

Exploring Tall Tales

- Recommended children's books
- Writing activities
- Drawing and other creative activities
- Ideas for sharing children's stories and writing
- Writing organizers and templates





Tall Tales

[Tall tales](#) are stories that may sound true ... but feature lots of [exaggeration](#) and action that is hard to believe! Popular tall tale characters from American folklore include Johnny Appleseed, Pecos Bill, Annie Oakley, Paul Bunyan, Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind Crockett, Davy Crockett, and John Henry.

Tall tales may have their origins around frontier campfires in the 1800s. Perhaps they began as "bragging contests" among the tough pioneers who were exploring the Wild West. And the stories kept getting wilder and wilder as they were retold.

A tall tale is about a larger-than-life hero or heroine with superhuman abilities. Tall tales are often funny and outrageous, where everyday problems are solved in humorous ways. The stories feature exaggerated details to tell about the main character's life and amazing feats of bravery and strength.



Here's how one story describes Paul Bunyan's birth:

It took five giant storks to deliver Paul to his parents. His first bed was a lumber wagon pulled by a team of horses. As a newborn, Paul Bunyan could yell so loud he scared all the fish out of the rivers and streams. His parents had to milk two dozen cows morning and night to keep his milk bottle full, and his mother had to feed him 10 barrels of porridge every two hours to keep his stomach from rumbling and knocking the house down.

Some tall tales are completely make-believe while others are exaggerations of real people and events. For example, some historians say that there was a real John Henry, the African American "steel-driving man" who helped build the railroads after the Civil War. John Chapman, who traveled on foot across the Midwest planting apple trees, became the tall tale hero Johnny Appleseed.

Discover more about tall tales at Start with a Book, by browsing our booklists, kid-friendly websites, apps, and podcasts: [Folktales, Fairy Tales and Myths](#).



Tall Tales

Get kids thinking

- Have you ever read a story that was too crazy to be true? Chances are it could be a tall tale!
- Ask kids if they've ever heard a tall tale. Are there any bigger-than-life characters they can think of? Paul Bunyan? John Henry?
- Read some tall tales together. See a selected list of books on the next page, or visit [Start with a Book: Folktales, Fairy Tales and Myths](#) for more recommended books.
- Talk about the characteristics of tall tales — especially [exaggeration](#) (also called [hyperbole](#)) and humor.
- Talk about the beginning, middle, and end of the tall tales you read together.



Writing activity

For this activity, kids will write an original tall tale about someone in their family or a close family friend.

Individual: each child chooses a family member or family friend and works independently.

Small groups: Siblings can work collaboratively on their family tall tale.

Supplies

- Pencils, pens, and art supplies: colored pencils, markers, crayons
- Drawing paper or construction paper: 8-1/2 x 11 or larger (2 sheets per child)
- Construction paper or cardboard, felt, yarn, and other decorative materials
- Scotch tape, scissors, school glue
- Tall Tale brainstorming worksheet (included in packet)
- Tall Tale sentence frames worksheet (optional, included in packet)



Tall Tales

Selected Children's Books



- **American Tall Tales** by Mary Pope Osborne, illustrations by Michael McCurdy
- **Cut from the Same Cloth: American Women of Myth, Legend and Tall Tale** by Robert San Souci
- **Davy Crockett Saves the World** by Rosalyn Schanzer
- **Dust Devil** by Anne Isaacs, illustrated by Paul O. Zelinsky
- **Fin M'Coull: The Giant of Knockmany Hill** by Tomie dePaola
- **John Henry** by Julius Lester, illustrated by Jerry Pinkney
- **John Henry: An American Legend** by Ezra Jack Keats
- **Kissimmee Pete and the Hurricane** by Jan Day, illustrated by Janeen Mason
- **Lies and Other Tall Tales** by Zora Neale Hurston, illustrated by Christopher Myers
- **Master Man: A Tall Tale from Nigeria** by Aaron Shepard, illustrated by David Wisniewski
- **Mountain Men: True Grit and Tall Tales** by Andrew Glass
- **Paul Bunyan** by Steven Kellogg
- **Pecos Bill** by Steven Kellogg
- **Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind Crockett** by Steven Kellogg
- **Seed by Seed: The Legend and Legacy of John "Appleseed" Chapman** by Esme Raji Codell
- **Swamp Angel** by Anne Isaacs, illustrated by Paul O. Zelinsky



Tall Tales

Selected Children's Books

Is your public library closed? See if your public library offers [OverDrive](#) where you can borrow and read free ebooks, audiobooks, and magazines on your phone or tablet. All you need is your library card to get access (and check out their [Libby app](#) for Android or iOS phones or tablets).

