

Writing the West

By Duke Pennell

**A Western story is just like any other story
except for one thing:
it takes place in the West,
and that makes it unique.**

Here are some things you'll want to consider when writing *your* Western.

This is in the format of the journalist's "5 Ws and H":
Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How.

If you have any questions, please put them in a comment or email Editor@FrontierTales.com.

I. Who

- A. The protagonist.** This one is simple. What's our hero or heroine's name?
- B. The antagonist.** Another simple one. Who's the bad guy?
- C. Supporting characters.** Are there any other people we should know about? If they are important enough to focus on, then give them each a name or other identifier.
- D. Specifics.** Each character has a variety of ways to be distinguished from the other characters. Some of these are:
 - 1. Name.** We've already hit on this, but it's important enough to mention again.
 - 2. Sex.** Is the character male or female? Inquiring minds want to know!
 - 3. Ethnicity.** German? Irish? American Indian (Apache, Arapaho, Comanche, etc.)? Each group has common traits that set them apart from other groups, and that can be very useful to you.
 - 4. Age.** Aside from physical appearance, there are certain expectations of each age group. Youth can be expected to be inexperienced while older folks are supposed to be wiser.
 - 5. Education.** This isn't just about school, although schooling certainly applies. It's also about training. A prospector might have been schooled at a university, but he might also have simply learned from conversations with others how to tell a gold nugget from a chunk of iron pyrite (fool's gold).
 - 6. Occupation.** Butcher, baker, or candlestick maker. Everybody has to do something to keep body and soul together. We can't all live the luxurious lifestyle of the cowboy. =
 - 7. Physical condition.** Tall, short, skinny, fat, weak, strong? Missing any fingers or toes? Missing any limbs? Bald, full head of hair, long hair, short hair? What makes the character different than the other characters? If some characters are members of the same family, is there anything that makes them look like it?
 - 8. Mental condition.** Is your character subject to wild emotional swings? Or is he like the old man down the street who was even-tempered: mad all the time? Is the character mentally stable or is he truly insane? Most of us probably fall somewhere on the spectrum between those two extremes; so do your characters.
 - 9. Habits.** We've all got them. Take two gunfighters. One is careless and loads all six

chambers of his pistol. The other is cautious and only loads five, leaving the hammer down over the empty chamber. The first gunfighter drops his pistol, it hits on the hammer and fires accidentally, killing the gunfighter. The second gunfighter is ambushed by six Apaches. He's able to kill five of the attackers but, with all five bullets gone, the sixth Apache kills the gunfighter. Swap the two gunfighters and the dropped gun lands on an empty chamber while the other gun, holding all six shots, kills all the Apaches. Most of the time habits don't matter but sometimes they can be the difference between life and death. Where it matters, show us your character's good and bad habits.

10. Special talent. Everyone has something they're better at than most anyone. If your character has exceptional hand-eye coordination and spent his spare time practicing how to draw a gun, that native talent (the hand-eye coordination) might be used to save his life when it's needed.

11. Background/History. Nature vs. nurture. The physical and mental aspects of the character have a huge amount to do with how that character acts. That's the nature side. But his background, his life experiences up to this point, that's also in play. That's the nurturing he received, whether it was good or bad, and it also helped shape him. Did the other kids abuse him or did they dote on him? As a result, does he now distrust strangers, or is he as friendly as a puppy?

12. Significant other(s). This category covers lots of ground, and we'll cover the highlights.

a. Family. The obvious first influencer. Did his father smother him with affection? Did his mother beat him? Were his brothers jealous of him? Did his sisters protect him?

b. Spouse. If married now or previously, did the spouse support him? Did she run him down? Did she cheat on him? Was it a marriage of convenience, a business-like arrangement, an affair of passion, the love of his life?

c. Business partner. This could be anything from co-owners of the bank, co-owners of a ranch, or even just two cowboys who work together. Is their relationship one of mutual respect or are they forced to work together? Are they supportive of each other or do they actively try to sabotage the other?

d. Friends. Does your character have any? How many? How close are they? Or is your character a loner, despising and despised by others?

e. Neighbors. Are the neighbors nearby or far? Are they supportive of your character, hoping he does well—or would they rather see him dropped in a well?

f. Rivals. Not to be confused with enemies, a rival can simply be someone who wants the same thing your character wants. They may be good friends and after the same girl. Then again, they may not even know each other.

g. Enemies. An enemy can be your character's worst nightmare. An enemy could also be a blessing for your character. An enemy can drive your character to up his game, to become more than he ever wanted to be ... simply to stay alive. A good enemy can be hard to find.

