



The American Revolution Timeline

Timeline Activity

This is a foundational lesson that introduces key concepts and information to students about the American Revolution.

Grade level: Upper Elementary/Middle

Subject: Multidisciplinary

Time Requirement

This activity is highly adaptable and can be completed in 60 minutes or multiple class sessions.

Rationale

Building a timeline provides a foundation to examine in a relatively short time frame how and why the American Revolution happened. Students build a timeline in layers. Each layer provides content, reveals meaning through context, and asks the participants to reflect on a new level of complexity. As each layer is added, new insights, connections, and questions emerge. The goal is not to definitively answer how and why the American Revolution happened but rather to allow students to formulate their own questions and arguments, based on textual evidence.

Educational Outcome

A Revolutionary War timeline will help your students connect historical events. Events are often taught one at a time. This activity pushes students to connect the events together. Students will be able to:

- view events as part of a larger movement
- sequence events in order
- identify cause and effect
- deepen their understanding of a historical period

Materials

Notecards - at least three different colors. You will need cards for the years of the Revolution, individual profiles, laws and decrees, and significant events.

Preparation

Create cards for the years of the Revolution (1763-1783).

STEP 1: Year Cards

Prior to beginning the lesson with students, place the timeline cards of each year horizontally around the classroom.

STEP 2: Individual Profile Cards

Assign each student or a pair of students one of the key figures of the American Revolution and have students research basic information about their person in the context of the American Revolution. When everyone is finished, have each student/group share the information with the class. Following this, students place the individual on the timeline based on the year they chose.

Student Research & Reflection (Individual or Pairs)

1. What specific actions or decisions made this person's contribution significant to the American Revolution? Choose the event and YEAR in which they made their most significant contribution to the American Revolution (This is where they will place this card on the timeline).
2. What challenges or opposition did this person face during their involvement in the Revolution?
3. How might the outcome of the Revolution have changed if this individual had not played their role?
4. If you had to summarize this person's legacy in one sentence, what would it be and why?

Class-Level or Post-Timeline Discussion Questions:

1. Looking at the timeline, do you notice any clusters of key contributions? What might explain those patterns?
2. Do you think any individuals on this timeline are overrated or underrated in their historical importance? Why?
3. What does the placement of these figures on the timeline tell us about how revolutions are built over time? Is it a sudden break or a gradual shift?

STEP 3: Laws and Decrees

With students still working individually or in pairs, distribute the Laws and Decrees from the American Revolution topics for students to research. Students record their answers and then share their law/decree with the class. Following this, students place the law/decree on the timeline.

Student Research & Reflection (Individual or Pairs)

As you research your assigned law or decree, answer the following questions on your notecard:

1. Who does this law or decree primarily target?
(Consider social groups: colonists, merchants, enslaved people, Loyalists, Patriots, women, etc.)
2. What is the intended purpose of this law or decree?
(Is it meant to punish, control, protect, raise revenue, maintain order, etc.?)
3. How might this law or decree affect the daily life of an individual living in the colonies?
(Think about effects on livelihood, freedoms, family, or safety.)
4. If you lived during the Revolution, how would you react to this law or decree? Would you obey it or resist it? Why?
5. What year was the law or decree enacted?
(Use this date to place the item on the class timeline.)

Whole-Class Timeline Discussion Prompts

Once all laws and decrees have been shared and placed on the timeline, discuss:

1. What patterns do you notice in the types of laws being passed over time?
2. How do these laws reflect the growing tension between the colonies and Britain?
3. Which laws or decrees seem to have been the most influential in leading to the Revolution? Why?
4. How do you think colonists' responses to these laws shaped the outcome of the Revolution?
5. How do these historical laws compare to laws and government actions today? What can we learn from them?

STEP 4: Significant Events

With students still working individually or in pairs, distribute the Significant Events of the American Revolution topics for students to research. After reading and sharing about their event, ask students to place their event card on the timeline.

