

Creating and Using a Timeline: A Half-Century through the Eyes of O. Henry

Allow 90 minutes, breaking up as needed.

This activity will use the lifespan of the writer O. Henry and the events going on around him at various ages and stages of his life to give insight and experience regarding the creation and use of a timeline. Students will consider the concept of contemporaneity: what is happening and what can be known by someone in his/her own time. (Completing the activity will also offer glimpses or a preview of the period between the Civil War and World War I.)

If your students have not worked with a timeline before, consider preparing a similar activity using a timeline of 1985-2005 marking important world events into which each student would insert mileposts in their own and their family's lives. (Parents married, siblings born, starting kindergarten, special vacation, etc.)

Introduction (5 minutes).

Ask if students have heard of a writer named O. Henry. Some may have seen a version of “The Gift of the Magi” (“The Gift of Love,” 1978, with Marie Osmond and Timothy Bottoms) on television, and some will have read “The Ransom of Red Chief” or “The Last Leaf” in a class. Ask a student who knows one of the stories to try to tell “when” it happened. If no one knows, say simply that O. Henry was a writer who wrote and published short stories about a century ago. O. Henry was his pen name; his real name was William Sidney Porter.

Ask someone to tell you the difference between a historical story and a contemporary story. If students knew about O. Henry, ask if they think he wrote historical tales or contemporary stories. Build a reply such as the one below from the student explanation:

“Consider that you might—today—write a story set in ancient Egypt, the Civil War south, or the Vietnam conflict; you would be writing in a historical setting. Or you might compose a story about something that could happen in 2003 in a town or city with which you are familiar. You might write a story in which a teenaged boy in Corpus Christi is listening to a CD player and talking on his cell phone. Such a story would be contemporary. Someone who reads that story a century from now might think of it as historical.” Ask again what the difference is, and affirm clear responses.

A. Individual Activity: Following oral instructions and demonstration: Making a timeline segment. (5 minutes.)

Give the following instructions:

1. Fold a sheet of notebook paper down the center lengthwise.
2. Unfold. Turn the paper to horizontal axis (holes at the top). The center line will be your timeline. Beginning one or two notebook lines from the left edge of the page, mark off increments at every other notebook paper line.
3. Label the lines 1855, 1860, 1865, etc., through 1915. (Illustrate on blackboard)

4. Use a straight edge to draw the timeline segment on the fold from 1855 to 1915.
(*Sample student timeline below.*)

B. Individual Activity: Gathering information; transferring information from one medium to another (15 minutes)

Prepare a classroom set of date lists: Give one to each student. Say “Use the date list to select about a dozen events or inventions which you think are interesting and place them on your timeline, making a slash on the timeline and writing the date and event *below* the line. (“A dozen” comes out to about one event for each five-year period.) Students may choose other dates they know or you may post additional dates on the blackboard for them to consider. (Take up the date lists when finished with this step.)

C. Individual Activity: Transferring information from auditory to visual (20 minutes)

Say: “Above the line, let’s add some of the significant transition dates in O. Henry’s life.” Call out the dates below, one at a time, and have students locate each date on their line and mark them, writing *above* the line; write only the location. (*Tell* students about some of his experiences and the mileposts which occurred in each place, but have them *mark and write* only the location.) After writing each location, ask “How old was Will Porter?” and add his age beside the location.

1862-William S. Porter born, **Greensboro, N.C.**

1867-Starts school at his aunt’s house

1876-Begins attending public school

1882-Sent to **LaSalle County, Tex.**, sheep ranch to help cure his tuberculosis (**age 20**)

1884-Will Porter moves to **Austin** (and spent some time in San Antonio) (**22**)

1887-Began working in the General Land Office; married Athol Estes

1889-Daughter, Margaret, born

1891-Begins working in bank

1894-Briefly publishes a humor newspaper, *The Rolling Stone*

1894-Brought up on embezzlement charges

1895-Flees to **Houston-New Orleans-Honduras** (**33**)

1897-Returns to **Austin** to care for Athol; she dies. (**35**)

1898-Tried and sent to prison in **Ohio** (Daughter to Pittsburgh, Pa., to live with Athol’s parents) (**36**)

1901-Released from prison, went to **Pittsburgh, Pa.**, to reunite with Margaret; began using “O. Henry” regularly as his pen name. (**37**)

1903-New York; began writing weekly for *New York Sunday World*. (**38**)

1904-*Cabbages and Kings* published; his first collection of short stories

1906-*The Four Million*

1907-*Heart of the West*

1902-married Sara Coleman of Asheville, N.C.

