Timelines in No Time

By Lorrie Jackson

WHY A TECHTORIAL?

What will I learn today?
You will learn how to use Microsoft Excel to create a simple timeline on the American Revolutionary War.

What hardware and/or software does the techtorial apply to?
The techtorial applies to Excel, a spreadsheet program that is part of the Microsoft Office suite for Macs and PCs. The techtorial also may be adapted for use with other spreadsheet programs, such as AppleWorks or Quattro Pro.

Which National Educational Technology Standards for Teachers does the techtorial address?
The techtorial will help teachers accomplish standard IVa in particular.

The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) has developed a set of National Educational Technology Standards for Teachers. Standards or Performance Indicators are included for each techtorial to help teachers and administrators improve technology proficiency. For a complete description of the standards indicated, go to NETS for Teachers.

TIMELINES IN NO TIME

You don't need special software or advanced computer skills to create colorful and accurate timelines. All you need is Excel! Follow these simple steps to make a Revolutionary War timeline, then see what you and your students can create in your classroom.

This techtorial assumes a basic understanding of Excel. If you've never used the program before, check out Create a Graph or Chart in Excel or Teaching Excel for overviews of the surprisingly easy-to-use and versatile software program.
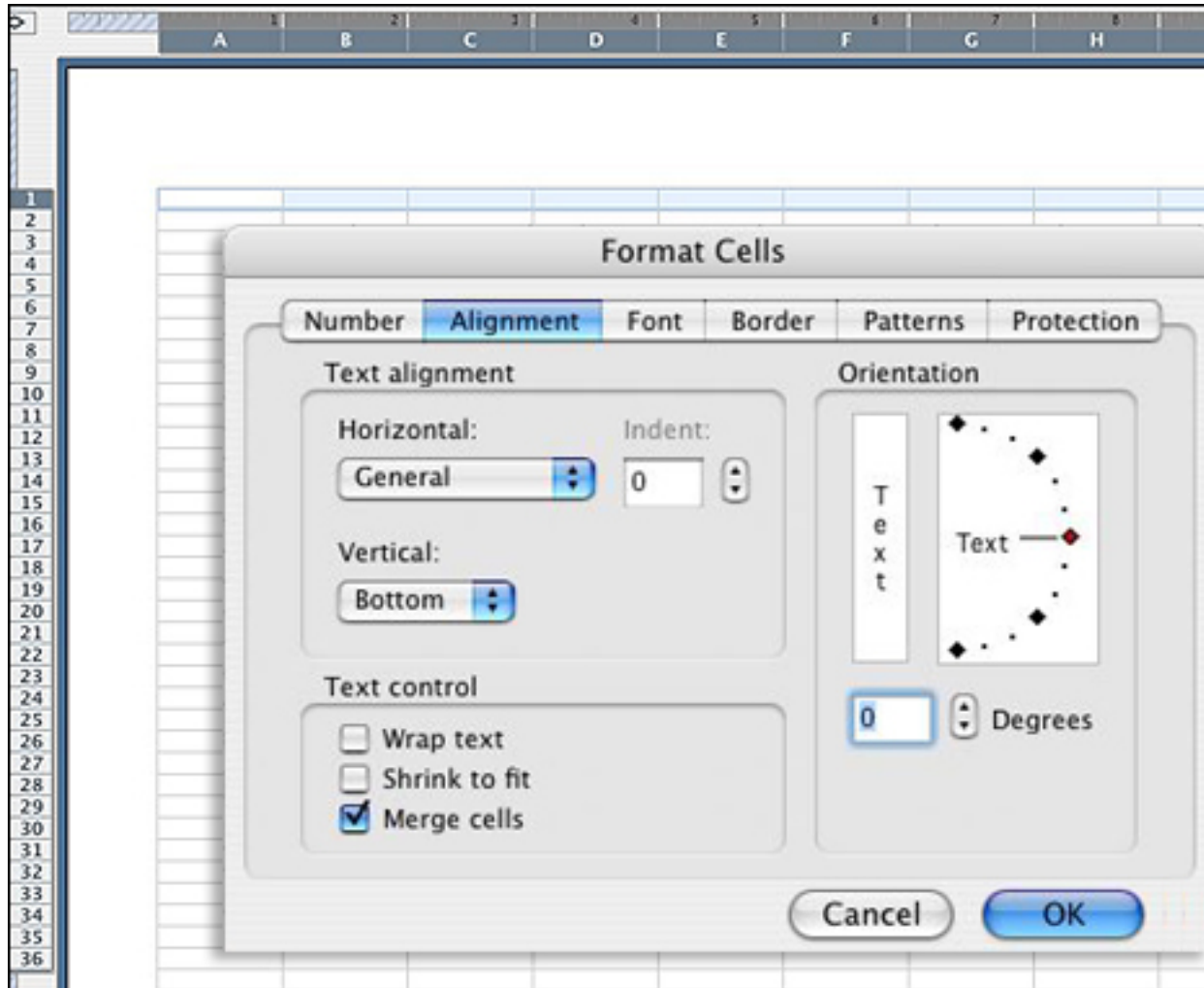
CREATE A TIMELINE

To create the timeline:

- Open Excel.
- Click File > Page Setup and change the page orientation from Portrait to

Landscape. Click OK.
- Click cell A1 and drag the cursor to the right to highlight cells A1 through H1.
- Click Format in the menu bar at the top of the window, and then click Cells.
- Click the Alignment tab and click the box next to Merge Cells. Click OK.

