KILLING your darlings

How do you trim 66,000 words to please a publisher? What one writer learned about the painful process of cutting

By Lea Aschkenas

THE FIRST SIGN I had that my book might be a little on the long side came just a few months before I completed it when, at the wedding reception of a woman from my writing group, another writer told me that she'd read somewhere that the average book was 75,000 words.

In the book proposal I'd written three years before, based on the first five chapters of my outlined, 34-chapter travel memoir on Cuba, I had estimated my word count to be 140,000.

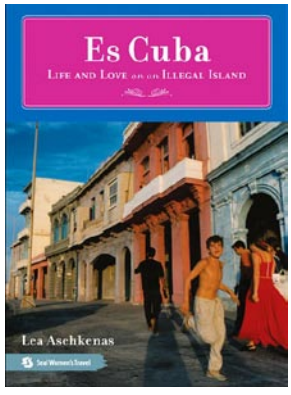
Throughout the years, I had continued to read up on the proposal-writing/agent-acquiring/publishing process, and I had since learned several interesting things, such as how many sample chapters should be included in a nonfiction proposal (three), what I should multiply each of my double-spaced typewritten pages by (two-thirds) to arrive at their equivalent book pages, and even which cover colors worked best to sell a book (red, white and black). But nowhere in all of my research had I come across any numbers for the average book length.

Now, as I tried, despite the shock of this woman's words, to calmly swallow a forkful of my caponata, I asked where she had read this. Although she couldn't recall, several other writers at the table nodded as if to confirm the information.

Briefly, I worried about what this might mean for the fate of my book, but then, just as quickly, I pushed the thought from my mind and finished my meal. From the start, I'd known there was a fair chance my manuscript might never be published, but I'd also discovered that it was best not to dwell on such inspiration-killing thoughts. Applying the same rule of thumb to my newfound knowledge about book length, I spent the next few months finishing and then revising my rough draft, cutting out one full chapter and then a few paragraphs here and there, and, along the way, convincing myself that this was enough.

Five months after my friend's wedding reception, I flew to Vietnam for a month to celebrate the completion of my book. On my first morning in Hanoi, I received an e-mail from Seal Press saying they wanted to buy my book.

So it was there, at a street-side Internet cafe, surrounded by the roar of a million motorbikes and the scent of green tea (as fitting a setting as any I could dream up for discussing the sale of a travel memoir), that my new editor and I began negotiating, not for pay but, as I'd feared, word count.



Behind the attractive cover of Lea Aschkenas' book lay a long tale of mandatory trims.

Back and forth

"Our average book is 80,000 words," the editor wrote on the day she made the offer. "If we go too much over this, we won't be able to keep our price line."

"I'm afraid that cutting that much would really sacrifice the integrity of the book," I typed back.

"I talked to my editorial team, and it sounds like we could shoot for maybe 90,000 words," the editor responded a few days later.

"Thank you," I wrote. "What about 115,000?"

"We'd like to settle at 100,000," she answered the following week.

"If you give me 110,000, I promise I won't ask for any more," I begged.

"OK," she conceded. "But this is it."

More word growth

But, unfortunately, this wasn't really it because when I returned home and, with a trembling hand, directed the computer mouse to my tool bar, I discovered that my book weighed in at a whopping 196,000 words.

With a mounting sense of panic, I realized that, to get down to 110,000 words, I would need to pull an average-length book (and then some) out of mine. Ironically, I was

sure it would leave my book much more average than it had been before the extraction.

With no hope of negotiating for more words, I decided that I would just try to cut the book down to 140,000—what I'd proclaimed it to be in my proposal—before turning it in to the editor, who had offered to help me with the cutting process.

Quickly, I did some calculations. It had taken me a year to write my first 56,000 words. Could I cut as many in the next three weeks, the time by which I'd promised my editor I would sign the contract and turn in my book?

A little help from my friends

"Maybe you could just delete every third page," a writer friend e-mailed me, attempting humor when I told him that this first round of cutting would amount to nearly one-third of my book.

Another friend, author Brad Newsham, shared with me the heart-wrenching story of how he spent three months polishing several scenes about the dissolution of his marriage, which comprised the first 160 pages of his first book, *All the Right Places*. Newsham's agent then read the full 700-page manuscript and, pointing to page 161, promptly declared, "The story starts here."

"Everything started to fall into place as soon as I chopped those 160 pages down to a 10-line first chapter," Newsham told me. "Maybe you have something like this in your book?"

My book, though, was the story of the start of a relationship—with Cuba and one of her *compañeros*—and, much as I now wished it didn't, I knew that it started on page 1.

