

Kim Hensley Owens & Yongzhi Miao

## Six (Words) Is Enough: Memoirs for Assessment<sup>1</sup>

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### Brief Six-Word Memoir History & Spotlight Introduction

Six-word memoirs have a long and storied history in creative writing, and have moved well beyond the first such memoir—“[For sale: baby shoes, never worn](#)”—often, possibly apocryphally, attributed to Ernest Hemingway. While Hemingway may have written the first, it was Larry Smith who in 2006 coined the term “six-word memoir” (“[Six Words Gets to The Point](#)”). The genre has continued to captivate creative writers even as it has moved into other spaces. The robust website [sixwordmemoirs.com](#) invites submissions from anyone, categorizing them by topic and offering contests that are themselves six words, such as “Swimming in sixes: Your ‘swim’ story” (“Six Word Memoirs”). The form is also taught in K-12 classrooms, with Edutopia but one website that offers detailed lesson plans for [six-word memoir activities](#) in that context (“How to use 6-word memoirs”). Classroom applications for six-word memoirs have expanded to include higher education, too, and applications beyond the classroom have expanded as well.

Those other applications include universities and at least one academic journal. Rollins College, for example, asks students to describe their [semesters in six words](#), and offers automatic publication: “All entries will be posted to this online collection,” in addition to being “reviewed by a panel of readers” and

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<sup>1</sup> The six-word memoirs analyzed here were submitted with publication permission by former NAU graduate teaching assistants Dillan Adams, Hunter Blackwell, Laura Brady, Nicole Hylton, Kimberly Jarchow, Maria (Masha) Kostromitina, Yongzhi (Vito) Miao, Sheikh Md. Muniruzzaman, Cassie Noble, Ekaterina Sudina, Oguzhan Tekin, Syd Tigert, lia Vlasova, Katherine Yaw, and 13 others who preferred to remain anonymous. These six-word memoirs are also central to a chapter under review for an edited collection (Hensley Owens and Miao, “Instructor of Record. No One’s Assistant”).

“considered for special recognition and prizes” (Rollins). Rollins College’s memoir collection seems to be for publicity, recognition, and connection. A behind-the-scenes analysis of those collected memoirs is not publicly visible, but seems a possibility, as each of the pieces in this spotlight feature will demonstrate. This first, co-authored by a (now former) writing program administrator and a graduate student, analyzes six-word memoirs of graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) to assess their perceptions of their training and support. The second and third, both from authors at the same institution (Beth Leahy and Jenn Stewart), who collaborated on their IRB, write from the perspectives of writing center director and writing program administrator, respectively, working with copious sets of memoirs to assess aspects of their programs. Finally, the fourth, from another writing program administrator (Katherine Fredlund), explores how six-word memoirs can be used as one tool to help GTAs better identify and better manage the emotional facets of teaching and learning.

### **Learning from Six-Word Memoirs**

The journal *Composition Studies* invited academics to submit six-word memoirs about their mundane work circumstances, ultimately publishing a found poem collaboratively authored by dozens of scholars in the field (“Where We Are: My Mundane Professional Life”). Inspired in part by that publication, we collected six-word memoirs from the graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) in our writing program. We first used these six-word memoirs for a creative project similar to the “Where We Are” piece, which includes a found poem of our own (Hensley Owens and Miao). Realizing that this data has even more potential than we realized as we wrote that piece—as we suspect Rollins College may also discover, if they haven’t already—we conducted a more formal assessment of the six-word memoirs, which we describe here.

The “Where We Are” piece includes an introduction from the editors, which argues that “ordinary; mundane experiences of everyday life... can reveal organizational values; norms... and much more” (175).

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We take this argument seriously. In what follows, we examine the six-word memoirs we collected as an assessment project to learn more about the experiences of GTAs at Northern Arizona University (NAU).

### **Positioning and Institutional Context**

“We” are Kim and Vito. When we collected these memoirs, Kim was in her final year as the sole writing program administrator at NAU and Vito was a second-year PhD student in Applied Linguistics. The writing program at NAU teaches approximately 5000 undergraduate students a year, with 50-70 GTAs and 5-15 full-time faculty. At the time of this assessment, GTAs taught over 75% of NAU’s first-year composition classes.

