

# Online Timelines

Most historians I know, myself included, love timelines. Timelines help provide context that is crucial to understanding and learning. We've all seen many timelines over the years and while they focus on a great variety of subjects, they tend to be, well, linear in nature. The advent of the Web, however, has not only made it easy to create and organize information but has also changed the timeline concept for people willing to think outside the timeline box. Dates are still included, of course, but color and movement and layers combine into a dynamic interpretive tool.

To get a sense of the variety of online timelines, do a quick image search using the words "interactive timeline." My search pulled up 40,600,000 results from all types of sources: educational to corporate. Newspapers and industry leaders, especially, are constantly looking for new ways to illustrate change over time in a clear, easy-to-grasp format that engages readers and investors. The history industry incorporates timelines into online exhibitions, general sites about state or local history, biographical sites, archival collections, and other places.

Interactivity is the key. The Internet has allowed designers to add all kinds of bells and whistles to the timeline format along with layers of information that allow users to customize the timeline experience. For example, the BBC offers a timeline of British history (<http://j.mp/BBCTimeline>) that gives the user many ways to explore—by theme: Slavery, Women's Rights, Technology, Kings and Queens; by region: all of Britain or separate out English, Welsh, Scottish, or Northern Irish events; or by keyword: for example "broch," a stone tower first built in Scotland around 500 B.C.

Over the years I have worked on various types of timelines. The key questions always center on how much information to include and how to organize it. A key mistake is often trying to cram too much information into a timeline. The reader can only digest so much. At present I am working with colleagues to develop

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an interactive timeline for an exhibition about the history of the space shuttle. We're trying to show the lifespan of each shuttle, color code the main types of missions (science, defense, construction of International Space Station, etc.), how many missions launched in each year, and the frequency of missions—a lot of information. We're basing the physical timeline, in part, on online interactive timelines we saw on newspaper websites. While I suspect we will post the interactive in an online version eventually, I believe it benefits us to think about it in Web terms at this stage—looking for a way to layer and filter information.

Here are some questions to ask when considering an online timeline. In numerous ways the characteristics reflect those of a larger website.

1. What amount of information do we want to include?
2. What is the best way to organize that information?
3. Besides chronologically (themes, time periods, regions, groups of people, etc.), are there alternate ways to organize the information?
4. How can we incorporate visual elements to

support text? Does the timeline reflect the richness of our collections: artifact images, historic photos, video, or audio clips?

5. How can we layer the information so that people with less interest can be satisfied with a basic level of information and people with a greater interest can find deeper information?
6. Does the design have a clean look devoid of clutter?
7. Can we guarantee ease of use (clear directions, minimal work to access information)?
8. Do we want to add an element of comparison within the timeline? For example, comparison between time periods, comparison with present day, etc.
9. Who will design it? Can we afford a design company, or should we use open source timeline tools or partner with local university students?

The best place to start is with examples. Besides the basic Google search, it is wise to visit recent winners of annual awards such as the Webby awards and the Best of the Web awards (at the Museums and the Web conference). Three recent Webby award winners included some innovative timelines:

1. **The Civil War: 150 Years** (<http://j.mp/NPSCW150>) the National Park



Service's sesquicentennial commemoration lacks sophisticated design, but offers an interesting comparison feature. For example: February 25, 1862,

marked the debut of the first Union ironclad ship. The timeline compares that with the recent launch of the aircraft carrier U.S.S. *George H.W. Bush*.

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**2. A Pine Ridge Story** ([www.pinebridgesiouxs.com](http://www.pinebridgesiouxs.com)) offers a look at the home of the Oglala Lakota or Teton Sioux tribe of South Dakota. The timeline is a series of stunning visuals with brief text. The chronology is so subtle that it does not look like a timeline. I only wish the images were larger.



**3. Counterspill** ([www.counterspill.org](http://www.counterspill.org)) chronicles the impact of various energy disasters around the world. It combines a timeline with a world map and allows the user to filter the data by type of resource and cost of the disaster.

For organizations that want to try a free open-source timeline tool, here are three examples of the many on the market. Each has its own strengths and limitations. The biggest limitation of any template is the lack of freedom to develop special elements for a specific audience or more creative components that grab the user's attention.

**1. Timeglider** (<http://timeglider.com>)  
Example: <http://j.mp/TimeGliderIdaho>  
(An Idaho history timeline)

**2. Capzles** ([www.capzles.com](http://www.capzles.com))  
Examples: <http://j.mp/CapzlesRevere>  
(Paul Revere's ride)

**3. Dipity** ([www.dipity.com](http://www.dipity.com))  
Example: <http://j.mp/DipityMN> (A Minnesota history timeline) ●

"History Bytes" is a forum for discussing Web issues facing all types of historical institutions. Tim Grove can be reached at [grovet@si.edu](mailto:grovet@si.edu).