II. What

A. The beginning situation. Here's where you set the stage. You do that by showing us what's going on. Maybe your opening scene shows a lot of people watching a rodeo. Or maybe it's inside a saloon, with a card game going on.

B. The change. If the opening scene was the rodeo, maybe the change is when Indians raid the town while the rodeo has most of the townfolk distracted. If the opening scene was at the card game, maybe the change is when someone bursts through the door and yells, “They struck gold!” Whatever it is, this is when the story really begins.

C. The desired situation. What is the hero’s goal? If we started with the rodeo, and the Indians have raided the town, maybe Our Hero has to track them down and rescue the girl who was kidnapped (*Searchers*, anyone?). If it was at the card game and the guy yelled, “Gold!” maybe Our Hero (who, as it turns out, was in the card game in a last-ditch effort to win enough money to pay off the family farm before the bank can foreclose on it) dashes off to the Klondike to make his fortune (*North to Alaska*, anyone?).

III. When

A. What year? It’s your story, and you get to choose, but be sure you know about the time you set the story in.

1. What technology is available? Don’t have the story occurring in 1860 and have Our Hero armed with a gun that wasn’t invented until 1872. You’ll make readers mad. The internet is a fine resource ... use it to be sure whatever you put in the story existed at the time of the story.

2. What are the clothing fashions? Don’t have the bad guy dressed in a leisure suit. We know leisure suits are the preferred outfit of any self-respecting lounge lizard, but they weren’t around in the 1800s. Again, if you haven’t done your research, now’s the time to start.

3. What are the customs of the day? Do you have Our Heroine sitting in the bar, sipping a glass of wine? If Our Heroine is a “lady” and not a “soiled dove,” would she be in a bar? If you don’t know, who’s your friend? Research, that’s who.

B. What time of year? What season? Spring, summer, fall? What month? January or July? What day? We (the reader) may not need to know but you, the author, certainly should.

C. The weather? Influenced by the time of year, but is it a hot summer or unseasonably cool? Is it a frigid winter or a mild one? Are there storms, hurricanes, tornadoes? These can all play a part in your story.

IV. Where

A. The geography. In what area of the country does the story take place? What state?

B. The topography. Let’s say your story takes place in Colorado. But is it in the east, where the land is really flat? Or is it in the west, where all the mountains live?

C. The neighborhood. Now we’re getting to the scene of the story. If Our Hero is in the mountains, is he in a valley, on a peak, or somewhere in between? What would he see if he looked around? Bear in mind that vegetation changes from location to location, as does wildlife and weather. What if you don’t know? Who’s your friend? Research!

V. Why

A. What is each character’s motivation? When the Indians took the girl and Our Hero went after them and her, why did he do it? In *Searchers*, John Wayne was driven by hatred of the “other,” what he took as barbarians. He was insulted that they had taken the girl and felt honor-bound to do all in his power to rescue her. His motivation drove a lot of drama in unexpected places, which made the story memorable ... something that every author should

strive for.

VI. How

A. How did the change in situation come about? When the Indians raided the town, we know they kidnapped the girl. But what was she doing when they arrived? What made them notice her? How did they get hold of her? Did she struggle? Was anyone else around? Did anyone get injured? *What happened?*

(Oh, and don't tell us ... show us.)

This is a reasonable list of factors you might want to include in your story. It's not complete (I'm sure you can think up more on your own) but they will give you a starting point. You probably won't want to put each and every one of them in your story but, whether you include them or not, you should know them. An author should always know all about the story, every detail of it, whether the reader sees it or not.

Again, if you have any questions, you can put them in a comment below or email Editor@FrontierTales.com.

Happy writing!