Evidence at the Exits

Investigate what sources can and cannot reveal about a factory fire.

AWH.P.2.2.A "Gather and evaluate the usefulness of various formats of evidence for specific inquiry, analyzing the broader historical context, and assessing potential bias and credibility of sources."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline the four sources described in detail, circle a limitation or possible bias for each one, and number two details about the historical context that shape the inquiry.

What Made Escape Difficult?

1. On March 25, 1911, a fire swept through the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in New York City, killing 146 workers. Many were young immigrant women who made clothing on upper floors of a building. Imagine investigating one focused question: What made it difficult for workers to escape? A newspaper article printed the next day describes smoke, crowded exits, and people jumping from windows. Its quick publication makes it useful for finding what people reported immediately. Yet reporters faced confusion at the scene, so dramatic details need checking against other evidence. A vivid account is a starting point, not a complete explanation.

2. Survivors later testified that a door on one exit route was locked during the fire. Their firsthand accounts can reveal what they tried and saw, but smoke, fear, and limited viewpoints could affect details. The factory owners disputed claims that doors were locked. Their statements matter because they had knowledge of workplace practices, but they also had a reason to avoid blame. A building floor plan could show where exits and stairways were located. It cannot show whether a particular door was open that afternoon. Compare these formats to separate the building's design from people's experiences of using it.

3. Context changes how these sources should be read. In 1911, garment workers often labored long hours, and workplace safety rules were weaker than those that followed the fire. Public anger helped spur new safety laws in New York. That later response shows why the disaster mattered, but it does not prove what happened at each exit on March 25. To investigate escape conditions, a historian could compare survivor testimony with a floor plan and a newspaper report, then look for inspection records from the time. Agreement across independent sources strengthens a claim, while disagreement points to a question worth investigating.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How could the newspaper article help answer the inquiry question, and why should a historian check its details?

2. How might survivor testimony and the owners' statements offer different views of a locked door? Identify a possible limitation or bias in each.

3. What could a floor plan establish about escape routes, and what could it not establish?

4. How does the passage's historical context help explain the response to the fire without proving what happened at each exit?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

A classmate says, “Because safety laws changed after the fire, the factory had no exits.” Write 4 to 5 sentences evaluating this claim using two different evidence formats, one source limitation, and one additional record you would seek.

ANSWER KEY

Evidence at the Exits

HIGH SCHOOL · AWH.P.2.2.A

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline the four sources described in detail, circle a limitation or possible bias for each one, and number two details about the historical context that shape the inquiry. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How could the newspaper article help answer the inquiry question, and why should a historian check its details?	**It reports what people described soon after the fire, including crowded exits. Reporters faced confusion at the scene, so details need confirmation.**
2	How might survivor testimony and the owners' statements offer different views of a locked door? Identify a possible limitation or bias in each.	**Survivors said a door was locked, but each had a limited view during a frightening event. The owners denied the claim and had a reason to avoid blame.**
3	What could a floor plan establish about escape routes, and what could it not establish?	**It could show the locations of exits and stairways. It could not establish whether a particular door was open during the fire.**
4	How does the passage's historical context help explain the response to the fire without proving what happened at each exit?	**Workplace safety rules in 1911 were weaker than those that followed, and public anger helped spur new laws. Those later laws do not show the condition of each exit during the fire.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

New York's later safety laws show concern about workplace protections, not that the factory lacked exits. A building floor plan could show where exits were built, but not whether a door was open during the fire. Survivor testimony about a locked door describes access to one exit, although each witness saw only part of the event. I would seek an inspection record from before the fire to check what officials documented about the exits.

Accept other supported evaluations that distinguish the existence of exits from access to them during the fire. Additional records should be relevant to exit locations, conditions, or workplace practices.