OMEKA PLUGIN | Neatline
This tutorial is formatted as an extension of Neatline.org’s existing tutorial on how to use Neatline.

Neatline is an exhibit-building framework that makes it possible to create beautiful, complex maps and connect them with timelines. Neatline is built as a suite of plugins for the Omeka, a digital archive-building framework that supplies a powerful platform for content management and web publication.

As described in the above snippet from Neatline.org, Neatline is an incredibly versatile plugin that facilitates the communication of any space and/or time-based narratives. Unlike the “Exhibit” feature of Omeka—which is effective in static, gallery-style sequencing of images and text—Neatline presents a more interactive environment that embeds items and narratives within their geographical spaces and times. Furthermore, the plugin features extensive customization options, allowing exhibit creators to design a wide variety of user experiences. From free form, user-directed interaction (Fig. 1) to quasi-cinematic, heavily mediated narratives (Fig. 2), the possibilities are endless.

![Fig. 1 Technology Companies in Silicon Valley and San Francisco](image1)

![Fig. 2. Jedediah Hotchkiss and The Battle of Chancellorsville](image2)

Seeing as Neatline’s website provides a detailed tutorial on how to use the plugin, this ‘tutorial’ will take the form of a series of questions-and-answers. Referencing the two example exhibits pictured above (credit: David McClure), this series will aim to encourage you against falling into the trap of adding features for adding features’ sake, and to instead consider what features are most apt for your project and argument.
MAPS

What base map should I use?

When choosing a base map, you can either choose a base map of your own creation/choosing, or one of the provided “base layer” options to the left. If you are making an argument (or constructing a narrative) that is steeped in historical analysis and artifacts, using historical maps you find on your own may be your best option (as is done in Figure 2). If none are available, consider using “Stamen Watercolor” or one of the “Terrain” options. Avoid using maps whose modern political borders could distract from your analysis.

If your narrative is one based on a current analysis of space (e.g. Figure 1), using the modern maps available is appropriate.

If I’m not using one of Neatline’s pre-sets, should I geo-reference my maps?

The decision of whether or not you need geo-reference your map is largely dependent upon how ‘general’ or ‘localized’ your analysis will be. If you are making an argument about a specific street, for instance, providing a map of the street independent from one of Google or Neatline’s world maps will constructively narrow your scope. Geo-reference your map if you feel a more distanced perspective befits your narrative.

PLOTTING

Should I use points or polygons to locate records?

Though many mapping sites use ‘points,’ these indicators risk conveying a sense of false specificity—something that becomes especially problematic when using maps with satellite imagery. If you were plotting the birth city of a famous author, for instance, plotting a specific point would falsely imply the author was born on a specific street or in a specific building. If such specific information is available to you, points are a fantastic option. Otherwise, it may be best to use Neatline’s “polygon” option to trace the outline of a city or country. You can further communicate ambiguity by stylizing your polygon—e.g. reducing the opacity, removing its outline, etc.
Can I create custom points?
Yes. As seen in Figure 1’s use of company logos, you can use “.jpg” files to replace “points” on your map, a useful function when communicating an image-based narrative.

What is the purpose of date ambiguity?
Neatline offers the date ambiguity widget to allow you visually communicate uncertainty within your timeline. This is a great way to avoid misleading users with false specificity.

NARRATIVE
How much should I direct my audience’s movement through the exhibit?
It is important to consider that any visual graphic is conveying a narrative—an argument about a space—no matter how simple. The question thus becomes how heavily you, as an exhibit creator, want to direct users through your exhibit. Figure 1’s “story” of technological companies’ spatial location in Silicon Valley is a simple one that doesn’t require much direction. The author accordingly let much of the map speak for itself. When conveying a more complicated narrative (Such as Figure 2’s “Battle of Chancellorsville), however, more explicit direction may be required.

How can I direct my audience’s movement through the exhibit?
There are a few ways in which you can control how users will move through your exhibit, the first being to set your “Map Focus.” This directs readers to specific view settings on your map, ensuring that the spatial representation they are seeing matches the item or record you have paired it with.
If linearity or ordering is important to your narrative, consider numbering the titles of your records. You may also re-order the “Items” list.

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Though it may seem superfluous or excessive at first, the miscellany of features Neatline offers stands as a testament to the fact that maps and timelines are not objective images, but ultimately visual translations of time and space. In creating a Neatline exhibit, you assume the role of translator.