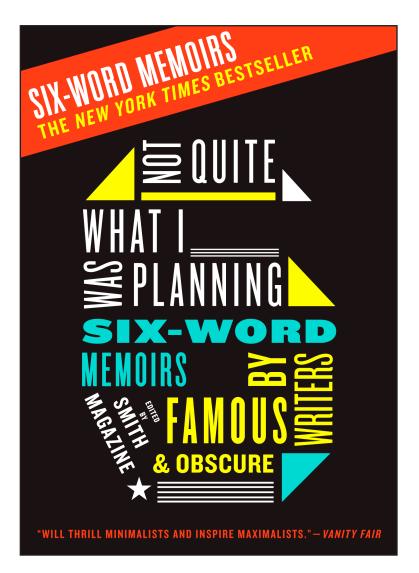
# **A Teaching Guide for**



## One Life. Six Words. What's Your Story?



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#### Note to Teachers

Legend has it that when Ernest Hemingway was challenged to write a six-word story, he came up with, "For Sale: baby shoes, never worn."

Inspired by Hemingway's short, short story, SMITH magazine, launched online in 2006, challenged readers and famous writers alike to submit their own sixword memoirs for a contest. *Not Quite What I Was Planning* is a selection of the thousands of entries that arrived. The results are devastating, poignant, hilarious, and good lessons to all.

There are stories of inspiration ("Learning disability. MIT. Never give up."), stories of resignation ("Lazy renaissance man settles for dilettantism") and stories of perpetuation ("Birth, childhood, adolescence, adolescence, adolescence, adolescence..."). Each is a nugget for a larger story, and universal themes abound. Many will inspire students to think about and write their own stories, beginning with the six-word essence and expanding onward and upward. If they post their six-word memoirs at www.SMITHmag.net, they will be considered for the next book in the series!

### **Questions for Class Discussion**

- **1.** After reading all the six-word memoirs, what surprises you about this form? What can you learn from it to take into other types of writing?
- 2. What's the difference between a story and a memoir? Why do we tell stories? Why is storytelling important? How often can your story change? Who knows your story best?
- **3.** In your mind (and without looking at the index), what were the most common themes that emerged? Write them down as a class and tally. Why do you think these themes stood out to you in particular? Why do you think they stood out to the class?
- 4. Now look at the index and tally the number of memoirs written by either men or women dealing thematically with the following issues: Regret, Risk, Food, Fear, Moms, Dads, Death, and Art. What do these numbers tell you about gender, culture, and what men versus women tend to think about most?

- **5.** Several of these pieces have been written by famous people. Select five by authors you know and explain what makes the memoir more funny or poignant by having an insider's knowledge. Is there still meaning if you do not know this person? If so, what is it?
- **6.** How is it both possible and impossible to distill the essence of who you are into six words? Which of these authors do you think did the best job of it and why?
- 7. Pick one of these memoirs which you do not understand and discuss what it might mean. Start with any part of it that you do understand. See if your classmates can help fill in the blanks.
- **8.** Which of these memoirs is the most poignant to you and why? Which is the most tragic and why? Which is the most funny and why?
- **9.** In Pamela Vissing's memoir (p. 77) who is Dorothy Gale and what does the author mean? Why do you think this memoir was included?
- 10. How can education get in the way of life, per Dan Vance's memoir (p. 115)? Isn't education supposed to enhance life? How can this go wrong? Conversely, how can being educated too little affect life?
- 11. Look at the memoirs by Bob Todd (p. 59) and the one by Craig Jones (p. 87). Choose a famous figure and, as a class, use these as a model to write a six-word biography that begins using the construct of adjective, noun and verb. Does your adjective complement or clash with your noun? Is there a surprise in the memoir, and if so, which words contain it? Explain.
- 12. As a class, consider how punctuation affects the six-word memoir by choosing three and rewriting them changing only the punctuation. Discuss how this changes the meaning of the memoir.
- 13. The word "minivan" packs a powerful punch in Cindi Hounton's memoir (p. 115). How would the meaning change if the word were: Porsche; job; mortgage?
- 14. Omi Castanar's memoir (p. 140) conjures what emotion in you? Which of the six words does it?

