The Six-Word Story

Jacquelyn Ardam

A collaborative exercise that explores narrative condensation.

Genre: fiction, especially short stories
Course Level: introductory
Student Difficulty: easy
Teacher Preparation: low
Class Size: small to medium
Semester Time: any
Writing Component: in class
Close Reading: high
Estimated Time: 45 to 50 minutes

EXERCISE

Legend has it that Hemingway’s favorite piece of his own writing was a six-word short story that he wrote to win a bet:

For sale: baby shoes, never worn.

This six-word story is a great jumping-off point for a classroom exercise on narrative fiction, particularly the short story. Instead of beginning class by talking about that day’s reading assignment, write Hemingway’s six-word story on the board and ask the students for their thoughts on it. Let the class brainstorm for several minutes, encouraging them to say anything that comes to mind about the story, and write their ideas on the board as well. Ask some questions to get them thinking: Do you think that Hemingway’s piece is a short story? How short can a story be and still be a story? Can you express a narrative in just six words? Characters? Who is narrating this story? How important are punctuation and syntax to its telling? What differentiates it from a poem?

After this discussion, divide your students into pairs and ask each pair to transform that day’s reading assignment into a six-word story. Give them about ten minutes to compose, and then ask them to write their stories on the board. Once everyone has regrouped, ask each pair to present its six-word story to the class. To get the conversation going, consider posing one or two of the following questions to the pairs: Which elements of the original story did you absolutely need to include and why? What does your six-word story leave out? How important is punctuation to your six-word story? Diction? Tone? Do you see your six-word story as a summary of the reading
assignment? As a tagline? Is there a narrative arc to your story? Is there an epiphany? What is the relationship between the two texts? Are your six-word story and the original story even in the same genre?

Here the conversation might naturally lead into a more general discussion of the genre of the short story. How short can a short story be? Conversely, how long can a short story be? How do long and short versions of narrative fiction work differently? If you wish, take notes on the board as your students come up with definitions in order to organize their thoughts. Ideally, your class will, as a group, come up with a framework and vocabulary for discussing fiction that you can employ throughout the rest of the class. You might encourage your students to define such key terms as point of view, plot, tone, or epiphany. If your course covers multiple narrative genres—flash fiction, the short story, prose poetry, the novella, the novel—you might also work with your students to define and distinguish one genre from another. Allow at least thirty to thirty-five minutes for the pair presentations and the conversations to follow.

**REFLECTIONS**

“The Six-Word Story” (an activity sometimes also assigned in creative writing classrooms) is designed to help students think about how and why we define narratives by genre, and also about the possible pitfalls of doing so. I have done this exercise several times in an introductory course, usually in the middle of a unit on short stories, but it can be done successfully at any point in a class on fiction or the short story in particular.

When doing this exercise, I often pair Hemingway’s six-word story with Flannery O’Connor’s “Good Country People,” which has made for some deliciously humorous narratives. A sampling from my students:

- Leg lost: Christian country person wanted.
- Dude, where’s my leg? That’s country!
- Simple good country boy: leg thief.
- A woman loses her leg twice.

“The Six-Word Story” can also lead class conversations in many different and productive directions. I’ve talked with my students about Hemingway’s “iceberg theory,” the role of the gothic in American literature, the relationship between the comedic and the ironic, and the effects of terseness and brevity in literature. In addition to O’Connor’s “Good Country People,” I have also paired Hemingway’s story with James Joyce’s “Araby” and would recommend pairing the six-word story with any short story that exhibits a significant shift in tone or an epiphany. Other short stories that I’d recommend are Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Birthmark,” Michael Cunningham’s “Pearls,” Junot Díaz’s “The Cheater’s Guide to Love,” and Jhumpa Lahiri’s...
“Sexy.” If you’re interested in a Hemingway-specific lesson, you could discuss his six-word story alongside “The End of Something” or another short story from *In Our Time*.

What I have found most valuable in this exercise is the group discussion of the students’ writing process: how they narrow the original story down to just six words, how they decide what matters (and *how* it matters) in the story, how many of their six-word stories make use of the author’s distinctive vocabulary, tone, or point of view. When you put students in an active authorial position, they are able to think about style from a completely different perspective and see a text’s diction, syntax, and punctuation as deliberate.

Additionally, this exercise builds strong close-reading skills. It encourages students to read fiction as closely and carefully as they read poetry. While my students are often more than willing to debate the role of a semicolon in a poem, they are much more resistant to doing so in a short story. This exercise opens students up to reading fiction—even very, very short fiction—from a new perspective.

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**Narrative Rounds**

*Joyce Coleman*

An icebreaker exercise that teaches the most basic elements of oral storytelling.

Genre: *fiction*
Course Level: introductory
Student Difficulty: easy
Teacher Preparation: low
Class Size: small to medium
Semester Time: first day, early
Writing Component: optional after class
Close Reading: none
Estimated Time: 35 to 40 minutes

**EXERCISE**

Begin by putting students into pairs (for small classes) or groups of three (for medium classes). Ask each student to tell the other member or members of the group a story. The story should last no more than five minutes, and it must be about the storyteller him- or herself (what folklorists call a “personal