

# The Timeline Game: Constructing Historical Narratives in History Survey Courses

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As someone who frequently teaches survey courses that have broad chronological and geographic scope – including Global history and African History classes – I often think about how I can help my students understand key events while avoiding too much emphasis on “coverage” or memorization.<sup>1</sup> Even more important to me is getting my students to think about the choices involved in constructing these sweeping historical narratives: How we decide what is included and, crucially, what is left out? Whose perspectives do narratives focused on large-scale change and world-historical events obscure? What regions of the world are ignored, marginalized, or done a disservice by many of the traditional narratives? What makes an event worthy of inclusion in a history class?

I found myself thinking about these questions and goals at the mid-way point of one of my African history survey courses. Important considerations in all courses, questions of inclusivity/exclusivity in historical narratives were top of mind for me for several reasons. As a white woman teaching about African history, it is especially important that my classes question and critique how I (and white people who engaged in African history before me) have constructed historical narratives about Africa. Many of my students in this class were future high school history teachers who also care deeply about these questions. I also knew, based on midcourse feedback from students, that some were looking for help “keeping track” of the basic chronology of certain events and processes in our class so they could teach this material themselves one day. Furthermore, being a new assistant professor and convinced by research demonstrating the many benefits for learning, inclusion, and motivation of a vibrant classroom community, I wanted to come up with a fun in-class activity or game that would build rapport and have the added benefit of breaking up the mid-semester slump.<sup>2</sup> To tackle all these seemingly disparate objectives, I developed a timeline game. Students played the game in teams, and it centered around the construction of a collective timeline. In this game, which we completed in two 75-minute class periods, groups of students competed to nominate a set of historical events onto a final class-wide “Final Timeline.” The team that successfully got the highest number of “their” events onto the “Final Timeline” would win the game.

Crucially, students could not simply nominate the “most famous” events. Rather, they had to demonstrate certain historical thinking skills through their nomination process. They could make an argument about causation, explaining how many future class events their event had caused, or they could argue that their particular event did an especially good job of drawing out a number of important course themes. They could suggest that their event, while not obviously “significant,” provided an important perspective that is often overlooked in macro-historical accounts and therefore deserved inclusion in ours. In short, students had to practice historical thinking skills and grapple with those questions about constructing historical narratives – what we include and what we leave out – through this game. I have since used this game in both African and Global history surveys, in classes with both majority history majors as well as majority non-majors, while teaching at a mid-sized public university in Northern Colorado. I believe that it can be a fun, engaging, and pedagogically useful activity – easily adaptable to any number of course subjects and institutional contexts – for anyone looking to encourage students to grapple with questions of historical significance, causation, and the politics of how we construct historical narratives.

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<sup>1</sup> Lendol Calder, “Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey,” *Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (March 2006): 1358–1370.

<sup>2</sup> For more on these benefits, see Wendy Rouse, “Lessons Learned While Escaping From a Zombie: Designing a Breakout EDU Game” *The History Teacher* 50, no. 4 (August 2017); Osvaldo Jiménez, “Leveraging the Social Aspect of Educational Games” *Theory Into Practice* 54, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 101–108; Sarah Rose Cavanagh, *The Spark of Learning: Energizing the College Classroom with the Science of Emotion* (West Virginia Press, 2016); “Belonging” and “Motivating” chapter in James Lang, *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning*, 2nd edition (Jossey-Bass, 2021).

## Objectives

Timelines – and classroom activities or projects using timelines – have of course been used in history classes for many years. Catherine Denial has written about challenging conventional approaches to timelines with her students whereas others have used different kinds of timelines to assess change over time arguments or as a first step in developing understandings of chronology and causation.<sup>3</sup> This game builds on some of these benefits but also targets different objectives as well. In addition to giving students needed practice establishing the chronology of class material, I also wanted students to practice thinking critically about how we construct historical narratives and the politics of knowledge production. And, I wanted to give them practice with other important elements of historical thinking, including causation, complexity.<sup>4</sup> Because there were far more events that we discussed in class than there were spots available on the final “Final Timeline,” each group of students had to make an argument, in the form of a presentation to the rest of their class, about why their chosen event(s) warranted inclusion. Students had to make arguments for historical significance in various ways including (but not limited to): articulating how it caused other events, how it represented important course themes, how it challenged dominant Eurocentric narratives about world history, or how their event provided an important perspective that was underrepresented on the timeline thus far. This meant that they could not simply tell the class that World War 2 should be included because it was famous, but rather, they had to explain how it, for example, connected to themes of nationalism or imperialism. It also meant that, with the right argument, students could promote “smaller” events, including micro-historical biographies, failed revolts, introductions of new commodities, thus embracing recent trends in global history scholarship as well.<sup>5</sup>