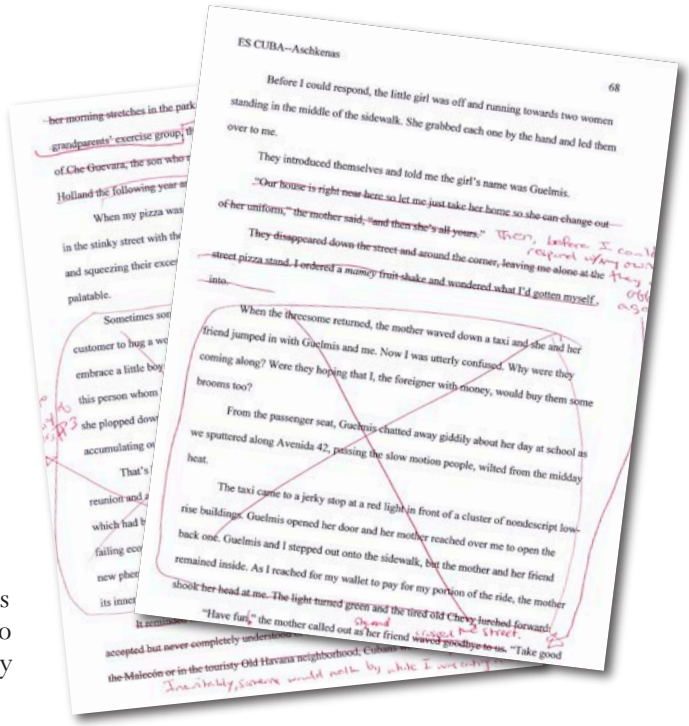
Tom Miller, a former editor of mine, departed from Newsham's anecdotal approach to advice-giving and instead bluntly wrote me, "Whatever you cut, you'll cry over it." He cautioned against carving and recommended, "Just slash. Kill whole vignettes or people."

More upsetting still were the comments of my nonwriter friends, three of whom— on separate occasions, without consulting each other beforehand—compared my task to having a baby and then being asked to cut off its limbs.

Performing triage

Murder and mutilation metaphors aside, I did eventually manage to cut my book, not exactly to the 110,000 words stated in my contract, but close enough so that my editor, who herself had a difficult time cutting, was willing to accept it.

Below I've outlined the steps I took, the triage I performed to keep my narrative intact and my story line alive. Consider this a how-to-cut and how-to-get-through-the-cuts resource for what may also prove to be your final prepublication stage of publishing. It's as important as coming up with the perfect cover and collecting the most compelling advance praise.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Before I could respond, the little girl was off and running towards two women standing in the middle of the sidewalk. She grabbed each one by the hand and led them over to me.

They introduced themselves and told me the girl's name was Guelmis.

"Our house is right near here so let me just take her home so she can change out of her uniform," the mother said, "and then she's all yours."

They disappeared down the street and around the corner, leaving me alone at the street pizza stand. I ordered a *mamey* fruit shake and wondered what I'd gotten myself into.

When the threesome returned, the mother waved down a taxi and she and her friend jumped in with Guelmis and me. Now I was utterly confused. Why were they coming along? Were they hoping that I, the foreigner with money, would buy them some brooms too?

From the passenger seat, Guelmis chatted away giddily about her day at school as we sputtered along Avenida 42, passing the slow motion people, wilted from the midday heat.

The taxi came to a jerky stop at a red light in front of a cluster of nondescript low-rise buildings. Guelmis opened her door and her mother reached over me to open the back one. Guelmis and I stepped out onto the sidewalk, but the mother and her friend remained inside. As I reached for my wallet to pay for my portion of the ride, the mother shook her head at me. The light turned green and the tired old Chevy lurched forward.

"Have fun," the mother called out as her friend waved goodbye to us. "Take good

Red pen marks denote a few of the many cuts in the writer's manuscript. Telling—rather than showing—was one tool she learned to use in compressing her narrative.

1 Cut the self-pity. It is one thing to cut for clarity, for conciseness, for the sort of poetic parity that allows all that remains to come into sharper focus, and another thing altogether to cut simply for the sake of cutting. During the first few days of my cutting, I spent quite a while feeling sorry for myself and enraged about the sorry state of book publishing.

During my worst moments, I recalled one of my favorite childhood books, Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*, and I worried that soon all that would remain of my story would be the stump. Briefly I considered giving up, but deep down, beyond my despair at having to cut nearly half my book, I knew that I had an important story to tell, and that even a much-abbreviated one was better than none at all.

2 Outline (again). When I started writing *Es Cuba*, I created a detailed chapter outline, but as I fleshed out my story, new themes and tensions rose to the surface. Essentially, I'd rewritten as I'd written, and now my original outline no longer reflected the full trajectory of my finished manuscript.

For me, re-outlining served a two-fold purpose. First, by skimming my book and jotting down about a third of a page of phrases describing the main scenes and themes for each chapter, I could see what I had referred to only once—what, if cut, would not be missed by those who hadn't known it wasn't there in the first place. Secondly, when I did decide to cut something that was interwoven into several chapters, my new outline visually tracked this development so that I could make a clean cut, removing all references. While I had always imagined that copy editors stayed up at night worrying about dangling modifiers, I had begun to dream of lingering references. My new outline quelled these fears.

