



USING TIMELINES

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When it comes to keeping track of what happened to whom, when, and where in history, timelines are infinitely popular with students – so much so that many college-level textbooks now include basic timelines as a matter of course. Timelines can help students identify cause and effect, and contextualize social and political change – but they can also help students develop critical historical thinking skills if used as active, rather than passive, classroom tools. Here are two classroom exercises that make use of timelines to help students weigh the significance of different historical events.

Activity 1 ✧ Transforming the Textbook

One of the skills it's important for students to develop as historical thinkers is the ability to weigh and prioritize information. My students often come to class with the previous night's assigned reading almost completely highlighted in neon marker – for introductory-level students, in particular, it's not always clear which are the most significant events or changes that a textbook chapter covers. To tackle this:

- a) Divide students into pairs or small groups (up to four in a group works well in my experience; more, and opinions can be so wide-ranging as to make consensus difficult).
- b) Draw an empty timeline on the board, setting the appropriate beginning and end dates for the day's work. For example:

1820 _____ 1850

Ask students to draw this on a blank sheet of notepaper, and to use it as the basis for their discussion.

- c) Ask each group to make a timeline of the day's reading according to some limit that requires them to weigh events / ideas against one another (for example, the ten most significant moments the reading covered, or those events that explain the evolution of a particular cultural belief). These small-group timelines will eventually be shared with the whole class, so make it clear to students that they will need to explain why their selections are significant.

- d) Depending on the length of the reading, and the limits you have set on the exercise, allow between twenty minutes and half an hour for students to work in small groups.



- e) Ask students to report back on their findings. What's the first event / idea they would nominate for inclusion on the timeline? Why? How does it connect to things they've already learned? (As the timeline is filled in you can ask them to connect later events / ideas to earlier items on the timeline itself.)
 - f) Students may want to include items that are not date specific – cultural movements; political questions; new religious ideals. Ask the students to work out how they would represent these items on a timeline, and use those moments as an opportunity to discuss what timelines most usefully communicate.
 - g) At the conclusion of the exercise, ask them to reflect on the experience. How did this change their understanding of their assigned reading? What was challenging about the exercise? What does it suggest about the ways in which historians make decisions about what to include in textbooks or other works?
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Activity 2 ✎ Working Backwards

It's important for students to recognize that the answers they receive from the historical record depend upon the questions they pose: certain questions bring certain events and historical ideas to the fore while others fall away. Examining events out of chronological order, and then asking students to go back and fill in the blanks, is one way to make this process transparent:

- a) Jump ahead in the events that you're covering, and supply your students with a primary source from that later moment. (For example, after my students recently finished studying the presidential election of 1829, I jumped ahead and provided them with excerpts from the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.)
- b) As a class, have the students pre-read the source for its author/creator, the date on or around which it was created, the place in which it was created, and the type of source it represents (map, newspaper, illustration, letter?). Discuss the significance of these details – how does this equip someone to better understand the source once they begin to read it?
- c) Ask the students to summarize the content of the source. This is not about interpretation – it's about itemizing information and checking that students understand what the source says.
- d) Split the students into small groups, and ask each group to then work out how the country / community / people being studied got from point A (where you last left off in class) to point B (the point at which your source was created). What events had to take place for the source



to come into existence? What social changes, military actions, political debates, and cultural shifts? (Their class textbook is probably the simplest source of information for them to use in answering this, but if you have access to a computer lab, you can also allow students to research the question online.)

e) Ask the students to render their findings on a timeline. Remind them that they will be sharing this information with the whole class, and must be prepared to make the case for why their items should be included on the collective timeline the class will construct.

f) This exercise takes at least twenty minutes, but often takes longer. Allow time for students to discuss the multiple ways it's possible to trace connections between A and B.

g) Build a collective timeline using the suggestions offered by the class. When an item is proposed for the timeline, ask the group why it should be included. Ask the class if they agree or disagree with the item's inclusion, and why. Take the time to explore the reasons why groups weigh events differently.

h) Reflect on the process – were there events that students had to leave out of the timeline that seemed important when they originally read their textbook? How did they decide what should be on the timeline and what should be left out? In what ways does this illuminate the stories historians tell and the decisions they must make when they do so? What does it suggest about the creation of their textbook itself?

i) If there's time, ask students to infer what might happen next. Given what they know about this era, and given the source they analyzed, can they anticipate what might be the major consequences of this event? How do they predict different communities will react? Check in with these inferences when you meet next class to cover that material.