## Set-up

I have played this game with classes ranging from 30 to 55 students, taking two 75-minute class periods to complete. Much of how I structured the set-up of this game (how many students per group, how many minutes per game phase, how many events total, how many spots on the Final Timeline, how many class periods you use, etc.) can be adjusted depending on your priorities and class context. I will discuss those potential alternative models at the end of this paper, and for specific instructions that I used in class, please see Appendix A.

To begin, I made some decisions about what form the Final Timeline and the student groups would take by following the following steps before class:

1. Determine how many “slots” the Final Timeline will have: For each slot, there is a class debate in which teams who have nominated an event from that time period debate with each other over whose event should win. The event that wins takes that slot on the timeline. In a class covering 1850-1960, I had a “slot” for each decade, resulting in a Final Timeline with one key event from each decade. In a class that started in the year 1500, having one slot per decade would have led to too many debates and taken up too

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3 Catherine J. Denial, “Atoms, Honeycombs, and Fabric Scraps: Rethinking Timelines in the Undergraduate Classroom” *The History Teacher*, 46:3 (May 2013): 415-434; Sharon Cohen, “The Challenging Concept of Change Over Time,” World History Connected, Elise Fillpot, “Teaching with Timelines” *Teachinghistory.org*, Accessed March 20, 2023, <https://teachinghistory.org/teaching-materials/teaching-guides/243471>; Denis Shemilt, “The Caliph’s Coin: The Currency of Narrative Frameworks in History Teaching,” in Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, Sam Wineburg, eds., *Knowing Teaching and Learning History, National and International Perspectives* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

4 Flannery Burke and Thomas Andrews identify both contingency and context as two of the “Five Cs of historical thinking.” See “What does it mean to think historically?” *AHA Perspectives* (January 2007), <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/january-2007/what-does-it-mean-to-think-historically>.

5 Amy Stanley, “Maid-servants’ Tales: Narrating Domestic and Global History in Eurasia, 1600-1900” *American Historical Review* 121, no. 2 (2016): 437-460; Francesca Trivellato, “Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?” *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011); Natalie Zemon Davis, “Decentering History: Local Stories and Cultural Crossings in a Global World.” *History and Theory* 50, no. 2 (2011): 188–202; Caitlin C. Monroe, “Searching for Nyabongo: An Unconventional Ugandan Intellectual and the Limits of Global History” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 42, no. 2 (2022): 389-403; Joshua Specht, “Commodity history and the nature of global connection: recent developments” *Journal of Global History* 14, no. 1 (2019): 145-150.

much class time than I could give to this activity. So, I created “eras” that were roughly 70 years, although I adjusted this time span for certain eras based how many events from each era we had discussed in class.

2. Form the student groups: It is easiest if you have the same number of groups as you do slots on the Final Timeline. In my World History class of 60 students, I had 9 groups and 9 eras. (You may have different numbers of students per group; this is okay for the purposes of this game.)
3. Pick the set of events and create the deck of “event cards”: This is the most time-intensive part of this activity for teachers. During the game, each group will end up with 1 event per era, so to determine how many events you need, multiply the number of slots you have on the timeline by the number of groups you have. Make sure that those events are distributed evenly across each of the eras. In my World History class, I had 9 groups and 9 eras, so I needed to decide on 81 events. In determining what events you choose, it is useful to take into account the following considerations:
  - a. What events have we talked about in class and would I like to reinforce their understanding of?
  - b. If this game is being played in the middle of the term, what events will be especially important for them to have a better understanding of moving forward?
  - c. Do I have a mix of world regions (if appropriate for the class) covered?
  - d. Do I have a range of historical actors and populations represented?
  - e. Do I have a variety of events that shed light on a combination of social history, military history, political history, cultural history, intellectual history, gender history, material history, etc.?
  - f. Do I have both obvious and “non-obvious” events included? Macro- and micro- historical events?
  - g. Do I have events that connect to all course themes?
  - h. Do I have events that relate to as many of the course objectives as possible?
  - i. Are there ways to include events that would capture broader processes that aren’t otherwise easy to distill into event-based history?
  - j. And finally, double-check: do I have the same number of events in each era?