3 Shift your focus. With a few scrolls of my mouse and some gentle tapping of the Delete key, I watched whole scenes and people disappear. Gone was a poign-

ant paragraph, which had taken hours to perfect, about driving through the fog in southeastern Cuba. Gone, too, was half of the two-week trip this drive had led up to. Gone was a holey-underwear scene embarrassing to my husband, a botched attempt at asking directions in Spanish embarrassing to me, a meeting with a former Black Panther, which had been touching—and upsetting to cut—for both of us. Gone were one, two, three chapters and large portions of several others.

Soon I discovered that cutting was a little like looking at one of those Escheresque sketches with negative and positive space; when you focus on the negative image, you can't see the positive one. To keep cutting, I needed to notice not just what was lost but also what was left. Did it work on its own? Did it enable the story I needed to tell to be told?

With this new outlook my cutting began to flow, and I just went with it, letting myself pull out scenes just for fun, just to see what the landscape of my book looked like without them. For the most part, it was still one I wanted to travel through.

4 Manufacture distance. On the date I'd promised it, I gave my editor my manuscript of a little more than 140,000 words. We decided that, over the next six weeks, we would work individually to see how much more we could each cut toward our 110,000-word goal.

But then as I sat down for my second round of cutting, I discovered that I was stalled. Suddenly the thought of reading yet another page of my book yet another time tired me out. I had reached a plateau where acquiring or, in my case, disposing of each new word became achingly slow. I had arrived, I realized, at cutter's block.

"You need distance," said my writer friend Alison Owings, whose publisher required her to cut her second book, *Hey, Waitress!*, by nearly two-thirds. "Hire someone who has distance. Or manufacture distance yourself. Put your book aside for six months or however long you can afford to. Then try to read it as if you're a stranger."

I tried a little of everything. I set aside my book for a few days, the most I could afford to do on my tight timetable, and then gave it to two writer friends for their thoughts. Maybe I shouldn't have been surprised that, after I'd already cut so extensively, they could find little else.

In the end, I realized that the cutting, like the writing of the book, was ultimately my responsibility. And really, I wouldn't want it any other way. So, on my own, I set about manufacturing distance.

I got into a routine where I woke early and worked on my book for four hours each morning. Despite Tom Miller's advice, I let myself carve, rather than slash, at this point in the process, realizing that a mere 800 words per day, over six weeks, could add up to just what I needed to cut. For each page I turned to, I tried to cut something small, even if only one sentence. I worked diligently until noon, at which point I often felt near tears, certain as I was that this would be the last day I'd be able to put myself through this. Then I would shut *Es Cuba*, eat lunch and, for the remainder of the day, do my best to put my book behind me. By the time I woke the next morning, after a 19-hour break from my cutting, I was refreshed and ready to try once more.

5 Read. One thing I did during my noncutting portion of the day was to reread *The House on Dream Street*, a travel memoir about Vietnam by Dana Sachs, which had not only inspired me to travel halfway around the world when I finished my book, but also motivated me to contact the author when I'd finished reading her book for the first time five years earlier. I had been struck by the similarities of our stories, in two countries so far apart from each other, and we had been in touch intermittently over the years. When my book sold to the same publisher who had put out the paperback of *The House on Dream Street*, I'd even used that book's word count (115,000) to negotiate for my own. Now I used it to study how the author had made her transitions, how she had presented the passage of time, how, essentially, she had told her story in this number of words.

6 Tell, don't show. Before I ever heard the axiom "Show, don't tell," I unwaveringly obeyed it, feeling that details and conversations added a much needed distinctiveness to scenes. But as I approached the final days of my cutting, unwilling to kill off any more of my vignettes or characters, I was forced to accept that the only way to shorten my story would be to substitute an eloquent, all-encompassing sentence or two for many of my multipage dialogues and scenes.

Painful as this initially sounded, in the end I preferred it to my slashing stage because by retelling my scenes, I got to write them again. Once more I got to immerse myself in the search for the perfect phrase, the challenge of re-creating a world.

Epilogue

On the day that it was due, I turned in my final manuscript with 130,000 words. The copy editor then cut an additional 10,000 words, and my wonderful, accommodating editor let the book stand at 120,000. As I look back on the process, I feel as if the moral of my cutting story should be that I learned my lesson, that I now know not to write so much for my next book. But really, the truth is I now understand that if my cuts were, in my editor's words, "a necessary surgery," then the writing of what I had cut had also been necessary. All my deleted portions had been necessary to move me on to the next scene or chapter or theme of my book. #

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Lea Aschkenas is author of *Es Cuba: Life and Love on an Illegal Island.* An excerpt is in *The Best Women's Travel Writing 2006* and outtakes can be read at www.leaaschkenas.com.