What Drove Reform?

Weigh evidence and interpretations of a workplace disaster

E.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 one piece of evidence from before the fire and one from after it, circle the two contrasting interpretations, and number two statements that limit what a source can prove.

The Fire and the Fight for Safety

1. On March 25, 1911, a fire at New York City's Triangle Shirtwaist Factory killed 146 workers. Many were young immigrant women. The tragedy raises an essential question: What makes workplaces safer, government rules, worker organizing, or both? A newspaper account from the next day can show what people learned quickly, but it may contain errors made in the confusion. Testimony from survivors can reveal where individuals tried to escape, but no single witness saw every part of the building. To investigate the larger question, compare accounts with records from the New York State Factory Investigating Commission, which examined workplace hazards after the fire.

2. The sources point toward both urgent danger and earlier demands for change. Witness accounts describe escape routes blocked by flames and a door that could not be opened. The commission later examined hazards in factories, including fire exits, and its work helped shape new safety laws. Yet workers had organized before the disaster. In 1909, thousands of garment workers in New York joined a strike for better conditions. Those facts agree that factory safety was a serious issue, but they challenge the claim that public action began only after the fire. A strike record documents demands; it cannot, by itself, prove which later law resulted from those demands.

3. Two interpretations can fit this evidence. One historian might emphasize the fire as a turning point because investigations and new laws followed it. Another might emphasize the earlier strike because workers had already pushed for better conditions. These views disagree about what drove reform most, not about whether the fire occurred. Timing alone does not prove that the fire caused every new law, and the strike alone does not prove workers could secure safety without laws. A stronger answer would examine specific laws, debates about them, and worker testimony, then explain how much each source can and cannot establish.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Which two kinds of accounts could you compare to investigate how workers escaped? Explain one limitation of either account.

2. Where do the two historians' interpretations agree, and where do they disagree?

3. What evidence challenges the claim that public action began only after the fire?

4. Why does the timing of new laws not prove that the fire caused every law? What additional evidence could help?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Choose a different public safety decision, such as whether to add a crosswalk near your school. In four or five sentences, state an essential question, name two kinds of evidence you would gather, describe a disagreement you might find, and explain how you would check an assumption before proposing an answer.

ANSWER KEY

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PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline one piece of evidence from before the fire and one from after it, circle the two contrasting interpretations, and number two statements that limit what a source can prove. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Which two kinds of accounts could you compare to investigate how workers escaped? Explain one limitation of either account.	**Compare survivor testimony with a newspaper account. A survivor could not see every part of the building, and a newspaper account written the next day might contain errors.**
2	Where do the two historians' interpretations agree, and where do they disagree?	**Both accept that the fire occurred and that safety needed attention. They disagree about whether the fire or earlier worker organizing drove reform most.**
3	What evidence challenges the claim that public action began only after the fire?	**Thousands of New York garment workers joined a strike for better conditions in 1909, before the 1911 fire.**
4	Why does the timing of new laws not prove that the fire caused every law? What additional evidence could help?	**Events occurring in sequence do not establish the cause of each law. The text suggests examining specific laws and debates about them.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

How should a town decide where to add a crosswalk? I would compare traffic counts with accounts from people who walk along the street. Drivers and walkers might disagree about where crossing feels most dangerous. Before assuming that the busiest intersection is the most dangerous, I would check records of crashes and near misses at several locations.

Accept other comparisons or inquiry plans when students distinguish what evidence shows from what it cannot prove. In Part 3, the proposed check should test the stated assumption rather than simply repeat it.