NAU’s English Department GTAs are drawn from students across five different graduate programs, most of whom are in two-year MA programs: Creative Writing (MFA); Literature (MA); Rhetoric, Writing, and Digital Media Studies (MA); and Teaching English as a Second Language (MA). The writing program also hires GTAs from the English Department’s sole PhD program, Applied Linguistics. Typically, linguistics PhD students are assigned to teach linguistics classes or to work as research assistants after their first year or two as composition GTAs, so nearly all of the GTAs in the program teach composition for one to two years.

The different graduate programs attract students with wildly different preparation—many do not have an undergraduate background in English or writing. We should note, too, that the accrediting body for NAU is the [Higher Learning Commission](#) (HLC), which does not require GTAs to have any graduate credits in a discipline prior to teaching their own sections of a course. Our GTAs, then, begin teaching at the same time that they begin their graduate studies. Preparing each new cohort of 20-30 new GTAs to teach their own writing classes—even with a shared textbook and a standard curriculum—requires significant support and training. It makes sense, then, to assess that training and support in part by examining how GTAs experience it. GTAs’ teaching roles are critical for the university and for the students they teach.

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Previous scholar-teachers in composition studies have written about GTA preparation in dissertations and articles, examining, for example, GTAs' perspectives on their training (Muñoz, Myers); professionalization (Leverenz and Goodburn); and their training in contrast with K-12 teacher training (Tremmel). In other fields, scholars have examined GTAs' identities and shifting roles (Winstone and Moore) and their increasingly international backgrounds (Winter et al.). In common with studies such as those, we take GTA training and support seriously. In contrast with studies such as those, we work here with very short accounts, typically with little context. While what we can capture with six-word memoirs is not the same as what long-term observational studies, case studies, or detailed surveys can discover, the data nevertheless offer up a breadth of valuable, actionable, and innovative perspectives.

While assessment in university contexts tends to focus on a particular course, training, or intervention, we gathered memoirs from GTAs across various stages of their programs, including those just beginning their training as well as those who had completed one to four years as GTAs. We wanted to see how GTAs responded to their initial training, how they felt as they began to see themselves as teachers, as well as how they felt about their experience upon completing their GTAships. We see this kind of broad-capture assessment as a practice infused with an ethic of care (Gilligan), one which centers GTAs themselves.

### **Collection Process and Initial Theme Assessment**

Kim first collected six-word memoirs on a Google Form over the summer, inviting returning and recent GTAs ( $n = 53$ ) to share six-word memoirs, with the goal of submitting a chapter of them to an edited collection. Along with that request, Kim also asked if any GTAs would be interested in co-authoring the chapter. Happily, Vito volunteered. Kim collected more six-word memoirs from new GTAs during their pre-semester Orientation, and subsequently Vito led a collection of additional six-word memoirs several weeks into Kim's fall teaching practicum course. Across the three collection phases, we ended up with 73 six-word memoirs for our study.

To write our found poem for the chapter, we grouped the memoirs loosely by theme as well as cadence. Because we focused on theme, stanzas collected in the middle of the two-week orientation ended up together, for example in stanzas like this:

Extremely overwhelmed but learning a lot  
I am so sleepy but excited  
Daunting, exciting, explaining, understanding, relaxing, Zen  
Feeling excited and overwhelming [*sic*] at the same time  
(Hensley Owens and Miao)

Another stanza drew on memoirs collected across various phrases, and demonstrated the financial precarity of GTA life, as well as the humor and self-deprecation some GTA memoir authors showed:

Talking is hard. Money is scarce.  
Living off Ramen and PBJ, #Goals.  
Too much money; said no GTA  
(Hensley Owens and Miao)

This latter stanza offers a good example of a set of memoirs that seemed to be doing more than what our thematic assessment could demonstrate. We wondered if we could learn more by examining them again, in more detail.

