One Fire, Three Views

Compare how historians interpret the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire.

SS24.HS.2c "Apply the concept of historiography through contrasting how various historians have interpreted the historical subject."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline each historian's main interpretation, circle the evidence each would use, and number the three viewpoints so you can compare them.

What Did the Triangle Fire Mean?

1 On March 25, 1911, fire swept through the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York City. The blaze killed 146 workers, most of them young immigrant women. Some exits were blocked or locked, and the building's fire escapes could not provide a safe way out for everyone. The disaster did not produce a single historical meaning. Historiography examines how historians build interpretations of the past. To see the difference, imagine three historians examining the same fire. They agree on the death toll but ask different questions and treat different records as central evidence.

2 A labor historian might argue that the fire exposed the cost of workers having little power over factory conditions. This historian would examine accounts of the 1909 garment workers' strike and testimony about exits to connect organizing with demands for safety. A legal historian might instead focus on the fire as a turning point in state regulation. This historian would compare safety rules before the disaster with New York laws passed afterward. Both see unsafe conditions, but the first emphasizes a struggle already underway; the second emphasizes how public outrage helped change government action.

3 An immigration historian might center the workers' lives rather than the laws that followed. Using family letters, newspaper accounts in immigrant communities, and records of relief efforts, this historian might ask how families faced loss and how neighbors responded. That view can reveal experiences that a list of new rules cannot show. Yet letters from a few families cannot represent every worker, just as new laws alone cannot prove that every workplace became safe. Contrasting interpretations is not a contest to find the one correct headline. It means testing how each historian's question and sources shape what the fire comes to mean.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How do the labor historian and the legal historian differ in their interpretations of why the fire matters?

2. How do the sources each of those historians chooses support a different focus in time?

3. What does the immigration historian's interpretation bring into view that the legal historian's focus on laws might miss?

4. What limit does the passage identify for the immigration historian's evidence, and what similar limit does it identify for the legal historian's evidence?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Using details from the passage, propose two fresh interpretations of the fire that emphasize different aspects from the three presented. For each, name a supporting source or detail, and explain one limit of your evidence.

ANSWER KEY

One Fire, Three Views

HIGH SCHOOL · SS24.HS.2c

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline each historian's main interpretation, circle the evidence each would use, and number the three viewpoints so you can compare them. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How do the labor historian and the legal historian differ in their interpretations of why the fire matters?	**The labor historian sees the fire as evidence of workers' limited power and an ongoing safety struggle. The legal historian sees it as a turning point in state safety regulation.**
2	How do the sources each of those historians chooses support a different focus in time?	**Strike accounts and exit testimony point the labor historian toward organizing and conditions before the fire. Comparing earlier rules with later laws points the legal historian toward changes after it.**
3	What does the immigration historian's interpretation bring into view that the legal historian's focus on laws might miss?	**It brings families' losses and neighbors' responses into view, experiences that new safety laws alone cannot show.**
4	What limit does the passage identify for the immigration historian's evidence, and what similar limit does it identify for the legal historian's evidence?	**Letters from a few families cannot represent every worker. New laws cannot prove that every workplace became safe.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

A building-design historian might interpret the fire as a warning about emergency exits in tall factories. The fire escapes could not provide a safe way out for everyone, so that detail supports a focus on building design. A media historian might interpret the disaster as an event whose meaning was shaped by public reporting. Newspaper accounts in immigrant communities could show how readers learned about the losses. Evidence about fire escapes cannot tell us how families experienced the disaster, while newspaper accounts may not capture every worker's experience.

Accept other well-supported contrasts that distinguish a historian's interpretation from the evidence used to build it. For Part 3, look for two distinct interpretations grounded in passage details and a specific evidence limit.