After deciding on these events, I printed out each of these events (along with their date, but with no other description) and cut them into “cards” that would be passed around the room.

4. Prepare the cards for circulation: Group all the events of the same “era” together, ready to give one era of cards to each group. Once you have done this, you are ready for the class to play the game.

## Playing the game

### *Phase 1: Event selection*

In class, after explaining the instructions (Appendix A), give each group a stack of event cards from one era. Organizing the game in this way ensures some fairness: each group will have first pick for one of the eras. Give each group a few minutes to select what event they want (see Appendix B for timing instructions). This is an important phase of the game! Students should be discussing what they know about the events they’re choosing from, how they might be able to make a significance argument, or strategizing about how they might make the case for their event, knowing what other events it will be up against. Once time has run out for their selection, students pass their “rejected” events clockwise to the next group, and the selection process starts again. This repeats until each group is passed 1 single event card (the event that all the other groups have chosen not to select) with no other options. Upon receiving this final event, their “hands” have been assembled.

### *Phase 2: Research*

In the versions of the game I have played, I had each group choose to nominate three of their events to the Final Timeline. Nominating all their events would have involved a much longer debate process. Nominating fewer would have meant far less competition for the Final Timeline slots. I suggest choosing somewhere between 3-5 nominations, though this can depend on class size and number of event cards in play. After instructing students to select their top three, I gave them time to research their chosen events and make their case for the significance

of their event. Depending on your class's preparation and your goals of the game, you can allocate more or less time to students to look through their notes (and/or readings and the internet) to prepare. In my classes, I required that a different student from the group present each event, and I found that quieter students appreciated being given time to prepare for their presentation.

### *Phase 3: Debate + voting*

Once groups have researched the events that they are going to nominate, they place their three nominated events on the Final Timeline. They could do this on a whiteboard, but I found it easy to use an online platform like Google Jamboard. Once all the events have been placed, we proceeded era-by-era. Students gave their presentations (ranging anywhere from 1-3 minutes) and after all the presentations from a given era had been given, the non-presenting portion of the class voted on what argument they found most compelling. The amount of time that it takes to debate the winner for each era will vary because some eras are more "crowded" than others. (If you ask students to complete a reflection assignment at the end of this activity, it could be worth asking them about why they think certain eras received more attention than others.) I provided the option for each group to have one "rebuttal" which they could use at any point in the game, but they only had one. This is an optional addition, but it follows the spirit of arguments in favor of allowing revisions – and the rebuttal arguments did sometimes lead to better arguments than the first attempts had achieved.

### **Pay-offs**

Perhaps the most obvious lesson learned – one that students themselves immediately recognized – was the opportunity afforded by this activity to have fun in the classroom, engage every student, and review content knowledge. In addition to witnessing thorough understandings of events covered in our class, I heard students make arguments about causation like, "this event, while less well-known, established the conditions for several of the other more famous events up for discussion and therefore should be included over those others." Crucially, the game asked students to engage in understanding of chronology in a particularly useful way. As Daniel Immerwahr has argued, we as instructors should ensure that we "distinguish between students who can repeat dates and those who actually understand narratives."<sup>6</sup> In asking students to argue for causation and situate their events within a broader narrative, this game prioritizes the more important kind of chronological understanding.

As survey courses – and especially world and global history courses – increasingly move away from "cafeteria-style" and coverage-based approaches and embrace purposeful themes or organizing principles, this activity also helps students take a break from learning new content and reflect on those broader frameworks.<sup>7</sup> In formulating their arguments for an events' significance, students had to think about our courses' thematic organizing principles – in World history, for example, that included nationalism, environment, imperialism, social hierarchy, and globalization – and try to test out their applicability to different contexts and events. Discussions of recurring themes in various lectures throughout the course – challenges to Eurocentrism, issues of archival silences, and examples of contingency – also frequently made their way into the activity's discussion. Oftentimes, a particular group was able to make a compelling argument for an event that many other groups had passed on, which in turn helped remind students to look beyond the most "famous" events and instead prioritize broader takeaways and course themes. For example, one group made an argument about the significance of the emergence Ottoman coffee houses. They did so by emphasizing the Ottoman's influence on European enlightenment, connecting the eventual demand for sugar (sometimes to put in coffee) with the rise in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, and arguing for the importance of challenging Eurocentric accounts of the past.

