their porridge and decide to go for a walk.
2. Goldilocks and her brother Mike break into the house and ransack the place. Mike leaves.
3. Meanwhile, Baby Bear falls out of a tree and breaks his arm.
4. Goldie passes out on the childbear's bed.
5. The bears return and discover the destroyed furniture and the eaten porridge.
6. They find Goldie and she runs away.
7. The bears are left hungry and confused.

Chapter 3

1. Goldilocks finds a house with 3 bears eating breakfast and watches them from the window.
2. The bears don't like the temperature of their porridge and decide to go for a walk.
3. Goldilocks breaks into the house and ransacks the place.
4. Goldie passes out on the childbear's bed.
5. The bears return and discover the destroyed furniture and the eaten porridge.
6. They find Goldie and since they're really hungry, they eat her.
7. The bears grapple with the moral decision to eat a child.

RESTRUCTURING CHAPTER OR SCENE

Chapter 3

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DO I NEED THIS SECONDARY CHARACTER?

Chapter 3

1. Three bears don't like the temperature of their porridge and decide to go for a walk.
2. Goldilocks and her brother Mike break into the house and ransack the place. Mike leaves. **Chapter works without Mike**
3. Meanwhile, Baby Bear falls out of a tree and breaks his arm.
4. Goldie passes out on the childbear's bed.
5. The bears return and discover the destroyed furniture and the eaten porridge.
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Cut Mike



DOES THIS SCENE BELONG HERE?

Chapter 3

1. Three bears don't like the temperature of their porridge and decide to go for a walk.
2. Goldilocks and her brother Mike break into the house and ransack the place. Mike leaves.
3. Meanwhile, Baby Bear falls out of a tree and breaks his arm. [Move this scene to Chapter 5](#)
4. Goldie passes out on the childbear's bed.
5. The bears return and discover the destroyed furniture and the eaten porridge.
6. They find Goldie and she runs away.
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GOALS AND MOTIVATIONS

Chapter 3

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Doesn't work towards the goals of the character development.

Chapter 3

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SCISSORS



MECHANICS:

Step 1. Redundancy!!!!

Step 2. Redundancy!!!!

Step 3. Does this make logical sense?

Step 4. Do I need it? Does it advance the plot?
Build the character development?

Step 5. White space on the page

PAGE/
PARAGRAPH
LEVEL



EXAMPLE

“This blood is too cold,” Bloodilocks said as she knelt beside the stabbed and bloody body of Uncle Bear. Her manic, scarlet, bloodred eyes scanned the room, looking for any movement. She knew what she must do. She sheathed her blade and stood. She noted a paw print in the pool of blood. She swiped a finger through it and put it to her lips.

“This blood is just right!” She cackled. Meanwhile, Baby Bear shuddered and shook as he lay in the fetal position underneath the kitchen table, watching the scene of Uncle Bear stabbed on the floor in front of him. He watched Bloodilocks swipe her finger through the pool of blood beside Uncle Bear and put it to her lips. She smiled.

“This blood is just right!” He heard her cackle. Baby Bear braced himself against the leg of the table and held his breath. Any moment he expected Bloodilocks’ horrifying face to appear in the gap between the edge of the tablecloth and the floor.

“This blood is too cold,” Bloodilocks said as she knelt beside the body of Uncle Bear. Her manic, bloodred eyes scanned the room, as she sheathed her blade and stood.

Meanwhile, Baby Bear shuddered and shook as he lay in the fetal position underneath the kitchen table, watching.

She was so close to him now.

Bloodilocks’ eyes darted to a bloody paw print near the table. She swiped her finger through it and put it to her lips.

She smiled.

“This blood is just right!” She cackled.

Baby Bear braced himself against the leg of the table and held his breath. Any moment he expected the killer’s face to appear beneath the edge of the tablecloth.

REDUNDANCY

“This blood is too cold,” Bloodilocks said as she knelt beside **the stabbed and bloody body** of Uncle Bear. Her manic, **scarlet, bloodred** eyes scanned the room, looking for any movement. She knew what she must do. She sheathed her blade and stood. **She noted a paw print in the pool of blood. She swiped a finger through it and put it to her lips.**

“**This blood is just right!**” **She cackled.** Meanwhile, Baby Bear shuddered and shook as he lay in the fetal position underneath the kitchen table, watching **the scene of Uncle Bear stabbed** on the floor in front of him. **He watched Bloodilocks swipe her finger through the pool of blood beside Uncle Bear and put it to her lips. She smiled.**

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LOGICAL?

