

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH AT UMD

Mapping Time in Narrative

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Students in English 252, Introduction to the Novel, and English 320, Jane Austen, worked on producing graphic representations of the progression of time in several classic novels. As everyone knows, no one ever tells a story in literal chronological order from beginning to end. Real narratives usually begin in medias res, and proceed by means of flashbacks and even flashforwards to tell the story in a nonlinear, but more artistically effective manner. The only current method available in our discipline for depicting the convoluted narrative order of events in a typical novel has been through prose plot summaries.

Time maps like these are helpful in comprehending the handling of time in complex narratives because they combine a high degree of precision with a Gestalt-friendly single-glance presentation. We can also superimpose graphs for different narratives to dramatically illuminate the different temporal structures that constitute the frameworks or skeletons of different types of novels.

My students produced a number of good time maps for several different novels, and the results were sufficiently encouraging that I decided to incorporate a similar assignment into my current English 251, Introduction to the Short Story. For this iteration of the assignment, I developed a series of three online video clips that (a) explain to the students what time maps are and show what they look like, (b) walk them through the logical analysis of a sample short story to show them how to gather and arrange the data for a story, and (c) provide a step by step tutorial on charting their time map data as an Excel scatter chart. These online video tutorials can be copied and used for any English course that spends time analyzing narrative literature, from very short stories to full-length novels.