### **Coding and Findings**

For this new piece, we ultimately decided to put the six-word memoirs into a spreadsheet and start over. We randomized the memoirs and then began to code them, first by topic and then by what we called “sentiment/tone”—what seemed to be the underlying emotional reality of each memoir. In retrospect, we could have used the emotion wheel Katie mentions in her piece (the fourth in this spotlight feature) to name these emotional realities, but we simply used the emotions that came to mind and made sense to each of us as we reviewed the memoirs. As we coded the 73 memoirs, revisiting the list over several sessions, we inductively agreed upon 18, which ranged from “Advice” to “Money” to “Confidence” to

“Time.” “Learning” topped the list, with 12 memoirs, followed by “Physical Situation” and “Roles,” each with eight. The next most common were “Balance,” with five, and four each of “Money,” “Contradictions,” and “Affirmation.” (See Figure 1)<sup>2</sup>

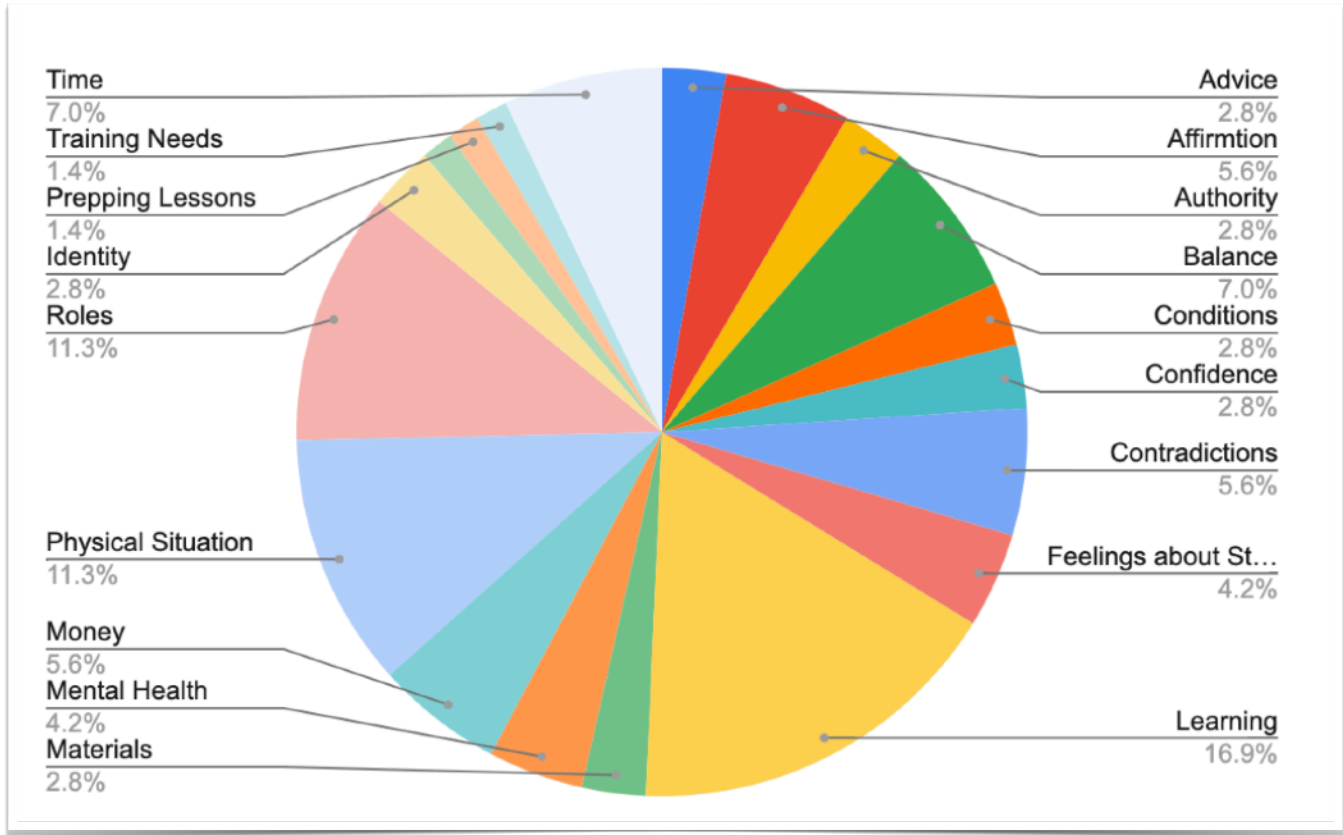


Figure 1: Memoirs Coded by Topic

The large number of “Learning” topics results from the batch of memoirs collected during NAU’s fall orientation; new GTAs shared memoirs like “Rewarding; challenging; and meaningful connections galore” and “It gave me confidence to teach.” In the “Balance” category, the memoir “Teaching is noble. Priorities are necessary” helps us see how a GTA both finds value in their role and recognizes that it could take