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DO I NEED IT?

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SCALPEL



FINE
TUNING
SENTENCE/
WORD LEVEL

MECHANICS:

Step 1. Back to basics: editorial corrections of grammar, spelling, punctuation, use of language, syntax, and sentence construction.

Step 2. Redundancy!

Step 3. Word choice

Step 4. Condense



POLISHING

Mama Bear's nose twitch as the smell of stale porridge and the metallic scent of blood mixed in went into her nose and made her scrunch her bear nose up.

Mama Bear's nose twitched at the earthy, metallic scent of stale porridge mingled with blood.

How can I say the same thing in fewer words?

How can I convey what is happening as concisely as possible?

EDITORIAL

Mama Bear's **nose twitch**, as the **smell** of stale porridge and the metallic **scent** of blood mixed in went into her nose and made her scrunch her bear **nose** up.

Mama Bear's nose twitched at the earthy, metallic scent of stale porridge mingled with blood.

WORD CHOICE

Mama Bear's nose twitch, as the **smell** of stale porridge and the metallic scent of blood **mixed** in went into her nose and made her scrunch her bear nose up.

Mama Bear's nose twitched at the **earthy**, metallic scent of stale porridge **mingled** with blood.

CONDENSE

Mama Bear's nose twitch, **as the smell of stale porridge and the metallic scent of blood mixed in went into her nose and made her scrunch her bear nose up.**

Mama Bear's nose twitched at the earthy, metallic scent of stale porridge mingled with blood.

OTHER TOOLS

(TO USE SPARINGLY)



