Through Riis's Lens

Trace how experience, audience, and historical conditions shape a text.

8.T.C.2 "Authors & Speakers: Analyze how authors' and/or speakers' perspectives influence texts and how circumstances shape their creation."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline details about Jacob Riis's experiences or the circumstances in which he wrote. Circle words or phrases that show how his perspective and purpose shaped his choices.

A Reporter's Purpose

1 In the late 1880s, journalist Jacob Riis walked through crowded tenements on New York City's Lower East Side. Riis had immigrated from Denmark in 1870 and had experienced unemployment and hunger after arriving in the United States. As a police reporter, he saw families living in dark, poorly ventilated rooms. His experiences led him to view unsafe housing as a public problem, not simply a private failure. He wanted readers with money and political power to notice conditions they could usually avoid.

2 In 1890, Riis published How the Other Half Lives, combining reporting with photographs and descriptions of tenement life. New flash photography allowed him to show indoor spaces that daylight photography could not capture. He selected scenes of overcrowding, poverty, and neglect because he hoped to persuade middle-class readers and city leaders to support housing reform. His book did not present every New Yorker's experience. Instead, its examples and urgent tone reflected his purpose of exposing conditions he believed were unjust.

3 Riis wrote during a period when rapid immigration and industrial growth had increased New York City's population. Many wealthy residents lived far from the tenements and knew little about them. These circumstances shaped both his audience and his method: he used startling images and direct language to bring distant conditions close. The book helped build support for reform, although change came through many people's efforts. In 1901, New York State passed the Tenement House Act, which required improvements such as better light, ventilation, and fire safety in many apartment buildings.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did Riis's experiences as an immigrant and police reporter influence his view of tenement housing?

2. What circumstances helped Riis choose photographs and direct descriptions for his book?

3. How did Riis's purpose influence the examples and tone he used in How the Other Half Lives?

4. How does the statement that Riis's book did not present every New Yorker's experience help you analyze his perspective?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine you are a student journalist who uses a wheelchair and is reporting on an auditorium that has only stairs at its entrance. Write exactly four sentences for the school newspaper that show how your experience and purpose shape the details you choose.

Through Riis's Lens

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline details about Jacob Riis's experiences or the circumstances in which he wrote. Circle words or phrases that show how his perspective and purpose shaped his choices. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did Riis's experiences as an immigrant and police reporter influence his view of tenement housing?	**His hunger, unemployment, and reporting showed him hardship firsthand, so he saw unsafe housing as a public problem that needed attention.**
2	What circumstances helped Riis choose photographs and direct descriptions for his book?	**Flash photography could reveal dark indoor rooms, and many wealthy readers lived far from tenements and did not know the conditions there.**
3	How did Riis's purpose influence the examples and tone he used in How the Other Half Lives?	**Because he wanted readers and leaders to support reform, he chose examples of overcrowding, poverty, and neglect and used an urgent tone.**
4	How does the statement that Riis's book did not present every New Yorker's experience help you analyze his perspective?	**It shows that he selected examples that supported his goal of exposing unjust tenement conditions, rather than giving a complete picture of all New Yorkers.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

During Friday's assembly, I waited outside the auditorium because the only entrance had stairs. From that spot, I could hear the speakers but could not join my classmates. I am focusing on this barrier because I use a wheelchair and want school leaders to see how one building choice excludes students. The school should add a working ramp or lift before the next assembly.

Accept answers that connect Riis's personal experiences, available technology, audience, and historical setting to his selected details, tone, and purpose. For the open task, accept four sentences that use the writer's circumstance to explain chosen details and a clear purpose.