Clues and Gaps

Compare records of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire

SS24.HS.4c "Describe the strengths and limitations of different types of primary sources for providing insight into the selected historical subject."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline one detail about what each source records, circle one detail about what it may miss, and number the four source types 1 through 4.

Investigating a Factory Fire

1 On March 25, 1911, a fire swept through the upper floors of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York City. One hundred forty-six workers died. Imagine finding four possible records while investigating why so many people could not escape. A survivor's account, recorded shortly after the fire, describes smoke filling a workroom and a rush toward a stairwell. The survivor worked near that stairwell but had not visited every exit. An interviewer wrote down her words. The interviewer's questions and notes determined which parts of her account reached the written record.

2 Imagine a newspaper published the morning after the fire. Its reporter had not entered the building during the blaze but had interviewed several people who watched from the street. The story printed their differing estimates of how many workers escaped. Because the paper had a deadline, those estimates appeared before investigators finished counting. A payroll ledger from the week before the fire offers another kind of record. It lists workers' names and weekly wage amounts in tidy columns. No entry says where a listed worker was when the fire began or whether that worker collected the listed wages.

3 A fourth record is a set of building plans drawn before the factory opened. The plans mark the intended locations of stairs, doors, and workrooms on each floor. An architect made them for construction, not to document the building during the fire. Repairs, moved equipment, or locked doors might have changed how people actually moved through the space. Each source was created at a different time and for a different purpose. A researcher studying the deaths can compare records, but the records do not all answer the same question. Even records from the time can leave important gaps.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How could the survivor's account help a researcher study the escape, and why could it not establish what happened at every exit?

2. What does the newspaper story offer that the survivor's account does not, and why should a researcher question its escape estimates?

3. What can the payroll ledger show about workers, and what can it not prove about any listed worker on the day of the fire?

4. How could the building plans help a researcher study escape routes, and why might the plans differ from conditions during the fire?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Choose two primary-source types not described in the passage to investigate whether escape routes changed after the fire. In four sentences, explain one insight and one limitation for each type.

ANSWER KEY

Clues and Gaps

HIGH SCHOOL · SS24.HS.4c

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline one detail about what each source records, circle one detail about what it may miss, and number the four source types 1 through 4. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How could the survivor's account help a researcher study the escape, and why could it not establish what happened at every exit?	**It describes smoke and movement toward a stairwell near the survivor. She had not visited every exit, so she could not report what happened at all of them.**
2	What does the newspaper story offer that the survivor's account does not, and why should a researcher question its escape estimates?	**It brings together several street witnesses' estimates. Their estimates differed and were printed before investigators finished counting.**
3	What can the payroll ledger show about workers, and what can it not prove about any listed worker on the day of the fire?	**It records listed workers' names and weekly wage amounts. It cannot prove that a listed worker was present when the fire began.**
4	How could the building plans help a researcher study escape routes, and why might the plans differ from conditions during the fire?	**They show the intended locations of stairs and doors. Later changes or locked doors could have made the actual routes different.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Dated inspection reports from before and after the fire could show whether inspectors recorded changes to exits. They might miss doors that were blocked between inspections. Dated photographs from before and after the fire could show changes to visible stairways or doors. They could not establish whether an exit was unlocked during an emergency.

Accept other passage-supported strengths and limitations for the four questions. For the open task, accept two primary-source types beyond the passage's four if each has a plausible insight and a specific limitation.