



Using Timelines to Teach History

The questions of how and why events occurred takes place over time. Timelines can serve as a visual tool for studying periods of history—a day, a year, an era—and help students grasp the nuances of causality and continuity¹. Many teachers discuss the struggle to help students care about chronology. A deliberate plotting of events organized around a common theme can spur them into realizing not only how history happened, but how to construct meaning and examine the human experience throughout an historical era.

Using timelines in the classroom can also encourage students to see interdisciplinary connections between events occurring in a single period by including the lenses of music, art, science, or literature. It is, in fact, not accidental that a certain poem might be recognized as tragic or triumphant depending on its year of its publication. A painting like Picasso's *Guernica* speaks to the tragedy of war by taking into consideration the time of its creation. A record of an event or era can help students have more “ah-ha” moments, and help bring history to life by mapping events onto a cohesive temporal narrative. In this way, timelines can be a highly valuable resource 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, any of which might have happened differently if different choices were made.

Timelines can also propel students towards metacognition. How do 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.

We teach History and English to help students appreciate their humanity. For this reason, the Echoes & Reflections timeline places 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:

- **Developing 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.
- **Analyzing 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
- **Focusing on details:** Large trends have little details that need to be examined. Use timelines to help your students discover how small events can be details that help magnify and relate to the larger picture.
- **Developing 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.



- Ask students to chart their family's history dating back to 1900. Have them develop a timeline themselves for that "journey". Then have them do a comparing of that timeline with the Timeline of the Holocaust to create a relation between it and something that is about them and their family's life.

Used intentionally, timelines enable students to make sense of history by 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. Timelines are a tool to aid in that ambitious goal.

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.

¹ "Create Active Learning with Timelines." *Quality Matters*. Accessed August 10, 2018. <https://www.qualitymatters.org/qa-resources/resource-center/articles-resources/timeline-creation-tools>.

¹ "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/>.