1908-*The Gentle Graft*

1910-Died of influenza and complications of enlarged heart, diabetes, and sclerosis of the liver. Buried in Asheville, N.C. (**48**)

(Other volumes of stories were published posthumously.)

D. Whole Class Interactive Project: Making generalizations; drawing inferences; identifying frame of reference. (10 minutes)

Divide class into several groups of 4 to 6 students; let them exchange seats or gather their chairs so that each group can discuss.

Say: “We are going to take a look at Will Porter at different ages and stages of his life to consider what he might have known about and what might have influenced him at different times.

“Look on your timeline to see what was happening around the time of his birth and his growing-up years in Greensboro. Find ‘1862-Greensboro.’ What were some of the things that were happening around the time of his birth?” (Affirm several responses.) “When would he have been 10 years old (or student’s age). What was happening then?” (Affirm several responses.) “Did anyone select an event that he would have heard or read about or been influenced by?” (Discuss.) “Did anyone select an event that he probably would not have known about at the time but which might have affected him later?”

E. Small Group Activity: Making generalizations; drawing inferences; identifying frame of reference. (20 minutes)

“Now, in your group, look at the years Will Porter spent in Texas. Find 1882, when he went to La Salle County, and 1897, when he went to prison in Ohio.”

“How old was he when he went to Texas? How old was he when he left Texas? Yes, we’re looking at the next 15 years of his life.

“Look at the events you selected, below the line. What might Porter have noticed or cared about in the world around him as a young man? Tell each other in your groups some of the things you found out.”

Give groups about five minutes to discuss, then say: “Now let’s hear some of the things you found out. Group I, tell us something you think he would have heard or read about that would have affected him in some way.” (Listen and affirm or remark as appropriate. Encourage students to recognize that some events which seem significant now would not have affected him, such as the birth of Adolf Hitler.)

Say: “What about the years he spent in prison in Ohio? Find those years on your timeline. What might have happened in those years that would affect him or influence him.” (Let groups discuss, then listen, affirm, remark. Consider drawing information from previous discussion, such as “Do you think the prison would have had telephones? typewriters? electric light bulbs? Why or why not?”

Now carry the discussion into Will Porter's years in New York. Have students locate those years on their timelines, and survey inventions, events, etc., for developments or news that would have influenced him. (Listen, affirm, remark.)

Any final observations regarding influences on Porter/O. Henry?

Have students sign their papers, write the names of their group members on the back, and pass them in for your review.

F. Closure: An enjoyable O. Henry read-aloud with a review timeline activity from the story. (30 minutes)

Read aloud (20 minutes) "Buried Treasure," a story by O. Henry set in Texas. (May be printed out from the Webliography source. Refer to the Read-aloud guidelines at the end of that document to prepare your manuscript and read.)

Follow-up Timeline Discussion Activity (10 minutes)

Interestingly, the story "Buried Treasure" was published in *Options* in 1909 and no doubt prepared for publication in 1908 or before, when the explorations of Roald Amundsen and his 1906 discovery of magnetic north were whetting the public appetite for adventure and scientific exploration. What feature of the story reflects the times in this regard? Let the class help you make a timeline of those events.

Invite a student to draw a timeline on the blackboard to explain the discrepancy between the treasure map and the watermark on the paper.

Reading various of his stories later in school (or life) will reinforce the influences of the times on the writer. O. Henry wrote contemporary stories—stories that could have happened at the very moment he was writing them. Only now, a century later, do they seem to have a *historical* setting.