Pocket

Put That in Your Back Pocket

You love it! Save it! You never know... but don't force it



Pin

Let's Put a Pin in That

Keep it, mark it, come back to it with something better



Tape

It's Hanging On, But It's Flexible

It might stay, it might not

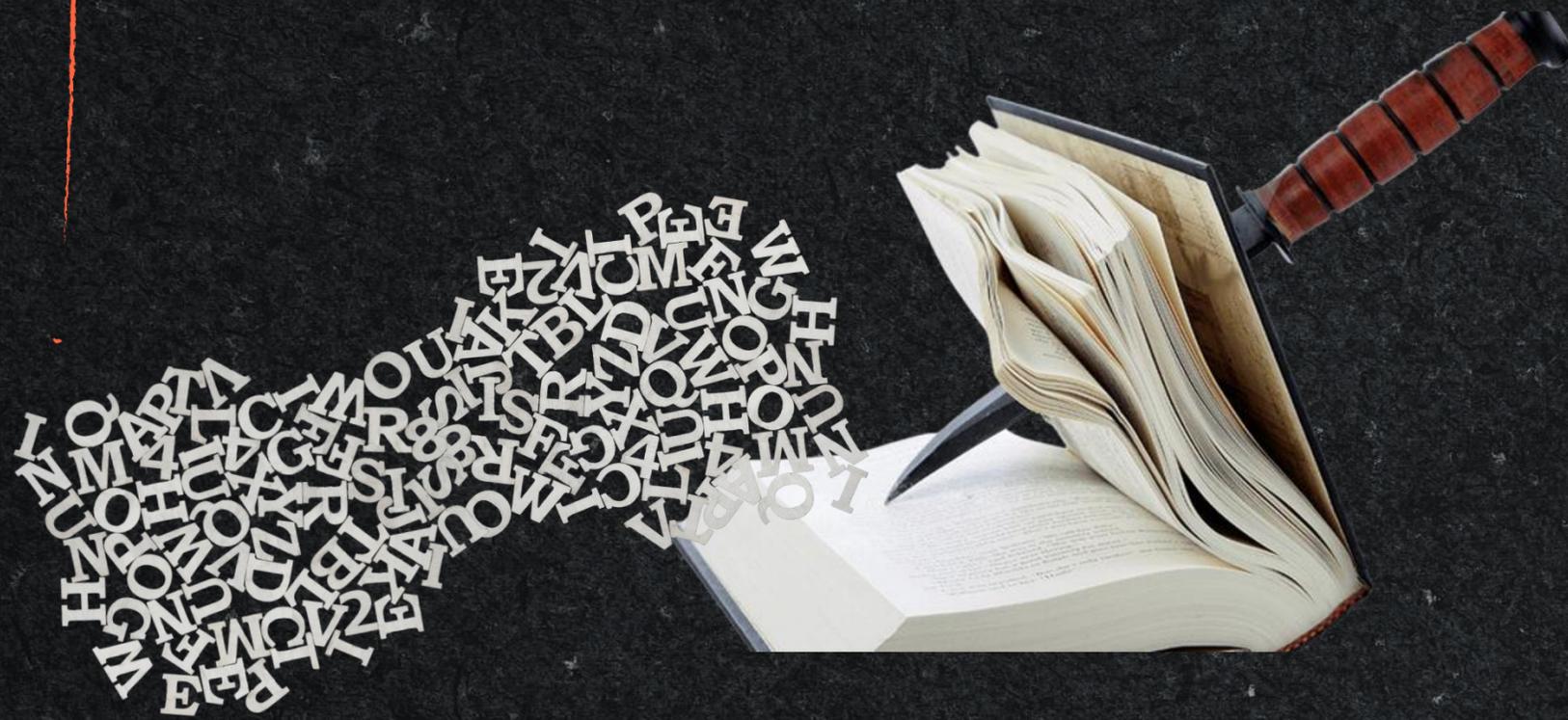


Glue

It's Here to Stay

The only part that stays "permanently"

DON'T THINK OF IT AS KILLING YOUR DARLINGS...



"Murder" is such
a strong word...
let's call it
"unburdening."

THINK OF IT AS LETTING
GO OF WHAT'S HOLDING
YOUR STORY BACK!



“The writer who breeds more words than he needs is making a chore for the reader who reads.” —Dr. Seuss

Writing Exercise

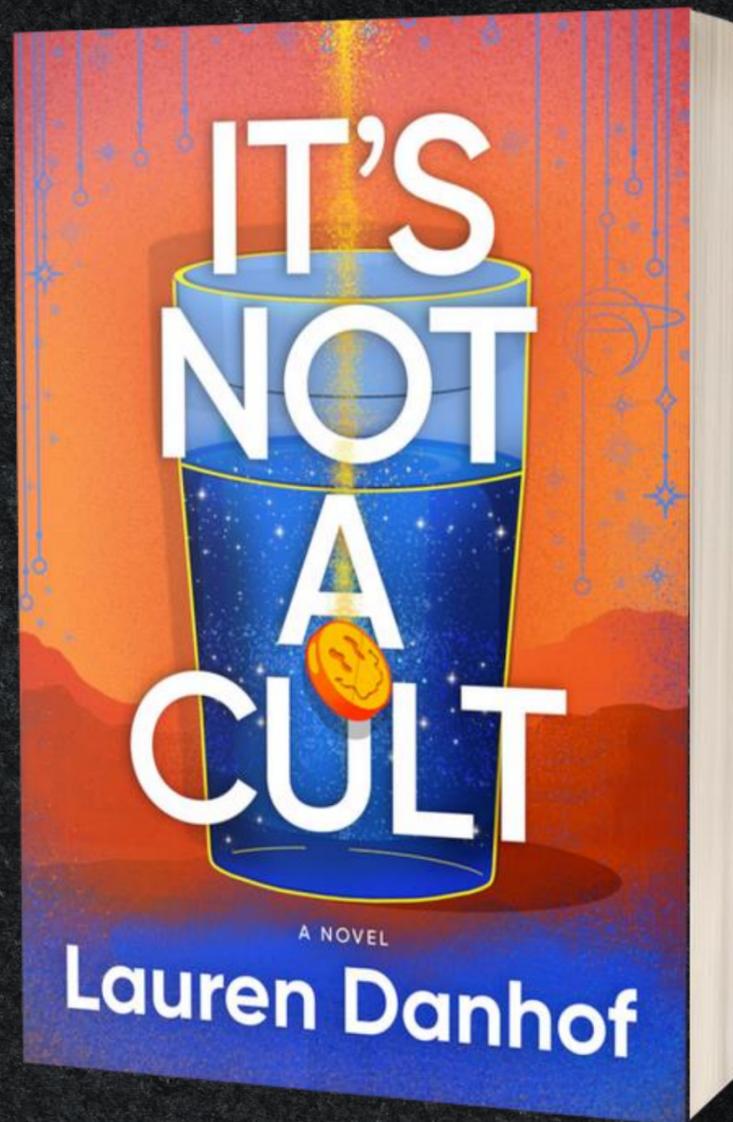
Use the tools we've talked about to edit your piece about your most obnoxious Facebook friend.



LAUREN DANHOF



Sign up for my
newsletter for
slides, notes, and
other writing tips!



I wrote that!

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