Evidence After the Fire

Compare firsthand records and later explanations of a historical event.

IS.1.35 "Locate and analyze primary sources and secondary sources related to an event or issue of the past. Discover possible limitations in various kinds of historical evidence and differing secondary opinions."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two kinds of primary sources and circle a limitation of each. Number the two different secondary interpretations 1 and 2 so you can compare what each emphasizes.

Investigating the Triangle Fire

1 On March 25, 1911, fire swept through the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in New York City. Most workers were young immigrant women who made blouses on upper floors of the Asch Building. The fire killed 146 people. To learn what happened, a researcher can search Cornell University's online Triangle Fire collection for witness testimony recorded during investigations. A witness's account is a primary source because it comes from someone present at the time. Witnesses described trouble getting through exits. Their accounts offer details that later writers could not observe firsthand, but smoke, panic, and each person's location shaped what each could see.

2 A second path leads to the Library of Congress's Chronicling America newspaper collection, where a researcher can look for reports printed just after the fire. Such articles are primary sources for what the public was told at the time, even when a reporter repeated someone else's claim. Newspaper coverage described workers jumping from windows, while investigation testimony also described difficulty using exits. Neither source alone shows everything that happened on every floor. A newspaper's deadline could leave little time to check claims, and a witness could not see through walls or across a crowded room.

3 Later historians use those records to write secondary accounts, which interpret evidence rather than record the fire as it unfolds. One interpretation emphasizes unsafe exit routes, including doors witnesses said were locked. Another emphasizes wider conditions, including crowded workrooms and weak safety rules, as reasons so many people died. These views need not cancel each other out, but they answer somewhat different questions. To compare them, ask which documents each author cites and whether those documents support the specific claim. A later account may connect many sources, yet its choice of evidence can leave other explanations in the background.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Where could you locate firsthand testimony about the fire, and why is it a primary source?

2. What can a newspaper report reveal about the fire, and how might its deadline limit its reliability?

3. How do the two later interpretations differ in explaining why so many people died?

4. Why should a historian avoid using one witness's testimony to describe conditions on every floor?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Suppose you want to investigate whether public accounts of the fire changed after 1911. In 4 to 5 sentences, name one primary source and one secondary source you would seek, where you would search for each, and one limitation of each for answering your question.

ANSWER KEY

Evidence After the Fire

HIGH SCHOOL · IS.1.35

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two kinds of primary sources and circle a limitation of each. Number the two different secondary interpretations 1 and 2 so you can compare what each emphasizes. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Where could you locate firsthand testimony about the fire, and why is it a primary source?	**Cornell University's online Triangle Fire collection has investigation testimony. It is primary because witnesses who were present gave the accounts.**
2	What can a newspaper report reveal about the fire, and how might its deadline limit its reliability?	**It can reveal what the public was told soon after the fire. A deadline might leave too little time to check claims.**
3	How do the two later interpretations differ in explaining why so many people died?	**One emphasizes unsafe exits, including doors witnesses said were locked. The other emphasizes broader conditions, such as crowded workrooms and weak safety rules.**
4	Why should a historian avoid using one witness's testimony to describe conditions on every floor?	**The witness could report only what they could see from their location, especially amid smoke and panic.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

I would search the Library of Congress's Chronicling America collection for a newspaper report published in 1911. It would show what readers could learn soon after the fire, but its deadline may have left errors unchecked. I would search a library catalog for a later historian's book about the fire. The book could show how an account changed, but its author may have selected evidence that favors one explanation.

Accept specific source types and search locations supported by the passage. For the open task, each limitation should explain what its source cannot reliably establish about accounts over time.