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Six-Word Memoirs in the Classroom

BY JENNY RICH | Jul 01, 2014



Every semester, on the last day of the literacy methods course I teach, I ask my pre-service



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teachers to write a six-word memoir as a form of reflection. I show them the funny, moving, irreverent YouTube video created by

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SMITH Magazine and Harper Perennial called [“Not Quite What I Was Planning: Six-Word Memoirs by Writers Famous and Obscure.”](#) and, after watching, I give them some time to write. Their six-word memoirs run the gamut from funny to moving to irreverent, as you can see from [the memoirs my created this semester](#).

Then we get to the point where we need to move beyond reflection and ask “So what? What does this have to do with teaching kids? How might we use this in a classroom?” This is an important question in a methods class, where the line between theory and practice shifts, and students start to own what it means to be teachers. Together, we came up with a list of how they might use six-word memoirs with the students they came to know and care about over the course of the semester, and how they imagine using six-word memoirs with students they have not yet encountered.

Here are our top five ways to use six-word memoirs in a classroom:

As a Form of Introduction. Students come to a class with different life experiences. Some have summers filled with camp, vacations, books, and wonder. Others have summers filled with taking care of younger siblings, staying indoors and watching television, angry adults, and unhealthy food. As teachers, regardless of where we teach, we never know who is joining our community or what they bring with them. Six-word memoirs offer students a safe way to share a small piece of who they are and what matters to them. Older students might want to watch the version of the [six-word memoir project compiled by HarperTeen.com](#) in order to find inspiration and mentor texts.

Writer’s workshop is a model emphasizing both structure and choice. The beauty of six-word memoirs is that structure is built into the fabric of this writing, but so is choice. When using six-word memoirs as a method of introduction, students can pick content and decide how much of themselves to share. They can

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share their favorite book, the number of siblings they have, or the fact they miss someone who is no longer here. The choice within the structure is theirs and theirs alone.

Write from a Character's Point of View. While six-word memoirs and all of the applications are exciting, this is a particular favorite of mine. There are so many ways six-word memoirs might be used within the context of reader's workshop! Thinking for a moment of a whole-class read-aloud, each student might be asked to write a six-word memoir from the perspective of a different character at the end of a book. Certainly, very few books would have enough characters to assign every student a different perspective (we're not reading *Game of Thrones* in elementary school!), but it's always interesting to see how students write the same character differently. As an example, let's take a look at a current favorite of mine, *Rump: The True Story of Rumpelstiltskin*, by Liesl Shurtliff. In this book, students can write six-word memoirs from the perspectives of Rump, Red, Opal, King Barf, the aunts, the trolls, pixies, Frederick and Bruno, and the miller. They might even write six-word memoirs from these characters at different points in the story, showing their perspective as it changes (or doesn't) over time.

This same idea can be repeated as an independent reading activity, a literature circle discussion prompt, or a way in to a partner reading conversation. Asking students to put themselves in the shoes of a book character is hard work, and writing a six-word memoir *as if they were that character* raises the bar just a little bit more.

Writing Across the Science or Social Studies Curriculum. While the 140-character limit of Twitter feels like an imposition of brevity on many older students, imagine what the limit of six words feels like! The six-word structure can be used as either a memoir or a structure for summary in the content areas. First, let's explore the six-words as a memoir in content areas.

We often ask students to write biographies of those who are

famous in the disciplines they study. Earlier this year, my son, a first grader, was asked to write a report on an "American hero" (he picked Paul Revere.) As I was getting ready to write this post, I asked him what he remembered about his "hero," and he replied as I feared, "ummm... nothing?"

Over the course of a school career, students study any number of historical figures from around the world and across disciplines. They write long reports about these people, sometimes drawing pictures or presenting what they have learned (or memorized) to their class. What if we asked each of our students to write their figure's memoir as well? These figures have an abundance of information associated with them, but six words would be something to take away, something these students might remember for the long haul.

The six-word structure can also be used as a method for summary of content areas. It is a useful tool when thinking about formative assessment, exit tickets, and helping students think about the big ideas of a concept or a unit of study. When looking across a class full of six-word summaries, it's easier to see if they "get" the big idea than when looking at 27 full-page summaries.

To be fair, learning to summarize in six words takes some practice. Students will want to summarize in five words, or eight. Writing in six words takes skill, and as a method of formative assessment it might not seem like the point. There is a certain habit of mind, however, that comes with thinking of just the right words to say what you want to say.

As a Connection to the Arts. It's always interesting to hear from my pre-service teachers once they leave my class and carry on with their studies. I'm never sure what they will take with them, what will "stick." One student of mine loved the idea of six-word memoirs, and decided to try it with kids she was working with in a summer camp setting. She was an art counselor working with all ages, and asked the kids to caption one painting project, a favorite setting, with six words.

Using the six-word structure as a connection to the arts is a natural fit, because this is an arts-based project in the first place. My student used it as a link to painting, but it could be used to caption a self-portrait (*memoir plus self-portrait, oh my!*), to describe an abstract work, as a placard for a sculpture, or the dedication on an artist's nameplate. Moving out of the realm of visual art, the six-word structure could be used to describe what a song or piece of music makes you feel, or a dance, or any other performance. The brevity of the six-word structure makes it an ideal form for this type of review.

As a Form of Reflection. I began this post discussing how I use six-word memoirs with my own students as a form of reflection. I ask my pre-service teachers to reflect on our time together, on what they have learned, and how they have grown as teachers and students. I am a firm believer in the power of reflection, and I have seen the six-word structure help my students grow in their ability to reflect.

I think the power of this lies in the limits. It becomes easy to reflect over the course of pages, to talk about strengths and weaknesses, what you liked and didn't like, where you excelled and where you will continue to grow. It is harder, of course, to be reflective in six words. It is harder to find voice in six words. You have to make a choice: do you want to be funny, or serious? How much do you want to share? You can be awfully honest in just six words, you can choose to put it all out there. Or you can find a cliché, string your words together, hide behind the limit.

This goes for young students, too. We can ask students in elementary school to reflect upon the type of readers they become over the course of a school year, or the type of mathematicians, or how they changed as writers or scientists or questioners. From our initial prompt, students can reflect in any number of ways. They can be silly or serious, thoughtful or rushed. They can use every word of their allotted six and think wisely about punctuation, or try to argue that "and" shouldn't really count as a word.

And so, in the spirit of the six-word memoir, here are my six words (in addition, of course, to the title): "Six-word memoirs: powerful teaching tools."



Jenny Rich is an adjunct instructor in the School of Education at Rider University in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, and a doctoral student at Rutgers University. You can find her on Twitter at [@jdrich219](https://twitter.com/jdrich219).

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