

# PRECISELY. NOT FIVE. NOT SEVEN. **SIX**

THE HOWLS OF PROTEST WERE LOUD AND LONG.  
AND THEY SOUNDED SINCERE.  
BUT FROM FIRST YEAR STUDENTS THEY OFTEN DO –  
THEIR OBJECTIONS TO THE HARD NEWS ASSIGNMENT  
IN WEEK TWO HAD BEEN HEARTFELT.  
REPORT A 40-MINUTE PRESENTATION IN 250 WORDS?  
WE CAN’T! YOU HAVEN’T TAUGHT US ENOUGH!  
BUT THEY DID IT. NOW IT WAS WEEK FOUR  
AND THEY WERE HOLLERING ABOUT THE TUTORIAL.  
WRITE A PERSONAL NARRATIVE IN SIX WORDS?  
BARBARIC! A CRIME AGAINST THEIR WRITING GENIUS!  
**IT CAN’T BE DONE!**

**A**fter just one month at university, they had to tell their life story in six words. Precisely. Not five. Not seven. Six. And they were scared. So they made a noise. So I did too. Eventually they listened and this is what they heard.

The six-word story is not my doing. Ernest Hemingway started it, or so literary legend has it. Ernest who, ma'm? Hemingway. Google him but remember to omit the second *m* then read his work. Story goes he wrote the world's first six-word novel in response to a challenge, either one of his own making or one made in a bar. But the birthplace of the genre is not as important as its first example. *For sale: baby shoes, never worn.*

In recent years, the six-word story has attracted a considerable following including themed competitions in publications like *The New York Times* (<http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/tag/six-word-memoirs/?scp=4&sq=six%20word%20memoirs&st=cse>). There are websites devoted to the genre and online magazine *Smith* assiduously nurtures the six-word industry. Recently its editors published an anthology of six-word memoirs. The collection, called *Not Quite What I Was Planning*, includes pieces by writers known and unknown: *Secret to life: marry an Italian* (Nora Ephron); *Fifteen years since last professional haircut* (Dave Eggers); *Fearlessness is the mother of reinvention* (Arianna Huffington); *Mom, Dad, Daphne, Owen. Who's next?* (Sean Wilsey); *Revenge is living well without you* (Joyce Carol Oates); *Liar, hysterectomy didn't improve sex life!* (Joan Rivers). Well, no, I didn't use those last two as examples in class.

Using six-word stories in the classroom is not a new idea. According to Wikipedia, there's already a teacher's guide to using the six-word memoir as a tool for teaching. And playing with the form in newsrooms is not new either. In response to the competition copy in front of them, editors in *The New York Times* City Room wrote **Dead tree's future limited. Now us.**

In the lecture hall, however, howling continued in sporadic outbursts. But eventually, like all good stories, the six-word memoirs succeeded in silencing the student listeners into wonder. I didn't do this alone: I was helped by a 10-minute NPR segment (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=18768430>) which is the most infectious introduction to the genre I have yet sourced. In it, the *Smith* editors explain how diverse the six-word form is and how much literary, intellectual and emotional potential it has. Thoroughly infected, I designed a tutorial session which aims to help students isolate the main focus of a story, and then to tell that story concisely, precisely and winningly. In six words.

Obviously, lead stories of six words are not a prescription for newsroom promotion. But reporters who know what the story is, and have the confidence to tell that story concisely yet compellingly, would be a newsroom asset. So, by writing their own stories in six words, students would – I hoped – learn how to get to the point succinctly, yet subtly and clearly.

The Rhodes journ school's weekly tutorials are led by senior journ students, and provide a more intimate and supported learning environment than the relative anonymity of a neon-lit lecture venue with more than 200 students. So, in week four of 2011, tutors introduced students to the six-word genre by calling on Hemingway, NPR and the examples above. Students were then encouraged to write multiple stories, covering various aspects of their lives. They then had to winnow this selection, alerting them – I hoped – to matters of editorial discernment and readers' needs.

In designing this tutorial, I deliberately discarded topics apparently popular with newspaper editors. So out went mothers (not every student has one), love (potentially perilous on many levels), and philosophy (who cares). But life stories offered potential, both for learning and for reading. The writing assignment that week had been a personal narrative so students were fresh from encountering themselves. What was the point of that exercise, ma'am? The point was that if you do not tell the truth about yourself you cannot tell it about other people. Virginia Woolf said that too. Google her but remember to insert a second *o* in the surname.

After reading the results of that personal narrative assignment, I realised that many students had epic life stories already lodged under their 18-year-old skins. Instinctively, I knew that Rhodes University's first year journalism students could write beautiful stories, with the best words they could find. And many of them did.

Financial Times columnist Lucy Kellaway nails work in six words: <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/e0e11924-bfa9-11e0-90d5-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1W9IJwWST>

*Crazy dad. Loud sisters. Normal one.*

*Parents died but wasn't the end.*

*One way traffic, in wrong lane.*

*She loves me, but I don't.*

*Mom was love. Dad was absent.*

*If hell is real, I'm screwed.*

*She left, he left, I'm left.*

*One person, two families, three lives.*

*Life is tough. Fit off-road tyres.*

*Lost the path, so slipped away.*

*Can't really colour inside the lines.*

*Black cats. Ladders. Bring it on.*

*Mom giving birth, they both died.*

*I will always believe in fairytales.*

*Stone dropped, ripples spread, life changed.*

*Born there, live here. Not moving.*

*Mismatched, multicoloured, tied-together shoelaces: tripping.*

*Well, the line was never toe-shaped.*

*Born right. Lived wrong. Alive again.*