As an educator, I love it when old sayings turn out to be true. This can offer powerful reinforcement in teaching key concepts. For example, “A picture is worth a thousand words”? Yep. Proved by science thanks to the foundation built by Alan Pavio and his dual-coding theory. How about “It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it”? Also true, proved by Albert Mehrabian’s lifelong work on how we’re perceived—our vocal and nonverbal delivery overpowers the words we so carefully choose.

Speaking of carefully choosing words, one of my favorite stories about being clear and concise comes from Ernest Hemingway. As the story goes, the famously concise author was asked if he could write a story in just six words—to which Papa replied: “For sale: Baby shoes, never worn.” Ooooooh. Clear, concise, and dramatic. This story has made the rounds and been used in countless classroom and workplace activities. The problem? There’s no evidence that this encounter and six-word response from Hemingway happened at all.

As I leaned back, mouth agape after discovering this depressing news deep down an internet rabbit hole, part of me was already thinking, “But … I can still use the story as a teaching tool, right?” Because this is a good one! That’s because, as communicators, we seem to need almost-constant reminders that less is more.

In fact, less is more than just more. Less is also attention-getting. And in today’s crowded, distracted digital world, attention is in short supply. Twitter co-founder Biz Stone famously quipped, “Constraints inspire creativity.” (Twitter itself followed this advice with their signature 140-character limit until, ironically, they increased it to 280.) A self-imposed constraint can inspire efficiency in your word choice, in many cases helping you say more with less.
That's why you should work on your own six-word story. This handy set of words can serve as an elevator pitch, the first line of a bio, or a North Star you use to focus the direction of your work. It also helps to have a six-word story for your brand. This can be a powerful tool for aligning your team and the community of stakeholders you serve.

So, how do you tell your story in just six words?

**Your Six-Word Story**

I'm going to get to my own six-word story by way of a slightly longer-than-six-word backstory.

For most of my adult life, my work has focused on branding and digital marketing. However, the boat was rocked in 2017 when I was asked by the folks at the Tippie College of Business to take on a new challenge of teaching communication. This new direction excited me and I jumped in. But there was one problem: my story of ‘branding and digital marketing’ no longer worked. This is a problem—especially when you're in the business of communication and personal branding.

However, once I remembered the importance story plays in both communication and marketing I found my six words: I help people tell their stories. When I'm allowed more than six words I say: I help organizations and individuals tell their stories. While this provides some clarity, it’s not required. We're all people.

Start by asking yourself: what do you do and for whom? From there, it's a matter of selecting the most concise set of words that paint the most vivid picture.

**Your Brand’s Six-Word Story**

If the question what you do and for whom sounds familiar, it’s because this is the prompt I use to outline the concept of a brand promise in my books and work. As such, this prompt can help you define your organization’s six-word story as well. For example, Apple has long represented the intersection of arts and technology. (Sadly, it’s just a coincidence that Steve Jobs’s vision was just six words in length.)

When thinking about your organization’s six-word story, don’t worry about this serving as your official "slogan" or “mission statement.” I put these phrases in quotes because sometimes the baggage they bring along can weigh us down and do more harm than good. That's because the goal of your brand's six-word story shouldn't be about being clever or catchy. A solid six-word brand story is a tool you can use to align your brand’s community—both internally and externally—to what you hold most dear.

At the end of the day, the number six isn’t magical. It’s a simple-to-remember short limit designed to help you stand out by subtracting. Less is more. And when you say it with less, both you and your brand have a better chance of standing out.

While Hemingway never wrote a story (that we know of) in just six words, he lived this philosophy in his work. “Good writers are those who keep the language efficient,” the poet Ezra Pound actually said (I looked it up to be sure). “That is to say, keep it accurate, keep it clear.” Accurate and clear. Clear and concise. Effective and efficient.

What is your six-word story?

Yes, that call to action was just six words. The title of this article? Six words. And while the article itself isn’t six or even six-hundred words, I aimed for something shorter than usual. You get the idea.

Say it in six. Or less.