

How To Make a Timeline

The way we think about time is learned. Over the eons, different cultures and peoples have held different beliefs about the nature of time. Western historical thought is based on certain assumptions about the nature of time. When we make a timeline of historical events, we create a graphic representation of how we in Western secular society think about time. We link units of time with events. We make a sequence that suggests a past, present, and future. The direction says that time and history proceed in a line, not a circle. Portrayed in a line, events are unique in history and do not repeat themselves in exact ways. History incorporates change.

Sequences in a timeline, where some events happen before others, also suggest the possibility of cause and effect. They suggest that events exist in relationship to one another, in a context. Thematic timelines suggest turning points, linear trends, and progressions, whether or not these exist in fact.

Thus, making a timeline allows one to plot events in a graphic way, to see possible relationships, to help memory, and to grasp sequence. In the process, culling from the many possible dates sharpens one's appreciation for the dates necessarily excluded.

Plot History on a Line

1. Decide what the timeline will show: personal events, big political events, events related to a geographic area, randomly chosen events, and so on. How will you choose which events to include and exclude?
2. Make a list of events that you wish to put on your timeline.
3. Research and note the specific dates when the events that you wish to include occurred. It is a good idea to note your source(s), too, so that you can return later and verify the dates, if necessary.
4. List the events in a chronology, a sequence of earliest to latest.
5. What are the earliest and latest dates that you wish to include.
6. Choose the period of time that your timeline will cover, being sure to include your earliest and latest dates.
7. Decide what units of time you will use (days, months, years, decades, centuries, etc.) to divide your timeline into segments. These decisions may be a matter of trial and

examples:

1735, 1812

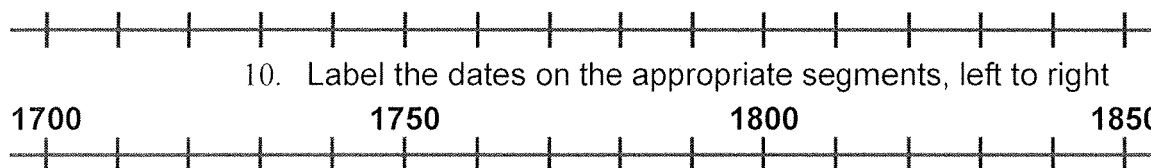
1700 to 1850

decades

error, based on the size of your paper.

1700 to 1850 =
150 years/10
years =
15 segments

8. Calculate the number of segments that your timeline will have.
9. Draw a line and divide it into the number of equal segments that you figure you will need.



10. Label the dates on the appropriate segments, left to right
11. Using the chronology that you made of events and dates, figure out where they would fall on your timeline. How will you mark and label them? For instance, you could write on the timeline, attach colored labels, or make a code that refers back to your chronology.
12. If there is not room on your timeline to include all of your chronology, cull some of the dates or make a timeline with larger segments that leave more room
13. If your dates can be divided into two or three smaller categories or themes, try making parallel timelines with identical segment sizes. Then you can see how the theme developed, but you can also compare two or more themes at a time.
14. For an amusing and enlightening exercise, calculate how long your timeline would have to be to show the dates of the Big Bang and the earliest known humans.

one timeline for
local events and
one for world
events

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