

Timeline Software - 1

by Vanessa Kier

Having recently finished writing a trilogy, I found one of the most frustrating aspects was trying to keep track of what each character was doing at each critical point in time. This was particularly important because the third book started before the second book, and I needed to make certain that I didn't have characters in two different places at the same time.

I needed a timeline like the ones you see in textbooks and museum displays.

So, being a tech girl, I decided to research standalone timeline software.

Unfortunately, the only writer-specific timeline program I found, Outline4D for Windows, didn't offer a free trial. Which means I wasn't able to test it out.

However, here is a breakdown of a few timeline programs I did try.

Mac OS X

The first program I tried was *Timeline3D* (www.beedocs.com) for Mac OSX. This is a very simple, very clean linear timeline program. It is not specific for writing. I tested it by importing events from iCal over a specific range of dates. The program then created the timeline with the dates along the bottom and vertical lines leading up from the baseline to the appropriate event name.

Double-clicking on an event title opened the event's data window. Here you can enter a description, or drag in a character's photo from iPhoto. Both the expanded description and the photo then show up on the timeline.

The program comes with a number of color themes to choose from, but you can't change the color for an event's text once the theme is set. This means you can't code your action scenes differently from your romance scenes.

The presentation of the data on the timeline is attractive. However, for days with multiple events, the graph got a bit crowded. There also didn't seem to be any way to zoom in on a particular day and see just those events.

Conclusion: *Timeline3D* looks nice, but it was too crowded for the dense action of my story. Plus, the lack of customization was an issue. However, this was the cheapest program of the ones I tried. Price: Under \$100.

Windows

SmartDraw (www.smartdraw.com) for Windows is a business task and event mapping program that can be adapted to work for writers. I used the timeline view, which creates the standard linear timeline.

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I found this program to be more flexible than *Timeline3D*. Not only was I able to easily change my timeline's parameters from several months down to several days, but I was able to switch the view to show each hour in the day. It staggers events both above and below the line, and lets you drag the text boxes around so the view doesn't get too crowded. You can even change the color of each text box, making the hero's box blue and the heroine's box pink if you want.

However, while you can add photos, it doesn't tie the photos to an event.

Conclusion: *SmartDraw* provides a clean, less crowded timeline than *Timeline3D*. Because *SmartDraw* is an overall business program, it offers templates for all sorts of diagrams, including floor plans, landscape plans, and crime scenes. This might come in handy if you like to create full visuals for your novel. However, the cost is prohibitively high for someone like me who just wants a timeline. Normal price: Over \$200 (they were running a special when I went to their website).

Mac OSX and Windows

MindView (www.matchware.com) is a robust timeline platform that works with both Mac OS X and Windows. I tried the Mac OSX version. *MindView* displays your events in a text bubble above the timeline, with a vertical line connector. You can choose to view the timeline in various increments (standard, daily, weekly, historical, geological). You can add an emoticon in front of the event title, such as a heart for the romantic plot threads, and change the color of the event title if you want to make your action scenes show green and your romance thread show red.

You can add a photo to an event. The event title will be added to the bottom of the photo to help you tell which photo goes with which event. You can even filter your timeline based on key words, so if you named your events to include the POV character or other key element, this could be handy. However, the program couldn't distinguish between the words heroine and hero, so you'd need to use proper names for this to work.

Conclusion: *MindView* has a lot of nice features that could help a writer out. In addition to the timeline view, there are various mind-mapping and story boarding views. Like with *SmartDraw*, these features come with a cost. Price: Over \$200.

Summary

Unfortunately, the verdict on standalone timeline software for writers isn't good. To get enough features to make it worthwhile, you'd need to shell out a lot of money. Over the course of a career, particularly if a writer used the software for workshop presentations, the cost might be worth it. For writers on a budget, though, a more cost effective option would be to choose writing software that comes with a timeline feature. Or to muscle through setting up a timeline in Excel. Or to use the old paper and colored marker method.

What's my method? After playing with the linear timeline views, I realized that for the way I look at a story, I wanted a calendar view. I created color-coded calendars for each novel and each character in iCal. Then I displayed the events from all these calendars on one calendar, so I could see which events

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in Book 3 had conflicts with Book 2.

Whatever your needs, creating a timeline requires work. You have to determine which events you want to map and then enter each event separately, including a description, a date, and if you're using software, a start and end time. Is it worth it? Only you can decide. However, for novels with a complicated plot, having some sort of graphical representation of the story can be a great clarifier.

Good luck!

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