Student Research & Reflection (Individual or Pairs)

As you research your assigned event, use these questions to guide your thinking. Record your answers on your notecard:

1. What happened during this event?
(Include key details such as who was involved, what occurred, where it happened, and when.)
2. Why is this event considered significant in the context of the American Revolution?
(Did it shift public opinion, change military strategy, unite or divide colonists, etc.?)
3. Who was most affected by this event?
(Soldiers, civilians, Loyalists, Patriots, enslaved people, women, etc.)
4. What year did the event occur?
(Use this year to place your event card accurately on the class timeline.)

Whole-Class Timeline Discussion Prompts

Once all event cards have been placed on the timeline, use the following questions for a class discussion:

1. What patterns do you notice about when the most impactful events occurred?
2. Which events do you think had the greatest impact on the outcome of the war? Explain your reasoning.
3. How might understanding the sequence of these events help us better understand how revolutions unfold over time?

When finished, ask students to take a gallery walk to study the completed timeline and to record their observations. During this time students also revisit their individual profile card and list the laws/decrees and historical events that affected the person on the individual profile card they studied.

Wrap-Up Questions: American Revolution Timeline Gallery Walk

Student Reflection During Gallery Walk

As you walk through the completed timeline, review the events, laws, and key figures. Use these questions to guide your observations:

1. What trends or patterns do you notice in the timeline?
(Are there clusters of events? Do laws seem to come before or after certain turning points?)
2. Which events or laws do you think had the greatest impact on the course of the Revolution? Why?
3. Did any events or laws surprise you? Why?
4. Are there any voices or perspectives that seem underrepresented on the timeline? Who might be missing?

Connecting to Your Assigned Historical Figure

Now, revisit your individual profile card and think about how the broader context of the Revolution influenced that person's life and actions:

1. Which laws or decrees likely affected your historical figure the most? How so?
2. Which events on the timeline may have shaped your person's decisions, beliefs, or actions?
3. How might your figure have responded to one of the events or laws discussed today? Support your answer with evidence from your research.
4. What did you learn about the American Revolution by seeing it through the eyes of this individual?

Optional Class Discussion Prompts

1. How does connecting individuals to events and laws change the way we understand history?
2. What does this activity reveal about the complexity of historical change?

Extension Activities

- Based on evidence from the timeline, ask students to write one question about how or why the American Revolution happened that they can answer, using the timeline as a source. Share with the class.
- What questions do they still have? Do their classmates have answers to those questions?
- Have students write a paragraph about how and why the American Revolution happened, citing textual evidence from the timeline.
- If your students are reading literature about the American Revolution, placing the events from the story on the timeline in addition to the existing layers provides historical context. What does the timeline add to your understanding of their stories?

Individual Profiles

- George Washington
- Thomas Jefferson
- Benjamin Franklin
- John Adams
- Nathanael Greene
- King George III
- Benedict Arnold
- Charles Cornwallis
- Alexander Hamilton
- Patrick Henry
- Samuel Adams
- Paul Revere
- Marquis de Lafayette
- Horatio Gates
- Henry Knox
- Daniel Morgan
- Ethan Allen
- Francis Marion
- William Moultrie
- Thomas Sumter
- William Howe
- Henry Clinton
- Banastre Tarleton
- Casimir Pulaski
- James Madison
- Henry Lee III
- John Laurens

Laws and Decrees

- Proclamation of 1763
- Sugar Act
- Stamp Act
- Townshend Acts
- Quartering Act
- Declaratory Act
- Boston Port Act
- Olive Branch Petition
- Tea Act
- Coercive (Intolerable) Acts
- The Boston Massacre
- Boston Tea Party
- "Common Sense" by Thomas Paine

Significant Events of the American Revolution

- Lexington and Concord
- Siege of Yorktown
- Battle of Cowpens
- Treaty of Paris
- Battles of Trenton and Princeton
- Battle of Kings Mountain
- Battles of Saratoga
- Battle of Bunker Hill
- Battle of Fort Mifflin
- Battle of Long Island
- Battle of Guildford Court House
- British capture Charleston
- Treaty of Alliance with France
- Continental Army winters at Valley Forge
- United States declares independence
- Capture of Fort Ticonderoga
- Siege of Boston
- Battle of Brandywine
- Battle of Monmouth
- Battle of Germantown

The Revolutionary War Animated Map

<https://www.battlefields.org/learn/maps/revolutionary-war-animated-map>