Finally, when I use this activity in my classes, I am consistently struck by how well students draw on these historical thinking skills while also showing important understandings of the politics of how we construct

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<sup>6</sup> Daniel Immerwahr, "The Fact/Narrative Distinction and Student Examinations in History" *The History Teacher* 41, no. 2 (February 2008): 201.

<sup>7</sup> Antoinette Burton, *A Primer for Teaching World History: Ten Design Principles* (Duke University Press, 2012).

historical narratives. This activity prompts them to discuss the tension between traditional narratives and attention to more overlooked histories. For example, in my African history class, I often heard students argue for including events that showcased the way that archives silenced African voices – particularly non-literature African women’s voices. In my world history class, students made arguments about “top down” versus “bottom up” approaches to historical narratives. Others discussed how certain events had ongoing legacies -- ranging from conversations about reparations to repatriation of museum artifacts to changes in human interaction with the environment -- for our world today and therefore merited inclusion. At other points, students noticed when timelines were disproportionately filled with political and military histories and therefore argued for the importance of including cultural or social histories on the timeline to more fully understand what different people and populations experienced in the past.

### Alternative models

There are endless ways that this game could be adapted or adjusted to suite particular professor or class needs. One idea would be to have students generate their own event cards, rather than having the professor give them a pre-established set of options. Doing so would provide an opportunity for retrieval practice and perhaps provide students with more ownership over the game. While I chose to list the date of the events on the card itself, a professor who wanted to prioritize chronological comprehension more explicitly could choose to let the students date the events themselves. A more complicated version of this game could depend on students correctly identifying which events came from which era, thereby hinging their chances for success in the game on their ability to maximize how many Final Timeline “slots” they could compete for (if they mistakenly chose two events from the same era, they would be competing against themselves, whereas if they correctly chose one event per era, they would have the most opportunities for nomination to the Final Timeline.) I did not choose to do this – in part because of my preference to move away from the memorization of facts and dates – but if a class was structured around a final exam or a state-mandated or Advanced-Placement exam that did require such knowledge, this could be a useful strategy.<sup>8</sup>

Though I think this is most successful with a group of students who are already familiar with the rules of the game, you could also do a “rapid fire” version of this game, where the activity is condensed into one class period instead of two. (I did this, upon student request for another round of this game, with my African history class for an end-of-term activity after they had already done the two-day version at the mid-course point.)

Depending on your goals and priorities for this game, it may be worth asking students to complete a brief reflection assignment after participating in the activity. If your focus is on remembering content (perhaps in preparation for an exam), you could ask them to follow a retrieval-practice type summary of one or two events they learned more about that day.<sup>9</sup> Another version of this assignment could ask them to simply reflect on what they learned, or it could provide them with examples of historical thinking (arguments about causation, arguments about contextualization, etc.) or course themes (nationalism, imperialism, etc.) and subsequently ask students to identify instances in class – with specific examples – where they demonstrated knowledge of one of those skill sets or themes. Such an activity might help them solidify what they did in class. And, importantly, it will help them see how much they have learned and what kinds of sophisticated analysis and reasoning skills they used, emphasizing to them that while it was indeed a fun game, it also had significant intellectual and pedagogical value.

Finally, one important consideration in using this game in class is the degree to which it relies on oral presentation and debate skills to be successful. In a class that has participation and oral presentation as a learning objective, this may be an appropriate skill to assess. However, audience reaction to debate performance is famously

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<sup>8</sup> Because AP History exams have preestablished units that (mostly) correspond to particular eras, this could be a useful strategy for those classes.

<sup>9</sup> James Lang, *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning*, 2nd edition (Jossey-Bass, 2021); Pooja K. Agarwal and Patrice M. Main, *Powerful Teaching: Unleash the Science of Learning* (Jossey-Bass, 2019). See also “Retrieval Practice” website at [www.retrievalpractice.org](http://www.retrievalpractice.org).

biased and is especially affected by factors like race, gender, and English-language background. Especially if class credit is being attached to this assignment, instructors should take extra care to ensure that votes aren't disproportionately being given to the loudest, most confident, white, male, students with a history major or upper-class-person status. Although the in-person debate often lends to a significant (and important) degree of classroom comradery, if bias towards presentation styles is a significant concern, instructors could choose to have students submit their arguments via writing (using jamboard or another platform) instead.

Yet there are other ways to address this potential pitfall as well. In my previous classes that involved debate, I have included explicit conversations about identity and prejudice often shapes notions of expertise and credibility. Depending on your goals and the ways that this timeline game is being used in your class, this could be a useful approach. Afterall, a discussion about how factors including race, gender, and other forms of identity shape what voices are listened to in the classroom would be particularly appropriate in a classroom activity that is, at its heart, about thinking critically about what voices and perspectives we include in historical narratives.

