Tracing the Evidence

Compare sources used to investigate the Triangle Shirtwaist fire.

SS24.HS.6 "Compare historical methods utilized for research and evaluate how these methods yield information regarding the selected historical subject."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Number the three research methods in the passage. For each method, underline one kind of information it provides and circle one limit on what it can prove.

What Can We Know About the Fire?

1 On March 25, 1911, a fire at New York City's Triangle Shirtwaist Factory killed 146 workers. To study what people knew while the disaster was unfolding, a historian might search newspapers printed the next day. Reporters recorded crowds outside the building, early death counts, and statements from witnesses. These articles show what information reached the public quickly, but speed could make details unreliable. A first report might give a death count that later changed. Comparing several papers can reveal which claims spread widely, yet agreement does not prove that every shared claim was true.

2 To investigate what happened inside the factory, a historian might read testimony from the criminal trial of its owners. Witnesses answered questions under oath about exits and events inside the building. A historian can compare these accounts with newspaper stories to test claims about escape routes. Testimony offers detailed observations from people who were there, while newspapers show what the public heard at the time. Still, witnesses saw different parts of the factory, and lawyers asked questions to support their cases. A sworn statement is valuable evidence, not an automatic final answer.

3 A third method is to examine building plans and city records describing the factory's exits. Plans can show the intended locations of stairs and doors, but they cannot show whether a door was open during the fire or whether a hallway was blocked. That is where witness accounts may add information the plans cannot provide. Conversely, a plan can help a historian check whether an account's description of the building is plausible. Together, the three methods distinguish public reports, firsthand claims, and the building's documented design without treating any single source as complete.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. If you wanted to learn what the public heard soon after the fire, why would you start with newspapers rather than trial testimony? What limit would you keep in mind?

2. How could building plans and witness testimony contribute different evidence about whether an exit could be used during the fire?

3. Why might comparing several newspapers be less convincing than comparing a newspaper claim about escape routes with trial testimony?

4. A historian finds a witness's description of a staircase. How could a building plan help check the account, and what could the plan not settle?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Investigate a new question: How did workplace safety in New York change after the fire? Propose two types of historical records you would examine, explain what each could reveal and what each might miss, and tell how comparing them would improve your conclusion.

ANSWER KEY

Tracing the Evidence

HIGH SCHOOL · SS24.HS.6

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Number the three research methods in the passage. For each method, underline one kind of information it provides and circle one limit on what it can prove. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	If you wanted to learn what the public heard soon after the fire, why would you start with newspapers rather than trial testimony? What limit would you keep in mind?	**Next-day newspapers show what information reached the public quickly. Their early details, such as death counts, could be unreliable.**
2	How could building plans and witness testimony contribute different evidence about whether an exit could be used during the fire?	**Plans could show an exit's intended location. A witness might describe whether its door was open or a route was blocked during the fire.**
3	Why might comparing several newspapers be less convincing than comparing a newspaper claim about escape routes with trial testimony?	**Several papers could repeat the same mistaken claim. Trial testimony adds observations from people who were inside, although their accounts also need to be checked.**
4	A historian finds a witness's description of a staircase. How could a building plan help check the account, and what could the plan not settle?	**The plan could show whether the described staircase fits the building's documented design. It could not settle what happened on the staircase during the fire.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

I would examine New York lawmaking records to find out which workplace safety rules changed after the fire. Those records would show what lawmakers required, but not whether factories followed the rules. I would also examine factory inspection reports from later years to learn what inspectors observed at the workplaces they visited. Those reports would not represent every factory. Comparing the rules with inspection findings would help me distinguish changes in the law from changes inspectors actually observed.

Accept other relevant pairs of records if the response identifies what each can and cannot show and explains how comparing them answers the new question.