Evidence Under Fire

Investigate how evidence supports and limits historical claims

AWH.P.1.2 "Develop practices which demonstrate an understanding that social studies involves the evaluation of evidence. Develop, investigate, and evaluate plausible answers to essential questions that reflect enduring understandings across time..."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two facts about safety, circle a conclusion the passage challenges, and number the two sources that disagree about locked exits.

What Can the Evidence Prove?

1. On March 25, 1911, a fire swept through the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in New York City. The factory occupied upper floors of a building, beyond the reach of many fire ladders. The building's fire escape collapsed, and 146 workers died. An essential question is: Who should be responsible for preventing deaths at work? One supporting question is whether workers had usable exits. Reports of the death toll establish the scale of the disaster, but they cannot settle that question. To investigate it, a historian needs evidence about the exits themselves, not just the tragic outcome.

2. Survivors testified that a door on the Washington Place side was locked when they tried to escape. Factory owners disputed claims about locked exits, and a jury later acquitted them of manslaughter. These sources do not all answer the same question. Testimony describes what particular workers encountered; the verdict shows that prosecutors did not prove the criminal charge to the jury's satisfaction. An acquittal does not establish that every exit was usable. To judge testimony, a historian would compare accounts from workers in different locations and examine whether their details agree with other records.

3. Historians can agree that blocked escape routes increased danger while disagreeing about how to divide responsibility among owners, building design, and government oversight. A newspaper editorial demanding stricter laws reveals a writer's argument, but it cannot by itself establish what happened at each doorway. Fire department records about ladders and the collapsed escape could help test broader claims about safety conditions. Suppose someone argues, 'The owners were acquitted, so the factory was safe.' That conclusion does not follow: a verdict about criminal guilt cannot measure every safety hazard. Strong answers distinguish what evidence shows from what people infer.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Two workers describe different conditions at exits. How could you investigate whether their accounts actually conflict?

2. What does the jury's verdict show, and what does it not establish about the exits?

3. What could historians agree on while disagreeing about responsibility? Name two possible sources of responsibility from the passage.

4. Why are fire department records more useful than a newspaper editorial for testing a claim about the fire escape?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Choose a present-day workplace other than a clothing factory and write your own question about its safety. Name two different sources you would seek, explain how you would check their reliability, and identify one disagreement the evidence could help resolve.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · AWH.P.1.2

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two facts about safety, circle a conclusion the passage challenges, and number the two sources that disagree about locked exits. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Two workers describe different conditions at exits. How could you investigate whether their accounts actually conflict?	**Check whether they described the same exit, then compare their details with other workers' accounts and records. Different locations could explain different accounts.**
2	What does the jury's verdict show, and what does it not establish about the exits?	**It shows that the criminal charge was not proved to the jury's satisfaction. It does not establish that every exit was usable.**
3	What could historians agree on while disagreeing about responsibility? Name two possible sources of responsibility from the passage.	**They could agree that blocked escape routes increased danger while disagreeing about the roles of owners, building design, or government oversight.**
4	Why are fire department records more useful than a newspaper editorial for testing a claim about the fire escape?	**The records could provide evidence about the collapsed escape. An editorial expresses an argument for stricter laws but cannot establish what happened to the escape.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Are delivery drivers given enough time to complete their routes safely? I would seek company schedules and interviews with drivers. I would check whether the schedules cover typical workdays and whether the interviews include drivers with different routes and shifts. The sources might disagree about whether late deliveries result from traffic or unrealistic schedules. Comparing planned delivery times with drivers' accounts of actual trips could help test both explanations, though neither source alone would settle the question.

Accept answers that distinguish a source's claims from what it can establish. For the open task, look for an investigable safety question, two relevant sources, specific reliability checks, and a plausible disagreement.