<sup>2</sup> The 4.2% “Feelings about st...” category is “Feelings about students”; the chart creation cut off that detail.

more time and energy than they have. Not bemoaning this situation, but accepting it, the GTA focuses on prioritizing where to focus their time and energy—skills all GTAs need.

While several of the topics demonstrated GTAs more or less happily engaged, several offered a more complex perspective. One, for example, felt that they were “In purgatory: full-time faculty or student?,” which we coded as the topic “Contradictions.” A handful made declarations of needs, such as “We need more classroom management guidance.” A representative memoir in the “Mental Health” topic, “Neverending grading upends my fragile sanity,” could also be categorized as being about workload, but we focused on the mental health component we saw as its core. From these topic-coded memoirs, we gain a fuller understanding of where supports were working and providing what’s needed, as well as where we can bolster the support for those who need something more/different.

When we coded a second time, focusing on the sentiment, or tone, of each memoir, a somewhat different picture emerged. For example, when we coded by topic, only three memoirs landed in the “Mental Health” category, but when we focused on sentiment, 20 of the memoirs landed in the “Worry/

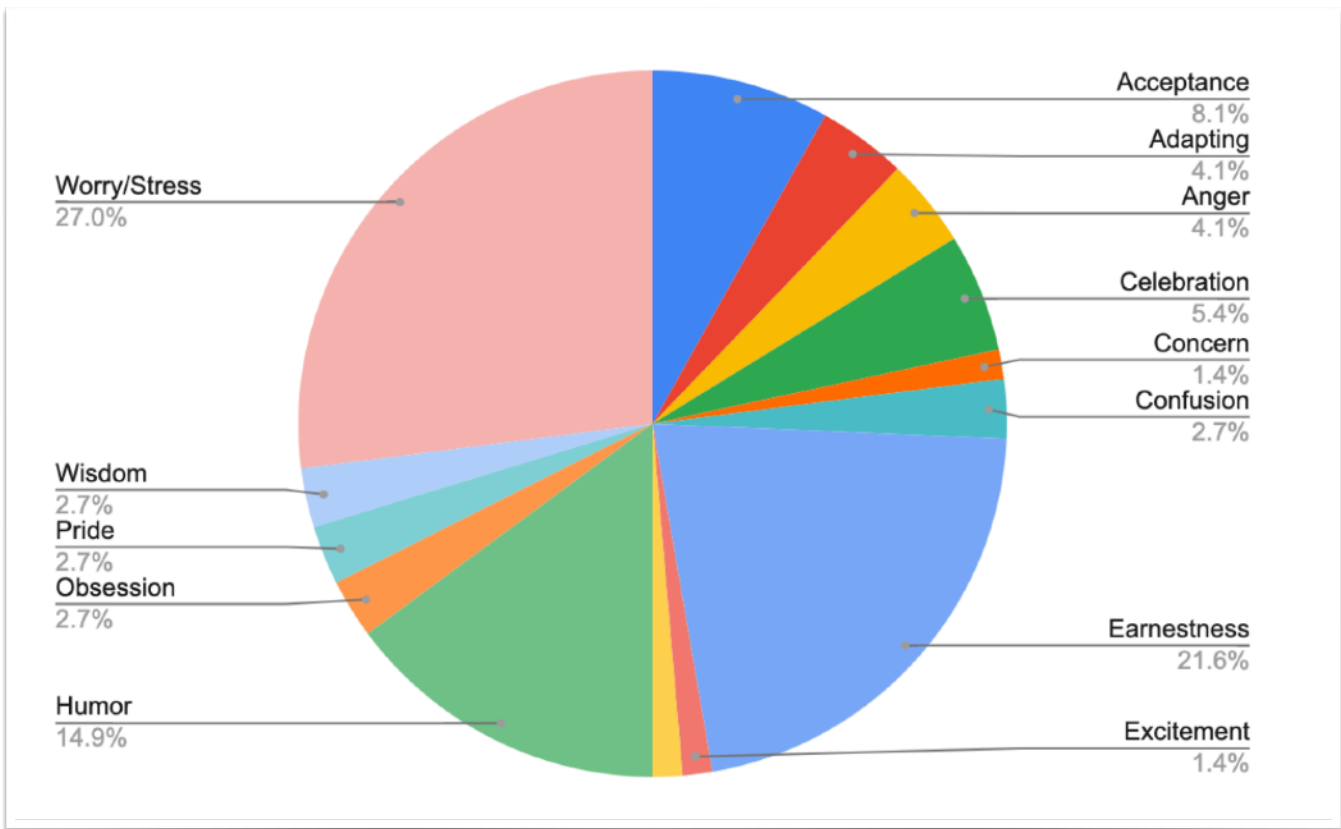


Figure 2: Memoirs Coded by “Sentiment/Tone”: Percentages

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Stress” category (see Figure 2), far outstripping any other category, which suggests that the mental health strain on GTAs is higher than what the original topic-based coding determined. This second round of coding, then, adds nuance to the initial round and allows for different kinds of details to emerge—details that can ultimately help those who are training and supervising GTAs to provide better-tailored support for their needs.

