



Using Timelines to Teach History

Teachers of various disciplines have discovered the value of using timelines to help put history and literature curriculum in perspective. Timelines provide a visual tool for studying a period of time—a day, a year, or an individual's life—or for examining a topic across centuries. Researching and creating timelines appeals to students' visual, mathematic, and kinesthetic intelligences.¹ They can be utilized to encourage students to make interdisciplinary connections between events occurring in a single historical era through the lens of music, science, or literature. Timelines, therefore, are a highly valuable when studying the Holocaust within 20th century history. One of the core pedagogical principles of Echoes & Reflections is the belief that the Holocaust was not inevitable. Using a timeline can underscore this idea, and help students grasp that the Holocaust was a progression of events, decisions, actions, and inactions, not a singular inescapable fate.

Timelines can also propel students towards metacognitive thinking about how we interpret and construct time and situate historical events. When should a timeline begin? What should we include in a timeline? What is the purpose of charting linear and causal occurrences?² Asking students to question and consider the constructs of history can be beneficial for higher order thinking and help students understand both the creation of a historical canon, and the events pivotal in telling history or understanding context for a reading.

Part of the challenge of learning with timelines, however, can be that same linear and impersonal connection to history. We teach history and English to help students find their humanity. By co-locating primary sources like testimonies, photos, and poems alongside important historical events, our hope is that students will build a personal connection and understand the impact that any one decision can have on individuals, societies, and even a nation.

Timeline-based assignments can aid in a variety of learning goals, including:

- **Develop historical context.** Students sometimes have trouble seeing a particular text or event as part of a broader human story. By visually locating events that occurred concurrently in time, timelines can help students understand individual events and people in relationship with others.
- **Analyze on a micro and macro- scale.** Students sometimes view historical events on only one scale. In using a timeline, students can identify and analyze how seemingly isolated events relate to larger scale history or other micro-macro dynamics, such as local or regional histories in the context of broader national or worldwide events.³
- **Understand the development of historiography.** Students can be unfamiliar with interpreting or understanding academic disciplines. By using a timeline to plot the development of history students can discover how scholars' understanding changes over time.
- **Focus on details.** Large trends have little details that need to be examined. Use timelines to help your students discover how small details can relate to the larger picture.
- **Develop arguments.** Have students select several items from their timeline to develop an argument about change and/or continuity over time. Work on developing skills that involve incorporating and synthesizing information and presenting arguments.



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Used intentionally, timelines enable students to make meaning of history while at the same providing a clear and linear outline to events. When we give students the tools to examine how individual decisions influence the arc of history, we empower them to explore the humanity of each narrative, and how all of us are part of a broader human story.

¹ Chapman, Tim. "Teaching Chronology through Timelines." The Effects of Poverty on Children on JSTOR. October 01, 1993. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43257957?read-now=1&logged-in=true&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

² "Create Active Learning with Timelines." Quality Matters. Accessed August 10, 2018. <https://www.qualitymatters.org/qa-resources/resource-center/articles-resources/timeline-creation-tools>.

³ "Using Timelines in the Classroom: Helping Students Make Connections." Learning Bird. April 08, 2016. Accessed August 10, 2018. <https://blog.learningbird.com/using-timelines-in-the-classroom-helping-students-make-connections/>.