Exits Under Scrutiny

Test an interpretation against evidence from different historical sources.

SS24.HS.8 "Utilize various historical methods to acquire information on the selected subject and relate findings to the research question created. 8a Compare historical evidence to previous interpretations and corroborate salient facts and theories."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline evidence from witnesses, circle evidence from newspapers, and number each statement that limits what the evidence can prove. Use your marks to judge whether the sources support the proposed interpretation.

What Kept Workers From Escaping?

1. On March 25, 1911, a fire swept through the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in New York City. The factory occupied the top floors of a ten-story building, and 146 workers died. A researcher asks, "Did unsafe exits contribute to the deaths?" Newspaper accounts described workers rushing toward doors and windows. A proposed interpretation blames the high death toll mostly on panic. That interpretation raises a question: Were workers unable to escape mainly because of their actions, or because routes out failed? To investigate, the researcher compares accounts written at different times with records from people present.

2. Survivors' testimony offers one kind of evidence. Several workers said a door to the Washington Place stairway on the ninth floor was locked during the fire. Their accounts support the idea that at least one exit could not be used. Yet witnesses saw only parts of a crowded building, and their testimony cannot establish the condition of every door. Contemporary newspaper reports described another danger: the exterior fire escape collapsed as people tried to use it. That failure does not prove any door was locked. It does challenge the claim that panic alone explains why so many people could not get out.

3. The factory owners were tried for manslaughter and acquitted. Defense lawyers challenged the claim that the owners knew the Washington Place door was locked. An acquittal does not establish that every exit was open; it means the prosecution did not secure a conviction. To check an interpretation, the researcher asks which facts different sources support and where they stop. Survivor testimony and newspaper reports point to dangerous escape conditions, while the trial outcome limits what can be claimed about the owners' criminal responsibility. The strongest conclusion is narrower than either "panic caused everything" or "the verdict proved the building was safe."

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How do the survivors' testimony and newspaper reports each challenge the interpretation that panic mostly caused the deaths?

2. What does the survivors' testimony support about the Washington Place door, and what broader claim can it not establish?

3. How should a researcher weigh the owners' acquittal alongside the survivors' accounts of the door?

4. Which conclusion is better supported by the sources, that escape routes were dangerous or that the owners were criminally responsible? Explain.

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

In four to five sentences, write a new research question about whether workplace safety changed after the fire. Identify two types of historical records you would examine, explain how you would compare them with a claim that nothing changed, and name one limit of your investigation.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · SS24.HS.8

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline evidence from witnesses, circle evidence from newspapers, and number each statement that limits what the evidence can prove. Use your marks to judge whether the sources support the proposed interpretation. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How do the survivors' testimony and newspaper reports each challenge the interpretation that panic mostly caused the deaths?	**Survivors said a ninth-floor stairway door was locked, and newspapers reported that the fire escape collapsed. Both describe barriers to escape beyond workers' actions.**
2	What does the survivors' testimony support about the Washington Place door, and what broader claim can it not establish?	**It supports that the ninth-floor door was locked during the fire. It cannot establish that every door in the building was locked.**
3	How should a researcher weigh the owners' acquittal alongside the survivors' accounts of the door?	**The acquittal means the owners were not convicted of manslaughter. It does not prove the door was open or erase testimony that it was locked.**
4	Which conclusion is better supported by the sources, that escape routes were dangerous or that the owners were criminally responsible? Explain.	**Dangerous escape routes are better supported by testimony about the door and reports of the collapsed fire escape. The acquittal limits a claim of criminal responsibility.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Did factory escape rules in New York change after the 1911 fire? I would compare state safety laws from before and after 1911, then read factory inspection reports from those same years. New exit requirements in the laws would challenge the claim that nothing changed, while inspections could show whether factories followed the rules. If the reports covered only a few workplaces, I could not claim that every factory became safer.

Accept answers that distinguish evidence of unsafe exits from proof about every exit or the owners' criminal responsibility. For Your Turn, accept other relevant pairs of historical records if the student explains how they could test the claim and identifies a genuine limit.