Beyond the Verdict

Investigate causes, responsibility, and the limits of historical evidence.

6-12.HT1.5 "Analyze historical issues by addressing questions that are open-ended and require research, analysis, and interpretation."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two conditions that made escape difficult, circle one limit of what a verdict or law proves, and number two sources a historian could compare. These marks will help you build an interpretation from more than one piece of evidence.

Investigating the Triangle Fire

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, where employees sewed women's blouses. Many workers were young immigrant women. The fire killed 146 people. Some workers escaped by elevator or stairs, but others could not reach safety. A fire escape collapsed under the weight of people trying to flee, and firefighters' ladders could not reach the highest floors. These details raise an open question: Which conditions made the fire so deadly, and who had the power to change them?

2. Survivors testified that a door leading to a stairway was locked during the fire. Factory owners Max Blanck and Isaac Harris were tried for manslaughter, but a jury found them not guilty. The prosecution had to show that the owners knew the door was locked at the time of the fire. An acquittal did not prove that the door was open or that the factory was safe. Testimony can reveal what a witness experienced, while a trial verdict answers a narrower legal question. To investigate responsibility, a historian would compare testimony with building records and reports from investigators.

3. After the fire, New York State created a commission to investigate factory conditions. Its investigators visited workplaces, heard testimony, and proposed safety changes. The state later passed laws requiring stronger fire protections in factories. A law's passage shows what officials decided to require, but not whether every workplace followed it. Inspection reports could help answer that question; workers' accounts could show how safety rules worked in daily life. Such sources might disagree because inspectors could visit briefly, while workers spent entire shifts inside. The fire's history is more than a list of events: it is an argument built from evidence.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Why would blaming the deaths only on the locked door leave out important evidence?

2. How should a historian interpret the not-guilty verdict alongside the survivors' testimony?

3. What claim about factory safety can the later laws support, and what claim would need more evidence?

4. If inspection reports and workers' accounts disagree about safety after the fire, what could explain the difference?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write your own open-ended research question about how factory safety changed after the fire. Name two kinds of sources from the passage, explain what each might reveal, and identify one limit of your evidence.

ANSWER KEY

Beyond the Verdict

GRADES 6-12 · 6-12.HT1.5

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two conditions that made escape difficult, circle one limit of what a verdict or law proves, and number two sources a historian could compare. These marks will help you build an interpretation from more than one piece of evidence. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Why would blaming the deaths only on the locked door leave out important evidence?	**The fire escape collapsed, and firefighters' ladders could not reach the highest floors. Both also limited escape.**
2	How should a historian interpret the not-guilty verdict alongside the survivors' testimony?	**The verdict means the prosecution did not prove the owners knew the door was locked at the time. It does not show that the survivors were wrong or that the factory was safe.**
3	What claim about factory safety can the later laws support, and what claim would need more evidence?	**The laws show that New York State required stronger fire protections. Whether factories followed those requirements needs more evidence, such as inspection reports.**
4	If inspection reports and workers' accounts disagree about safety after the fire, what could explain the difference?	**Inspectors might have visited briefly, while workers spent entire shifts in the factories and could observe conditions over time.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

How did escape routes in New York factories change in the years after the Triangle fire? I would compare inspection reports from different years to look for changes to exits. I would use workers' accounts to learn whether those exits stayed usable during shifts. One limit is that reports from a few factories might not show what happened across the state.

Accept interpretations grounded in the passage that distinguish what evidence shows from what remains uncertain. For the open task, look for a researchable question, two relevant source types, and a specific limit.