Tracing Fire Evidence

Three sources, three views of a factory fire

6-12.HT2.6 "Evaluate historical sources, considering authorship, strengths, limitations, potential biases, and appropriate application, while analyzing primary and secondary sources to understand their collective contribution to historical..."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline one useful contribution of each source, and circle one limit or possible bias for each source.

Investigating the Triangle Fire

1. On March 25, 1911, a fire swept through the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York City. The fire killed 146 workers, many of them young immigrant women. To investigate why so many people died, imagine finding a worker's sworn testimony given soon after the fire. She says the stairway door she reached would not open. As a primary source, her account offers direct evidence of what she experienced and can help explain one escape route. Yet smoke and fear may have limited what she could see. Her testimony cannot tell us whether every door in the building was locked.

2. A newspaper reporter who visited the scene wrote a story the next morning. This primary source records what people were saying while the disaster was still fresh. The reporter interviewed witnesses and described crowded streets below the factory. However, the reporter did not enter the burning floors, and early reports could contain mistakes. A dramatic headline might have been chosen to attract readers, not to measure the fire's causes carefully. Use the article to study early public reactions, but check any claim about conditions inside against testimony and other records.

3. A historian writing a century later compares witness accounts, building plans, and inspection records. This secondary source can connect details that no single witness knew and explain how the fire influenced demands for workplace safety rules. Its author may focus on reform and give less space to evidence that complicates that story. Check which records the historian cites before accepting a broad claim. Together, the worker, reporter, and historian offer different kinds of evidence. If their accounts disagree, ask when each was written, what each author could know, and what further records could settle the question.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Why is the worker's testimony useful for studying an escape route but not enough to judge every exit?

2. What possible bias could shape the newspaper's headline, and how should you check its claims about conditions inside?

3. What can the later historian do that one witness could not, and what should you check before accepting the historian's broad claims?

4. If the newspaper and the worker disagree about an exit, how could the historian's work help you investigate the disagreement?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

A museum label claims, "Every exit was locked, and that alone caused all 146 deaths." In four sentences, explain how you would test this claim using two sources from the passage and one additional kind of record. Include a limitation of one source.

ANSWER KEY

Tracing Fire Evidence

GRADES 6-12 · 6-12.HT2.6

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline one useful contribution of each source, and circle one limit or possible bias for each source. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Why is the worker's testimony useful for studying an escape route but not enough to judge every exit?	**She describes a door she reached, but her limited view cannot show whether every exit was locked.**
2	What possible bias could shape the newspaper's headline, and how should you check its claims about conditions inside?	**The headline might aim to attract readers. Check claims about the burning floors against testimony and other records.**
3	What can the later historian do that one witness could not, and what should you check before accepting the historian's broad claims?	**The historian can compare several kinds of records. Check the cited records, especially because a focus on reform may leave out complicating evidence.**
4	If the newspaper and the worker disagree about an exit, how could the historian's work help you investigate the disagreement?	**Check the building plans and inspection records the historian cites, while considering that the reporter did not enter the burning floors and the worker saw only part of the building.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

The worker's testimony supports a claim about one door she reached, not every exit. I would compare it with the historian's account of inspection records to check for evidence about other exits. I would also seek a fire department report for evidence about exits and other hazards. The historian may emphasize safety reforms, so I would check the records the historian cites before accepting the museum's claim.

Accept other reasonable ways to compare the sources or seek an additional record. Do not accept the worker's account as proof that every exit was locked.