- **15.** Who is the "you" to whom C. McClosky refers? (p. 152). Use as many words as you need to explain what he is saying.
- 16. Tom Gabay's memoir (p. 181) might be summed up with the cliché: "Stop and smell the roses." Pick your favorite cliché and find a sixword memoir that embodies it. If it's not immediately obvious that the cliché and the memoir go together discuss why you think they do. Compare with your classmates.
- 17. Do you think Paul Schultz (p. 14) is talking literally or metaphorically? And if the latter what might his bad breaks and high speed be? What might be yours?
- **18.** Why does Michael Farmer (p. 12) write his memoir in Latin? What does it mean? Does Latin make it more powerful? Why or why not?
- 19. Jon Thysell (p. 35) takes the noun "nerd" and uses it as a verb. What is the effect? What do you immediately imagine the "nerding" entailed? Do you think he is using "nerded" as a positive or a negative? Does he free you to be a nerd or shame you for it?
- **20.** On p. 34, what is a xenophile and how does this word work with "tumbleweed"? What is Dominic Arizona Bonnuccelli's problem and what is his cure? Who do you know, real or in literature, who was similarly cured?
- **21.** Is Tanya Jarrett (p. 198) bitter, self righteous or happy at last? Which word makes you think so?
- **22.** Who is Michael Eisner (p. 199) and what do you think he means by jafroed? How does his memoir address anti-Semitism?
- **23.** What is Dawn Ryan's (p. 217) fixation? What other types of fixations are you aware of and how can they take over a life?
- **24.** Julie Dohertys memoir (p. 86) seems so final. Can self esteem be resurrected and if so, how?

- **25.** What is so disturbing about M. Brenner's memoir (p. 90)? Is it possible the terrible twins are not who you think they are? Who else might they be?
- **26.** What do you imagine might cause a person to make the transition that Pat Ryan makes (p. 106) in life? In your experience, do you know more people who go this route or the reverse? What can you say about people who stay the same politically?
- **27.** What might be the gold about which Maureen Barnes (p. 127) speaks? What are the reasons for which people may bury their gold? How can they make sure not to meet the same fate as Barnes?
- **28.** To whom does Stephen J. Dubner implicitly compare himself in his memoir (p. 221)? Do you think he is being facetious?
- **29.** Jerry Richstein's memoir is "Over 50 and still a Boy Scott." What does he mean? Is he really a Boy Scout? Do we know if he was ever actually a Boy Scout?
- **30.** "My second grade teacher was right." What do you think Janelle Brown means by that?

#### **Homework Assignments**

1. "For Sale: baby shoes, never worn." The success of Ernest Hemingway's story lies in the multiple questions and possible meanings that lie between the lines. For example: Why is the narrator selling the shoes? Is the baby grown? Did she die? Did she simply go barefoot or was she sadly never able to walk? Is the narrator the mother? The father? The sibling? The former baby? Is the story about the end of childhood? The end of parenthood? The end of innocence or justice or happiness or all of the above? The questions are endless and the possible meanings are many. Try to write your own six-word memoir with multiple meanings. How difficult is this? Where did you start? What are some of the meanings? What questions does your memoir leave the reader?

- 2. Pick one of these six-word memoirs that really speaks to your life so far. Pick the one that might be closest to your own six-word memoir. Write it at the top of a page and expand it to 500-900 words that include the pertinent details of your life and what matters in it. Make sure your memoir has a beginning, a middle and an end.
- **3.** Look over Linda Hatfield-Southern's memoir (p.87) and write a short story (fiction) of what happened in the 24 years in between.
- 4. Margaret Hellerstein's memoir (p. 20) is a devastating warning to young people. Consider what makes it so, by writing a paper about your dreams and how they may conflict with the rules you have been taught. How can you heed Margaret Hellerstein's warning? Include which rules you could follow and which you might break to achieve your dreams. Give examples from history or of people you admire who broke the rules for a good cause. Consider those whose best laid plans went awry as well as those whose ends justified the means.
- **5.** Jim Gladstone (p. 16) is stuck in adolescence. Write a paper about how this might happen. How can you avoid it yourself? What are the benefits of growing up? What are the pitfalls? What makes adolescence such a confusing and often difficult time? What wisdom can you take from it into the rest of your life?
- **6.** Harold Ramis (p.92) had second thoughts. What have you conquered that you had second thoughts about? Write a three-part essay about your journey, what you learned and where you went from there.
- 7. Go to SMITHmag.net and submit your own six-word memoir!



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