## Appendix A: Student Instructions (handout)

### Timeline game instructions

As a class, we are going to construct a timeline of course events that features 9 key events – one per era. However, we have learned about a lot more than 9 events in this class, so it's going to involve a selection – and debating – process to create this final timeline. At the beginning of class, your group will select a handful of “event cards,” each of which could end up on the final timeline – **IF** you make the case for the significance of your event compellingly enough. Out of the 80+ event cards that are in circulation during this game, only 9 will end up on the final class timeline. You will be allowed to put your top 3 events up for consideration on the final timeline. At the end of the activity, you as a class will debate and then subsequently vote on what key events make it onto this timeline. (You won't be allowed to vote for your own events.) For every event that your team gets placed in the final timeline, you get a point. The team with the most points (i.e. the most events voted onto the final timeline) wins.

Learning objectives that we're achieving by playing this game: spending more time learning chronology of course (mid-course survey request), practicing articulating why certain events are important to world history, critically examining/reflecting on what kinds of significance our arguments promote (are we promoting social histories? Political histories? Histories that emphasize Europe vs. “rest of world” agency?)

Game instructions:

#### Round 1: Event selection

1. We will start with 80+ event cards, which will be distributed evenly between the groups.
2. Your group will start with 9 cards from one era. You will have 5 minutes to decide on ONE event card that you want to keep. The rest you are going to pass to the next group.
3. Your group will receive another group's un-selected event cards from a different era. You will now have another opportunity to choose a SECOND event card and the rest you will pass to the next group. This will continue until each group has SELECTED a complete set of cards, one for each era.
4. After the steps above are completed, you will have the full set of cards you're going to need for Round 2. Get ready!

#### Round 2: Prepare the Class Timeline

5. You are going to be able to put forward THREE cards for consideration on the timeline – not all of them. You'll choose your cards based on what you think has the best chance of ending up on the final timeline. You will have 15 minutes to research/review your event, so you do not need to make your argument for its significance and worthiness all based on memory. It's up to you whether you research all your cards and then decide on your final three, or if you decide right off the bat on a smaller group of cards you're going to focus on. As you consider what cards to put forth, it is likely worth remembering the following:
  - a. There will be one event PER ERA that makes it onto the final, voted-on, class timeline. We will vote “by era” in the final competition, meaning that events between 1650-1750, for example, will be “up against” each other.
  - b. Remember that your team will be tasked with persuading the rest of the class to vote for your event. **You can only vote in debates that your team did not participate in.**
  - c. The way you justify an event's significance can basically fall into a few different categories: 1.) how many other things it influenced 2.) how much of a turning point it was in world history 3.) How emblematic it is of important processes or events in world history 4.) How well it highlights important course themes or things you think are important to remember when studying world history. You're welcome to make whatever kinds of arguments you want, but just remember that you don't have to vote for a final timeline that simply has the most well-known events on it.

6. Everyone will then put their cards onto the jamboard (see QR code and link on the powerpoint) and put them in order, one by one.

Round 3: Vote on the final Class Timeline

7. We will then go card-by-card and you will explain your event and justify its significance.
8. Depending on time: Each group gets ONE rebuttal where they challenge another group after the first round of cases have been made.
9. The team with the most cards that get voted onto the board wins!

## Appendix B: Timing calculations

Sample timing breakdown for a 75-minute class with nine eras and nine groups:

### Class #1

Introductions, announcements, and game description: 15 minutes

Phase 1: Selection of events

- 3 minutes per round + transition time for passing cards ( $3 \times 27 + \text{transition time} = 30$  minutes)

Phase 2: Research

- 30 minutes to research, students should also decide who which group member will present which of their 3 events
- Have students take a photo of their chosen events before they leave class this day!

### Class #2

Intros, announcements, reminder of rules, regrouping, pulling up chosen events and research notes, answering questions (10 minutes)

Putting events on the jamboard (8 minutes)

Phase 3: Argumentation

- 1 minute presentation per event per event, plus transitions and vote-counting ( $27 + 10$  minutes transition and counting voting = 37 minutes total)
- 1 rebuttal per group, plus transition time ( $9 \times 1 + 1$  minute transition = 10 minutes)
- Discussion of winning strategies and arguments + any recap assignment students will be asked to complete (10 minutes)