Our next largest category was “Humor,” at 14.9%. These memoirs were often our favorites, such as “2AM nights used to be sexier.” GTAs writing funny memoirs were often writing about multiple topics—this memoir, topically coded for “Time,” could also be about workload, for example, but the humorous tone suggests that the writer accepts this temporary fate. It is also the case that [humor can help relieve stress](#). Overall, these sentiment-focused categories suggested GTAs were working hard, but also overall feeling like they had been well trained and had support, as we saw in memoirs such as “you are enough, you are helped”; “It [orientation] equipped me to teach college”; and “Hungry for knowledge, left feeling full.” At the same time, the large number of Worry/ Stress outcomes in the Sentiment round of coding gave us pause.

In part because of our curiosity about that percentage, we subsequently worked on collapsing categories to get a broader-strokes picture of the overall positive, neutral, and negative emotions our coding system revealed (see Figure 3). While not all categories readily lent themselves to such rudimentary descriptors, we performed a bit of rough justice, determining that fleeting feelings of Confusion and Obsession are common to the GTA experience, and therefore placed those few memoirs, such as “I think about teaching all day,” in the Neutral category; we recognize that others might make different decisions. Similarly, while we agreed that sentiments like Pride and Excitement landed easily in the Positive emotion category, some might interpret “Humor” as a negative emotion: we felt, ultimately, that those using humor to describe their experiences were focusing on elements of fun or acceptance, and chose the positive category.