There are also a number of online services that offer high-quality audiobooks and ebooks: [Audible for Kids](#), [Tales2Go](#), and [Epic!](#)

Here are some ways to explore myths and legends online:

- [Tall Tales](#): texts of well-known and not-so-well-known stories (American Folklore)
- [Tall Tales Collection](#): illustrated digital book (Epic!)
- [Famous Tall Tales](#): animated videos (Little Cozy Nook)



Tall Tales

Let's get started

Ask kids to think about which family member they each want to write a funny “superhero” kind of story about. Ask: Do you have an uncle who loves to tell stories about his great adventures as a young man? Or a grandmother who really does seem to have superpowers?

Remind the kids that every tall tale has action and a problem (big or little) that needs to be solved. *What problem does your tall tale character have?*

Show the kids how to use the [Tale Tale brainstorming worksheet](#) to jot down their thoughts about the characters, [setting](#) (time and place where the tale happens), the problem or [obstacle](#) that's in the way, and how the problem is solved.

Don't forget to include lots of exagerrated details and funny stuff in that last column — that's an important part of every tall tale! Adults may want to model how to use the brainstorming worksheet with an example of their own family member.

With younger kids, you can guide them in using our [Tall Tale sentence frames worksheet](#) to write out a simple story, and skip the brainstorming, draft, and revision stages. Younger kids who aren't yet writing can dictate their stories to an adult.

Next, it's time to write the tall tale. Tell the kids to use their brainstorming ideas to write a draft on a new sheet of plain paper. Suggest that they read their stories out loud and see if they want to make any changes ([revisions](#)) before carefully writing out a final version on a new sheet of paper.

Option: We've provided a set of decorative templates that kids can use for the final versions of their tall tales. They are included at the end of this packet.

Remind the kids to use [descriptive words](#) and [exaggeration](#) to bring their story to life. For example, instead of, "My aunt had a really big frying pan ..." one could say "My aunt had an enormous frying pan, wider than the Mississippi River ..."

Each child should give their tall tale a descriptive title. Kids can also include an original drawing if they like.



Tall Tales

Sharing our work

Once the tall tales are finished, gather everyone together in a circle to read the stories out loud. Kids can choose to memorize their stories and present them without notes — in keeping with the oral storytelling tradition. Kids can be as dramatic as they like in sharing their tall tales.

Tell kids to share their tall tale with family and friends. They can invite listeners by asking, *"Have you ever heard about the adventures of [insert character name]?"*

Try this!

Perform It: Have kids make a simple prop out of paper, cardboard, or other found materials that will help dramatize their tall tales when read out loud.

Record It: Help kids to record their tall tales on a smart phone (audio or video) and share with their extended families.

Tall Tale Parade: Kids could also pick their favorite Tall Tale character from one of the books you've read together and make a costume with props from everyday materials. If you have a big enough group, put on a parade or "convention" where the characters get together and share their stories orally.





Brainstorming! My Tall Tale

Exaggerations & funny stuff

Character

Who is the hero or heroine?

What special characteristics does he or she have?

Setting

Where and when does your tall tale take place?

What does the place look like?

Plot

What problem does your hero or heroine need to solve?

What obstacles need to be overcome?

How does your character solve the problem and overcome the obstacles?

What adventures happen along the way?

Story Frame

My Tall Tale

To get started: think about the name of your hero and a second character who has a problem that needs to be solved. Who are your two characters? What problem does your hero need to solve?

_____ was the _____ man/woman in
(name of hero) (superlative adjective, such as fastest, smartest, wiliest ...)

the state of _____. Everyone for _____ miles around
(state's name) (number of miles)

knew _____ and loved to tell and retell stories of his/her amazing feats.
(hero's name)

Now one day _____ went to visit _____.
(hero's name) (2nd character's name)

_____ had been having big problems with
(2nd character's name)

(explain the 2nd character's problem)

_____ explained his/her problem. And that was all it took for
(2nd character's name)

_____ to spring into action!
(hero's name)

Story Frame

My Tall Tale

Right away,

(Describe how your hero solved the 2nd character's problem)

_____ problem was solved, and the folks in _____
(2nd character's name) (state)

now had a new tale to tell about _____!
(hero's name)

My Tall Tale

