



Session 1 – Reading Comprehension and Writing Pecos Bill

Vocabulary: Please review these words before you read the passage. These words will help you comprehend the tall tale passage.

tale – a story, usually a made-up one

humorous – funny

frontier – the area beyond where most people live

exaggerate (*ex-ag-ger-ate*) – to tell of something as greater as or larger than it really is

tumbling – falling suddenly or helplessly

coyote – a small, wolf-like animal

howling – the long, wailing cry of a wolf or dog

lasso – a rope with a sliding loop at one end that is used to catch cattle

cyclone – a storm with strong winds that circle and carry a lot of rain

washed-out – tired

Skill to use while reading: **Fantasy and reality**

Today you will be reading a **tall tale**. A tall tale is a humorous story about a character that can do amazing things a normal person can't do. They have unbelievable strength and have very unusual adventures. These tales began on the American frontier in the 1800s and have been passed down through storytellers. When you read a tall tale, you will read about things that could happen in real life (**realistic** or **reality**) as well as many things that are exaggerated and could never happen in real life (**fantastic** or **fantasy**).

As you read the tall tale, think about what events are realistic and could happen and which events are fantasy and could not happen in real life.

Perhaps you have heard stories of the giant lumberjack, Paul Bunyan, and his blue ox, Babe. Their stories were told in the logging camps of the American frontier. Well, cowboys also had their tall tale hero. He was called Pecos Bill. He traveled the American Southwest, using his superhuman strength to help tame the Wild West!



Pecos Bill

The story of Pecos Bill started when he was just a baby living with his family in East Texas. The family liked living far away from other people, so when neighbors moved in about 50 miles away, the family decided to move further west. They packed up their very large family (it's said that Bill had fifteen or sixteen brothers and sisters) and started heading out. Bill was so young; he rode in the back of the wagon. The trip was going fine until they crossed the Pecos River in Texas. There was a big bump and Bill went tumbling out of the wagon!

Bill was swept down the river and saved by a mother coyote. The coyote adopted Bill and raised him as one of her own cubs. That's why Bill grew up thinking he was a coyote! He was real good at howling at the moon!

In time, Bill grew up and met up with some cowboys. That's when he learned he was a man, not a coyote. So he joined up with the cowboys. That's how we learned about his superhuman strength. He had many adventures in the Southwest. They say he invented the rope lasso and rode a mountain lion. He also tamed the wildest, fastest, most beautiful horse in the world!

One story tells how he wanted to start a ranch of his own. Since most of the land in Texas already belonged to someone else, Bill went further west. That took him to New Mexico. Now he liked what he saw and decided to stake out the whole state for his ranch and fenced in Arizona for a calf pasture!

Well, it was known that Bill was so strong that he could ride just about anything. So it was no surprise that when a big cyclone came roaring down out of Kansas, Bill decided to ride it. It was a mighty big cyclone, but Bill jumped right on its back. The cyclone whipped this way and that, trying to throw Bill off. But Bill stayed on. It knocked down forests and mountains as it tore through Texas.

The cyclone headed further west toward California, trying to shake Bill off. It worked so hard to get rid of Bill that it just rained itself out. It made so much water that it carved out the Grand Canyon! That's how the Grand Canyon was made!

The cyclone was just about washed-out by the time it reached California. There wasn't much of a storm left. That's where Bill finally fell off. They say he hit the ground so hard it sank below sea level. Folks today call that spot Death Valley.

Bill went on to have many more adventures, each bigger and more unbelievable than the one before. There are lots of stories about Pecos Bill, first told around the campfires of the American West. They have been passed down to us today.



Check your understanding of the tall tale, *Pecos Bill*. You may look back at the story. Answer in complete sentences.

1. Explain how the main character, Bill, got his name.

2. Give an example of **exaggeration** from the third paragraph.

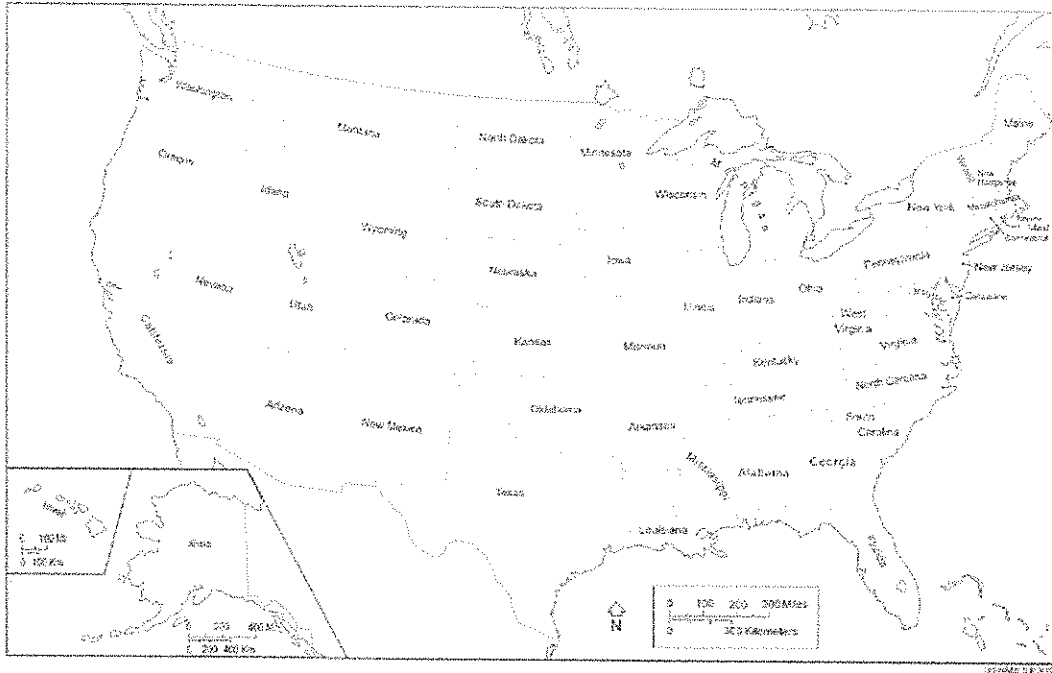
3. Tall tales have events that could happen (reality) and events that could not happen (fantasy) in real life. Fill in the chart below with examples from the story, *Pecos Bill*.

Fantasy	Reality



4. The story about Bill riding the cyclone takes place in the United States. Using the information from the story, mark an X on the map below where the cyclone started. Then trace with a line the path Bill rode it across the United States.

The United States (with state names)



Courtesy: Arizona Geographic Alliance
Department of Geography, Arizona State University
Susan Washburn

Map courtesy of the Arizona Geographic Alliance

5. Explain how the Grand Canyon was formed in the tall tale.



Writing Activity

Now that you have read a tall tale, you will write one of your own. Over the next five sessions, you will work through the steps of writing a tall tale. You will focus on the writing element **Voice**.

Step 1: Prewriting – Start planning your tall tale. It must have all of the characteristics of a tall tale.

1. A main character (a hero or a heroine) who has exaggerated (bigger than life) qualities.
2. A setting. Where will your hero/heroine live?
3. A problem. What problem will your hero/heroine solve with his or her exaggerated qualities?

Use the chart on the next page to help you organize your ideas for writing a tall tale.

In the next session, you will put your ideas together to write a draft of your tall tale.



Write your main character's name in the center box. Write details about them in the bubbles connected to it. Add details about the setting, the problem, and your character's exaggerated qualities.