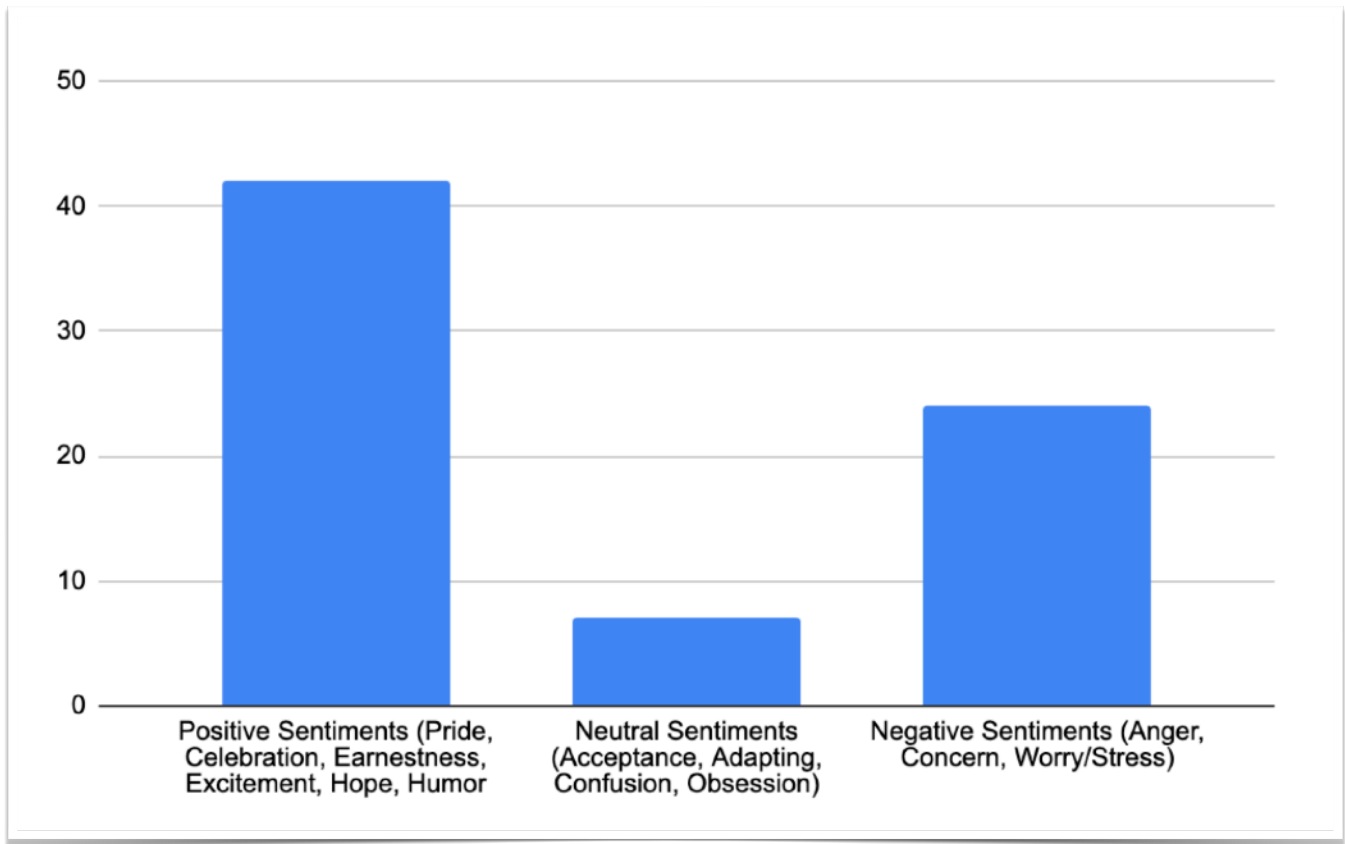


Figure 3: Memoirs Coded by Sentiment and Collapsed into Broader Emotion Categories

In contrast, sentiments like anger and worry/stress were relatively easy to place immediately into the negative category. With this broader categorization, we were able to see that about a third of the memoirs were airing negative sentiments, while a strong majority offered positive ones. Brain research tells us that humans tend to magnify negative experiences and memories and downplay positive experiences and memories (Pilat and Krastev), which makes these largely positive findings quite promising, overall, while leaving room for exploring ways to improve struggling GTAs' experiences—in part by working to reduce their stressors, but also by explicitly trying to help them build skills such as resilience and time management.

**Takeaways**

Six-word memoirs can only offer partial, imperfect portraits of GTAs' lives and preceptions, but these portraits provide data that can help administrators, teachers, and others in supporting roles better understand how prepared GTAs feel and the issues they face. These short writings provide windows into their physical situations and mental health statuses, both of which are important to have a sense of—not only for the individual GTAs' sakes, but because offering support or intervention early, before a situation becomes untenable, might keep such teachers in their roles. Such actions can spare students, GTAs, and administrators alike the severe disruptions that come with a GTA resigning or needing to be removed from a teaching role. Six-word memoirs are in no way a panacea for challenges writing administrators and GTAs might face together, or with one another, but they can do a kind of assessment work few other methods can, at a human level.

Collecting six-word memoirs is pretty fun, and it offers an opportunity to hear from GTAs without creating much extra work for anyone. It's an idea to think about as a way to quickly take the pulse of a group and have some data to help know where/how to offer support, as the three other contributors to this Spotlight Feature will demonstrate in more detail from each of their own institutional contexts below.

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