“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
experience narrative” or “memorat”). The tellers should choose a story that they are comfortable sharing and that is likely to interest the audience, and they should tell it with conviction. The listeners should pay close attention and respond supportively.

Once all the students have told their stories, ask the entire class to get up and form two concentric circles. (Move furniture to the sides of the room as needed; if you are in a classroom with bolted-down chairs, bring everyone to the front of the room.) Ask each circle to walk slowly, in opposite directions, until you tell the circles to stop and face each other. Then ask each student to choose one of the stories she or he just heard and tell it to the person standing opposite. That person will then tell the first speaker a story he or she had just heard. Because the retellings of the stories tend to be notably shorter than the originals, this portion of the exercise typically takes just five to seven minutes.

Now ask the circles to walk forward again until you stop them. Have the new facing pairs tell each other the story they have just heard from their previous partner. This next round will take even less time than the previous one, usually only four to five minutes.

Have the students return to their seats, then call on one person at random to tell the last story she or he heard to the entire class. Ask the other members of the class to help trace this version of the story back to the intermediate and original tellers, noting which aspects of the story have changed along the way. After the class has traced a few stories back this way, invite the students to consider the changes that seem to occur in transition. Although some parts of stories may become garbled, as in the game of telephone, students typically find that the changes are meaningful: action has been tightened, less important details have been dropped, and the story has moved more firmly into one or another narrative mode (usually comic). They may also find that common themes emerge. List these observations on the board and encourage students to reflect on what their discoveries might say about storytelling more generally.

**REFLECTIONS**

“Narrative Rounds” invites students to discover some of the most basic components of effective narrative through their own lived experience. The learning is augmented by many nonintellectual factors: the intimacy of the storytelling group at the beginning, the physical activity of walking, and the excitement or anxiety of encountering random listeners in the circle and plunging into engagement with them. The exercise takes narrative back to its source in face-to-face interaction, connecting it to the high-context, multisensory experience of oral literature. This can be used as a teaching point later on if you are reading texts derived from oral traditions; you can also use these observations to ask students how written narratives differ from oral
ones. Finally, as an icebreaker, the exercise gives students a way to meet each other and begin to feel comfortable interacting.

For example, in one of my classes a student told a story about a trip from North Dakota to Manhattan with her father and two of her high-school friends. The father sent the three young women into the city with lots of good advice, which they promptly disregarded. They got pulled into a game of three-card monte, lost money, got the money back when a cop intervened, and were chased by the card dealer. They finally got back safely to their hotel, where they lied to the father about what had happened.

In tracing the story back to its original version, the class discovered that various details had dropped away in the retelling: for example, information about the women involved and the exact sequence of their bets in the card game. Other elements were augmented to create more excitement, such as how far the women had to run to escape the angry dealer. The class recognized that the retellers had edited the story to make it more dramatic and engaging. At the same time, the real fear that the women had felt gave way, in retelling, to a comic tone.

Discussion of the story’s theme pulled in another story, about a male student engaging in underage drinking, then driving, landing in jail, and having to be bailed out by his parents. Combining these stories, the class arrived at a general, age-appropriate theme of adolescents testing their limits but needing their parents to fall back on. As a result of the discussion, the students became more aware of basic elements of narrative construction and also more aware of their own preferences as audience or readers.

As a follow-up to this exercise, you can also design a take-home work sheet that guides students to a more detailed analysis of the experience. The work sheet could ask the students to consider why they chose the personal story they told, how and why they edited and possibly fictionalized it in the telling, what they thought the underlying message of the story was, and how their listeners’ reactions affected them as they spoke. They could also be asked to comment on what they learned about narrative from their experience as listeners and retellers. The next class can be devoted to sharing these analyses and drawing further conclusions.

The results of this take-home exercise usually reinforce the principles that emerge in class discussion. Even the original tellers of the stories, it turns out, often fictionalize them to make them sound happier or funnier (“I altered the ‘reality’ of my story by making it humorous. Of course, at the time this really happened, none of this was funny”) or to heighten the interest by exaggerating key details or dropping boring ones (“like where I stayed and what I ate”). But it also provides new insight into the role of audience in shaping narrative: “The more we nodded the more he told,” one student wrote. In another case the listeners transformed the story as the teller was telling it: he changed his serious account of falling down a flight of stairs into a funny
Splicing

Michael Wood

An introductory exercise on literary influence and adaptation.

Genre: fiction, especially novels
Course Level: introductory
Student Difficulty: easy
Teacher Preparation: medium
Class Size: small to medium
Semester Time: any
Writing Component: none
Close Reading: medium
Estimated Time: 20 to 25 minutes

EXERCISE

Play the following game with your students: The night before class, choose two novels that share some connection. The novels might be from the same genre, for example, or they might include a similar character type, or make use of a particular kind of plot point or theme, or use language in a similar way: two novels, in other words, that make you say, even if only briefly, “Oh, this reminds me of that other novel.” (They don’t need to be novels on your current syllabus, but they can be.)

From each novel, select a few short excerpts that you might normally show to students side by side as evidence of the similarity between the texts. Now splice the excerpts from each novel together. You can simply alternate bits if you like, or you can splice them more creatively (half a line here, half a line there). Try to maintain narrative sense; try not to let the seams show. You don’t have to use every word or even every sentence. (What you don’t include will ultimately be as instructive as what you do include.)

In class, give the students a copy of this new passage. Tell them it is a hybrid—a text made up of actual phrases or sentences from two different