

Why Am I Here? Six-Word Stories about the First Month of Law School

Mary Dunnewold and Hamline University Law Students

According to an apocryphal anecdote, Ernest Hemingway was once challenged to write an entire story in six words. His story: “For sale: baby shoes. Never worn.” Hemingway purportedly considered this his best work.¹ During the last decade, as the Hemingway tale has spread, interest in six-word stories has increased, resulting in several books and web sites.²

True or not, the Hemingway anecdote promotes brevity in writing, a value shared by teachers and readers of legal writing.³ In the fall of 2008, after

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1. There is apparently no proof that the story is true. It may have its origin in a play about Hemingway, *Papa*, written by Joseph DeGroot and produced in the 1990s. See <http://www.snopes.com/language/literary/babyshoes.asp> (last visited Jan. 12, 2010).
2. Smith Magazine began collecting and publishing six-word stories in 2006. See <http://www.maximumfun.org/2009/06/30/larry-smith> (interview with Larry Smith) (last visited Jan. 12, 2010); see also <http://www.smithmag.net/sixwords/> (Smith’s six word memoir web site) (last visited Jan. 12, 2010); <http://www.sixwordstories.net/> (web site devoted to six-word stories) (last visited Jan. 12, 2010). Four books have resulted from the Smith collections: *Not Quite What I was Planning: Six-Word Memoirs by Writers Famous and Obscure* (Smith Magazine 2008); *Six-Word Memoirs on Love and Heartbreak: By Writers Famous and Obscure* (Smith Magazine 2009); *I Can’t Keep My Own Secrets: Six-Word Memoirs by Teens Famous and Obscure* (Smith Magazine 2009); *It All Changed in an Instant: More Six-Word Memoirs by Writers Famous and Obscure* (Smith Magazine forthcoming 2010).
3. See, e.g., Antonin Scalia & Bryan A. Garner, *Making your Case* 59, 98–99 (West 2008) (brevity in brief writing promotes objective of making court’s job easier); Julie A. Oseid, *The Power of Brevity: Adopt Abraham Lincoln’s Habits*, 6 J. of the Ass’n. of Legal Writing Dir. 28 (2009); Richard A. Posner, *Legal Writing Today*, 8 *The Scribes J. of Legal Writing* 35 (2001–2002) (identifying “lack of economy of expression” as a problem in much legal writing); Bryan A. Garner, *Legal Writing in Plain English* 144 (Univ. of Chicago 2001) (brevity in writing a quality favored by legal readers).

reading a review of a recently published six-word story collection, Professor Tracy McGaugh posted a message on the Legal Writing Listserv⁴ suggesting that a six-word story assignment could be useful in a legal writing class.⁵

Prompted by the listserv post, the Hamline legal writing faculty decided the six-word story idea could be used not only to teach writing principles, but also to channel our students' competitive impulses into something fun. We proposed a six-word story contest on the theme "the first six weeks of law school."

A deadline was set. The dean was recruited to judge the entries and choose a winner. Announcements were made in classes and in the weekly newsletter. And a grand prize was decided upon.⁶

We received dozens of entries from both students and faculty. The stories were frequently humorous, sometimes obscure, and always revealing. Read as a whole, they speak volumes about the first month of law school.⁷

We deemed the contest a success and repeated it this past fall. The following are the best entries we have collected over two years:

- Books opened—Hubby is bachelor again!
 - Can't clear fog, so many details!
 - Finally beginning to understand—wait—no!
 - So this is law school, huh?
 - Trained by Socratic assault. Professors acquitted.⁸
 - Socrates died and went to Hamline.
 - Dear Mom, School's fine. Send highlighters.
 - Readings appeared clear; thinking Professor erred.
 - Has it only been one month?
4. Posting of Professor Tracy McGaugh, Touro Law Center, tracy.mcgaugh@gmail.com, to LRWPROF-L, a legal writing listserv (Sept. 3, 2008) (on file with author).
 5. Legal Writing teachers are always alert to new ways of teaching not only brevity, but theory of the case and storytelling, both amenable to six-word story assignments. *See, e.g.*, 14 *Legal Writing* (2008) (entire volume of *Legal Writing*, the journal of the Legal Writing Institute, devoted to applied storytelling in the legal context).
 6. A school t-shirt displaying the winning story, of course.
 7. It's tempting here to go on at some length about the high stress levels of law students, and how that problem is reflected in these stories. *See, e.g.*, Todd David Peterson and Elizabeth Waters Peterson, *Stemming the Tide of Law Students Depression: What Law Schools Need to Learn from the Science of Positive Psychology*, 9 *Yale J. of Healthy Pol'y L. & Ethics* 357 (2009); Nancy J. Soonpaa, *Stress in Law Students: A Comparative Study of First-Year, Second-Year, and Third-Year Students*, 36 *Conn. L. Rev.* 353 (2004); Lawrence S. Krieger, *Institutional Denial about the Dark Side of Law School, and Fresh Empirical Guidance for Constructively Breaking the Silence*, 52 *J. of Legal Educ.* 112 (2002). But I'll leave it at this: the stories were great reminders to our faculty about the pressures law students are experiencing as they adjust to the demands of law school.
 8. Winner, 2008.

- And I thought undergrad was hard!
- A new life! A good choice?
- Thick books. Heavy bag. Hurting shoulders.
- Scared 1Ls, stressed 2Ls, impatient 3Ls.
- Came smart. Stayed scared. Ended confused.
- I get it. No, I don't!
- Excuse me, I am having issues!
- Hold on, what is the issue?
- I didn't know I needed luggage!
- Socratic method—and other scary words.
- Briefs should be worn, not written.
- No way Scalia did this too!
- My wife should sue for damages.
- Sorry dear, dishes aren't my jurisdiction.
- I thought Learned Hand was fictitious.
- Lost: sanity. Last seen: before orientation.
- Studied battery all week. Mugged Friday.⁹
- I know the answer—it depends.
- Criminal Law with Thompson, classmates quiver.
- Am I negligently or recklessly procrastinating?
- The library should start charging rent.
- My backpack is Atlas's worst nightmare.
- Happy people don't study hard enough.
- The library is my new home.
- "It depends" doesn't work at home.
- Family chaos rules. Law school reigns.
- "What are you doing tonight?" "HOMEWORK!"
- Law jokes aren't funny at bars.
- Law jokes aren't funny on dates.
- Law jokes aren't funny at all.
- I accepted Hamline Law's offer. Oops.
- Deadline: One night; reading for two.
- Our marriage is a contract too!
- Finally something answerable in six words.
- Just who is this reasonable person?

9. Winner, 2009. The student was actually mugged the first week of classes.

- Intentional infliction/emotional distress. Professors guilty?
- Balance? Time management? Organization? Yeah right...
- Cold-called in class...I nearly died.
- Quitting is not an option. Period.
- Read. Brief. Discuss. Sleep. Press repeat.
- Amazed my head has not exploded.
- Incentives to sleep...more to brief.
- Talented at law and six word stories [sic].
- "Law school" shouldn't mean "lost cool."
- Clueless before. Slightly less clueless now.
- It will all be worth it.