Time and Timelines

Obviously, if history involves the study of the past, we have to be able to talk about how long ago something happened and whether it was before or after something else. Timelines help us see the order in which events occurred, or perhaps to compare events in different parts of the world.

Then and Now

To know how long ago something happened, we have to first know when now is!

What year is it now? ____________________________________________

In what year were you born? ________________________________________

How many years ago was that? ________________________________________

If you are good at math, hopefully you took the year for now, subtracted the year for then (when you were born), and came up with a number near your age! That’s all you have to do to calculate the time between any two events.

Years and Counting

The concept of the year – the time it takes for Earth to revolve around the sun, or a full cycle of the seasons – is very old, but our method of keeping track of them is relatively new. You know that at this time next year, instead of 2012 it will be 2013. The number of the year will be 1 greater. Similarly, last year was 2011 – the number of the year was 1 smaller.

Does that mean that there was nothing before 2012 years ago? Of course not! Humans have been around for millions of years. Trouble is, we don’t know exactly how long. If we were starting at the beginning, we would have to know when Year 0 happened; we don’t.

A few hundred years ago, people noticed that there were lots of numbering systems for years all over the world. Most people now have adopted a single system, using the terms BC and AD. The inventors of this system were religious Christians, so they decided to label the birth of Christ as Year AD 1. AD stands for anno Domini, Latin for “the year of our Lord.” So today is the year AD 2012.

AD years work like positive numbers on number line; if you counted backwards one year at a time, you would eventually reach AD 1. The year before that is known as 1 BC. BC stands for “Before Christ.” Years in BC work like negative numbers (but not in the scary math way, just in the sense that you count “backwards” in BC). The year before 1 BC was 2 BC, and the year before that was 3 BC.

Note: there is no Year 0.
**Number Lines and Time Lines**

Here is a number line like you might see in math class:

![Number Line Diagram](image)

If we adjusted this so it counted years, not just numbers, it would look almost exactly the same (remember, time always moves forward from left to right):

![Adjusted Number Line Diagram](image)

Let’s try some math with a timeline (READ CAREFULLY):

![Timeline Diagram](image)

If you were in the year 200 AD and were predicting something 100 years later, what year would you be thinking about? ____________________________

If you were in the year 200 AD and were talking about an event that happened 50 years earlier, what year would you be talking about? ____________________________

If you were in the year 200 BC and were predicting something 100 years later, what year would you be thinking about? ____________________________

If you were in the year 200 BC and were talking about an event that happened 50 years earlier, what year would you be talking about? ____________________________
**Timeline Practice #1**

*Note: the broken lines in the middle of the timeline indicate that a period of time has been skipped over. On either side of the divide, a similar amount of space covers a similar amount of time.*

**The Mauryan and Gupta Empires**

1. How many years does the timeline cover?

2. During which empire was Asoka the leader? What religion did Asoka join?

3. What conclusions can you draw about what happens when strong rulers die?

**Timeline Practice #2**

Use the large time line on page 4 to answer the following questions.

1. Which happened first: the emergence of Nazca culture or the beginning of the Han dynasty?

2. When did the Golden Age of Greece begin?

3. How long ago was Monte Albán established?
As you can see from the chart above, there is another system used to refer to BC and AD. Some people wanted a religion-neutral way to refer to years. Therefore, you will see BCE (Before Common Era) and CE (Common Era) used in place of BC and AD.

The terms are exactly interchangeable. Any year in BCE is the same year in BC; any year in AD is the same year in CE.

1. It is currently AD 2012. What year does that correspond to in CE?

2. On the BCE/CE scale, when did the Golden Age of Greece begin?
**Centuries**

The last, and sometimes most confusing, piece of talking about time is the century. A century is a period of 100 years. Most of the time, we talk about all the years that start with 19 (1943, or 1991, or all the others) as being part of the same century.

However, it would not be the 19th century! You were born in the 20th century, even though the year started with 19. Let’s look at why.

The years between AD 1 and AD 99 – the first hundred years AD – are the 1st century AD. That means that the years from AD 100 to AD 199 are the second hundred years; the 2nd century AD.

![Diagram showing centuries AD](image)

Saying that the Black Death happened in the 14th century is like saying that it happened during the 14th set of 100 years – which would be the 1300s. A simple trick is to take the start of the year number (the hundreds value) and add 1 to get the century number.

1. What century was the year AD 222 a part of?

2. What century was the year AD 1517 a part of?

3. What year would be part of the 18th century?

Centuries in BC work like years in BC – they count backwards from 1. Therefore, 1 BC to 99 BC is the first hundred years and is the 1st century BC. 100 BC to 199 BC is the second hundred years, so it is the 2nd century BC. You can use the same trick of adding 1 to get the century number; 812 BC is in the 9th century BC.

4. What century was the year 477 BC a part of?

*Careful now...*

5. Which came first? The 14th century AD or the 15th century AD?

6. Which came first? The 8th century BC or the 6th century BC?

7. Which came first? The 4th century BC or the 3rd century AD?
Timeline Practice #3

1. How many years do these timelines cover?
   A. 4271 years  
   B. 3500 years  
   C. 2729 years  
   D. 771 years

2. What occurred about the same time Sargon established his empire?
   A. The Amorites invaded Mesopotamia
   B. Trade between Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley developed
   C. The Old Kingdom ended due to foreign invasions
   D. The Indus River Valley culture collapsed

3. At what time did the Egyptians and the Mesopotamians begin to trade with one another?
   A. 2000 BCE  
   B. 3500 BCE  
   C. 3200 BCE  
   D. 2200 BCE

4. How much time passed between the beginning of Indus River farming and the building of cities along that river?
   A. 7 years  
   B. 700 years  
   C. 2429 years  
   D. 2500 years