

SIX WORD MEMOIR

SUMMARY

Often used as an example of the power of the written word, even in short form, legend has it the writer Ernest Hemingway was challenged to create a complete story in only six words when he penned, "For Sale: Baby shoes, never worn." A whole world of meaning and experience can be contained in the smallest of sentences. This activity invites you to take a moment from your life and collapse it into a single, profound form.

MATERIALS NEEDED

notebook
pen/pencil

WHAT TO DO

START WITH A "YOU" LIST

List as many words, topics, memories, or personality traits as you can about yourself: things you like to do, things you love, places you have been to, memorable moments in your life. Don't edit, cross out, change, or rewrite words; just write! The more you have on the page, the better. If you get stuck, let the words on the page lead you to other ideas.

MAKE THE CUT

Now that you have a full page of topics and ideas, read them over. Circle the two or three that stand out to you at the moment. They don't have to be the most thoughtful or the "important," just the ones that draw you to them and that you could say more about.

FREWRITE

Using one of the words that you selected, begin to freewrite— this means write whatever comes to mind about that word: questions, memories, thoughts, impressions. How does that word fit into your life or what does it mean to you? The only rule here is to not stop writing for at least two or three minutes; whatever is on the page stays on the page.

PUT IT TOGETHER

Read over what you have just written. Is there a common theme or idea about the topic and yourself that ties it all together? If you were to boil your freewrite down, what would you say is the general meaning to you? Can you state it in a phrase?

ADD THE POWER

Take the phrase you have just created. Can you shorten, or lengthen, it to six words only? Do the words you use have your emotion and thought behind them? Is what you have written about you, the topic only being used to tell your personal story? Are there synonyms that might work better for your goal? Edit and rewrite until your memoir tells your story. Topic just not working for you? Go back and freewrite on another word choice until you find your phrase.

ALTERNATIVES

“Photo Essay Memoir”

For added power using both the written and the visual, pair your memoir with a picture or images that illustrate the story you are telling in some way.

“Slide Show”

An autobiography covers an entire life up to its writing, but a memoir focuses on a specific period in the writer’s life. Create a “This Is My Life” slideshow composed of six-word memoirs written about different periods of your life.

RESOURCES

Not Quite What I Was Planning. Fershleiser, Rachel and Larry Smith, ed., HarperCollins, 2008.

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