- Click the field you've created and type a title for the timeline (such as The American Revolutionary War). and then press the Enter or Return key.
- Click on the merged cell again, and click the Align Center icon to center your title.
- Save your work!

ENTER DATES

To enter the dates for your timeline, click cell A5 and type 1775 in that cell. Continue entering the following dates in the cells in row 5 (skip every other cell):

- 1777 (cell C5)
- 1779 (cell E5)
- 1781 (cell G5)
- 1783 (cell I5)

Your spreadsheet should look like this:

Next, you need to draw the actual timeline:

- Click cell A6 and drag the cursor to the right to highlight cells A6 through I6.
- Click View > Toolbars > Drawing, then click the arrow next to the paint can on the Drawing toolbar. Choose a color and click.
- Save your work.

ENTER EVENTS

Now it's time to associate some events with those dates. We'll type several battles inside some shapes resembling cannon fire. Here's how:

- Click AutoShapes on the Drawing toolbar.
- Move the cursor to Stars and Banners and click a shape resembling an explosion.
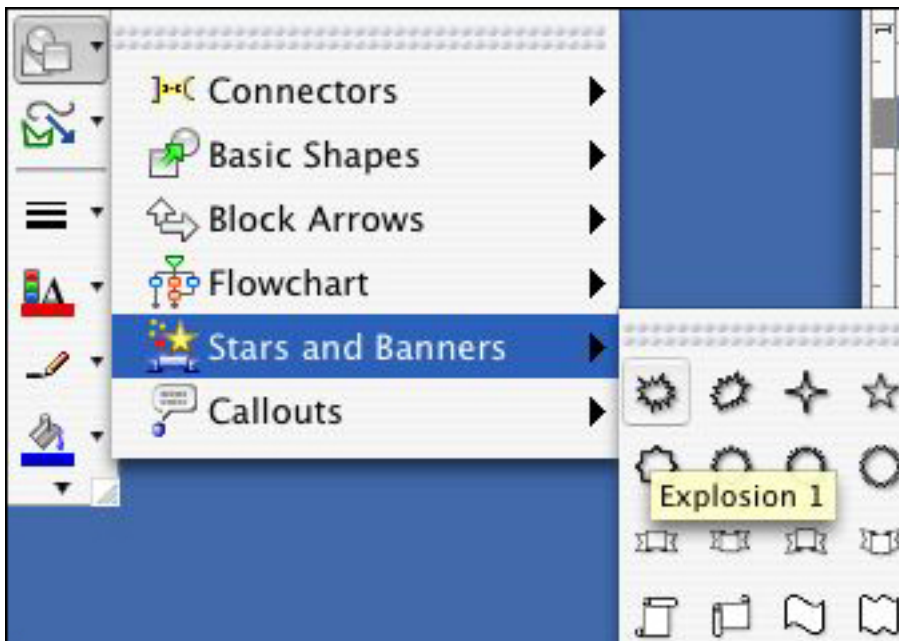
- Click a cell beneath the year 1775 on the timeline (around cells A8 through A12, for

example) and draw the explosion shape. Click the Text Box icon -- it looks like a typewriter "A" -- on the Drawing toolbar.

- Click in the shape you've drawn and type "Battle of Breed's Hill." (You might have to resize the shape to read the entire text.)
- Great Britain won this battle, so let's make the explosion red: Click the shape, click the arrow next to the paint can, and then click the color red.

Repeat the preceding steps to make a blue explosion shape for a Colonial win. Label this explosion the Battle of Yorktown and place it just beneath the year 1781 (G8 through G11 or so).

For added clarity, you also might click the line icon in the Drawing toolbar and draw a line or arrow from the name of the battle to the correct year on the timeline.

Save your work.

FORMAT TEXT

To **format** text in the timeline, you can use the Formatting toolbar or Excel's Format Cells window. To use Format Cells:

- Highlight the text you want to work with.
- Click Format in the menu bar at the top of the window, and then click Cells.
- Click the Font tab.
- Choose the font, font size, style, and color you want and then click OK.
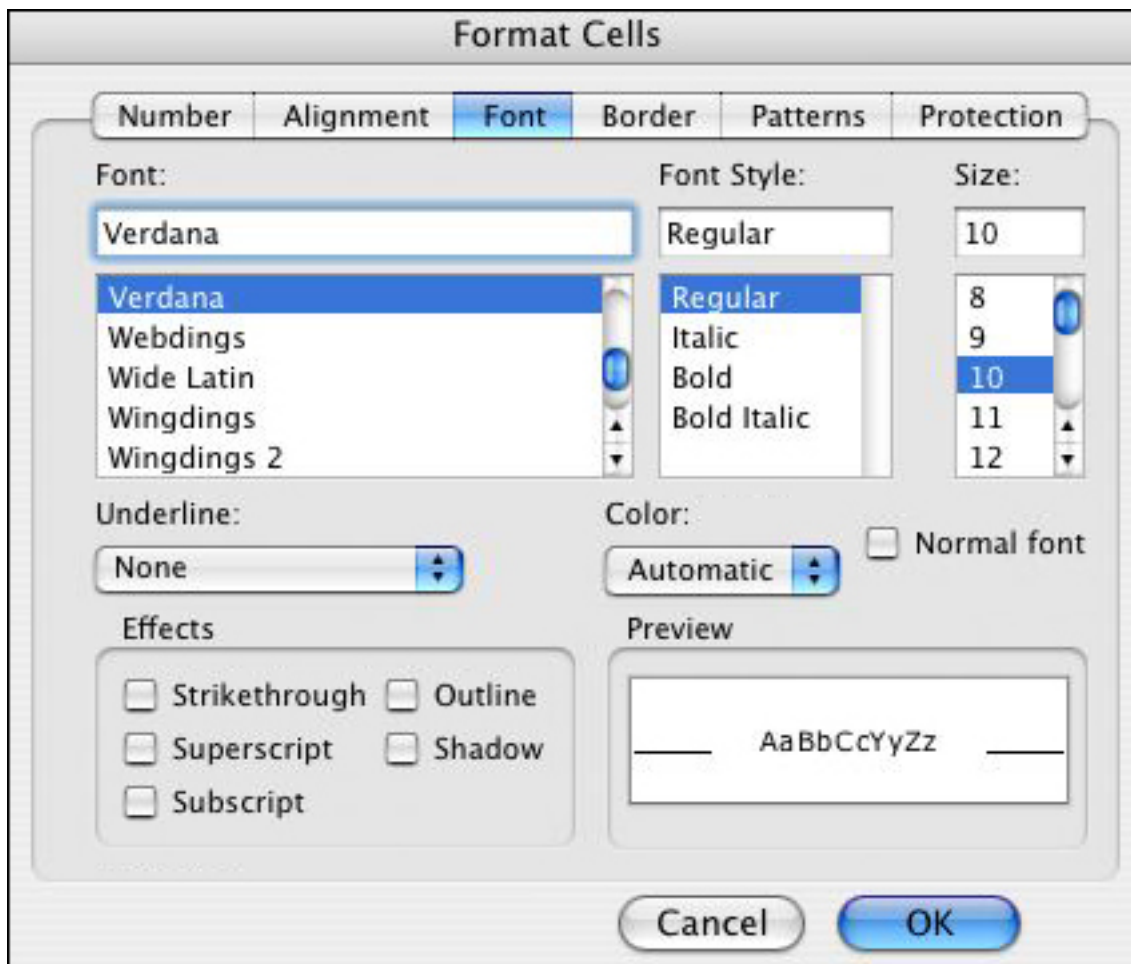
WRAP TEXT

Sometimes a longer phrase is needed to describe an event. To view the entire phrase, you will need to **wrap** the text:

- Click cell I9 just beneath the year 1783 on the timeline.
- Click Format in the menu bar at the top of the window, and then click Cells.
- Click the Alignment tab and click the box next to Wrap Text. Click OK.
- Type "Treaty of Paris is signed" in cell I9, and then click Enter or Return. Notice that row 9 is now taller than other rows. The text in cell I9 wraps under itself, making that row taller. This is a helpful trick whenever you use Excel!

1783

Treaty of
Paris is
signed

ORIENTATION

You can add interest and/or readability to text by using the **orientation** tool to angle your text! For example:

- Click cell E5 containing "1779."
- Click Format and Cells and then click the Alignment tab.
- In the Orientation window, click and drag the text line to 60 degrees. Click OK.

The American Revolutionary War

1777

1779

- Save your work.

In this instance, putting text on a diagonal is not particularly helpful. But imagine if you were putting your grades in Excel. Putting the names of tests or students at an angle would save space but still be more legible than trying to read them vertically.

PRINT THE TIMELINE

Highlight all the cells you want to print. (A1 through I12 or so). Helpful hint: Whenever you're selecting a group of cells in Excel, *always* go from bottom right to top left. Why? If you start at top left and move to bottom right, sometimes the program moves far too fast and you select lots of empty cells and pages. By moving toward (not away from) top left, you don't run the risk of selecting cells you don't need!

Click File > Print Area > Set Print Area, and then click Print.

Note: As always when creating digital content, plan to spend at least 75 percent of class time collecting accurate and relevant research for the timeline. Spend 25 percent of class time creating the timeline. Otherwise, students will spend hours making the timeline look pretty, but it will contain little substantive content.

TELL ME MORE!

Where can I find more information?
Check out Microsoft's Office Tips for Teachers for more creative timeline formats. In addition, Ask Mr.Excel explains how to use Excel's graphing feature to create a timeline. And don't forget to check our Techtorial Table of Contents for how-to ideas for Excel and many more classroom software and hardware tasks.