Who Explains Triangle?

Compare accounts of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire

SS24.HS.2 "Analyze secondary sources related to the selected topic in history. 2a Describe the strengths and limitations of different types of secondary sources for providing insight into the selected historical subject..."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline one strength and circle one limitation of each later account. Then number the two historians' contrasting claims 1 and 2 to track how their evidence shapes their viewpoints.

One Fire, Different Histories

1 On March 25, 1911, fire swept through the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York City. The fire killed 146 workers, most of them young immigrant women. Many could not escape from the upper floors. Newspapers reported the disaster, and witnesses later described what they saw. Those accounts are primary sources because they came from people living at the time. A historian writing decades later creates a secondary source by selecting, comparing, and explaining such evidence. The historian might also study inspection records and testimony. A secondary source does more than repeat facts: it argues which facts matter most and why.

2 Imagine three later accounts of the fire. A museum exhibit uses photographs and short captions to show the crowded workplace and the people who died. Its visual detail makes the loss vivid, but brief captions may leave little room to explain disagreements. A scholarly article traces debates over workplace rules using inspection records and lawmakers' testimony. It can test a narrow claim closely, but its focus may miss workers' lives outside the factory. A survey textbook places the fire within a broader history of industrial labor. That wide view provides context, yet a short chapter may flatten differences among workers and reformers.

3 Two historians could use the same fire to build different viewpoints. One might argue that labor activists were central to the push for safer workplaces, citing union organizing before and after the fire and workers' public demands. Another might stress the role of state government, citing the investigations and New York laws that followed. Neither explanation is settled by listing the death toll alone. Historians choose a question, weigh evidence, and explain why some causes deserve more emphasis than others. Comparing these interpretations is historiography: studying how accounts of the past differ and why those differences matter.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How would the museum exhibit and survey textbook offer different insights into the fire? Give one strength and one limitation of each.

2. What claim could the scholarly article test closely, and what might its focus leave out?

3. How do the two historians differ in what they emphasize? Name evidence each would use.

4. Why does comparing these two explanations reveal more than listing the death toll?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write 4 to 5 sentences proposing a third historian's viewpoint about the fire, different from the two in the passage. Support it with two details from the passage, name a type of secondary source that could help investigate it, and explain one limitation of that source type.

ANSWER KEY

Who Explains Triangle?

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline one strength and circle one limitation of each later account. Then number the two historians' contrasting claims 1 and 2 to track how their evidence shapes their viewpoints. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How would the museum exhibit and survey textbook offer different insights into the fire? Give one strength and one limitation of each.	**The exhibit makes the human loss vivid, but its brief captions may not explain disagreements. The textbook gives broad labor-history context, but its short treatment may flatten differences among workers and reformers.**
2	What claim could the scholarly article test closely, and what might its focus leave out?	**It could test a claim about debates over workplace rules using inspection records and lawmakers' testimony. It might leave out workers' lives outside the factory.**
3	How do the two historians differ in what they emphasize? Name evidence each would use.	**One emphasizes labor activists, citing union organizing and workers' public demands. The other emphasizes state government, citing investigations and New York laws after the fire.**
4	Why does comparing these two explanations reveal more than listing the death toll?	**The comparison shows how historians select evidence and assign different importance to causes. The death toll alone cannot explain why workplace change followed.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

A third historian might focus on the experiences of the young immigrant women who worked at Triangle, rather than on activists or lawmakers. Most of the 146 people killed were young immigrant women. Many workers could not escape from the upper floors. A museum exhibit could help this historian bring attention to the people who died and the conditions in the workplace. However, its brief captions might not provide enough space to explain how different workers experienced the factory.

Accept other evidence-based contrasts between source types and interpretations. For Part 3, the proposed viewpoint must differ from both the labor-activist and state-government explanations.