Evidence Under Fire

Investigate what different sources can reveal about a workplace disaster.

E.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 Read the passage, then underline one detail each from a plan, a photograph, testimony, and a newspaper report. Circle a detail that gives historical context, and number two claims you would check against another source.

Investigating the Triangle Fire

1. On March 25, 1911, a fire swept through the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in New York City. The factory occupied the top three floors of a ten-story building, and 146 workers died. Many workers were young immigrant women employed in the garment industry. Investigators asked why so many people could not escape. At the time, garment factories often worked under intense pressure to fill orders, and workplace safety rules were weaker than those adopted after the disaster. An inquiry about escape routes must consider both the building itself and the conditions in which employees worked, rather than treating a single dramatic account as the whole story.

2. Different records preserve different pieces of that day. A building floor plan shows where stairways, doors, and the outside fire escape were designed to be, but it does not record what happened during the fire. Photographs taken afterward show damage to the fire escape, which collapsed as people tried to use it. In testimony collected after the fire, survivors described crowding at a door that would not open. A newspaper published the next morning reported deaths and repeated claims about blocked exits. The newspaper's early death estimates later changed. Witnesses in different parts of the factory did not all see the same exit.

3. The factory's owners faced a criminal trial over allegations that a door was locked. A jury acquitted them in December 1911 because prosecutors did not prove the owners knew the door was locked. An acquittal does not settle whether every exit worked during the fire. New York State then investigated factory conditions and passed new workplace safety laws. A student investigating the fire could consult trial testimony, newspaper reports, photographs, and building plans. Each was created for a different purpose and at a different time. The question being asked determines which details matter most and which claims need checking against another record.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. If you are investigating why workers could not escape, what can the floor plan tell you, and what can the photographs add?

2. Why should you check the newspaper's report of blocked exits against another source before relying on it?

3. How is survivor testimony useful for investigating an exit, and what limits what one survivor could know?

4. Someone claims the owners' acquittal proves every exit worked. How would you assess that claim using the passage?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Suppose you want to learn whether factory exits became safer by 1913. In four or five sentences, propose two kinds of sources to seek, explain what each could show and one limit or possible bias, and describe how you would use the 1911 fire as historical context.

ANSWER KEY

Evidence Under Fire

HIGH SCHOOL · E.P.2.2.A

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Read the passage, then underline one detail each from a plan, a photograph, testimony, and a newspaper report. Circle a detail that gives historical context, and number two claims you would check against another source. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	If you are investigating why workers could not escape, what can the floor plan tell you, and what can the photographs add?	**The plan shows where escape routes were designed to be. The photographs show damage to the fire escape after it collapsed.**
2	Why should you check the newspaper's report of blocked exits against another source before relying on it?	**It was published the next morning, when facts were still emerging, and its early death estimates later changed.**
3	How is survivor testimony useful for investigating an exit, and what limits what one survivor could know?	**A survivor could describe crowding at a door that would not open, but could not see every exit in the factory.**
4	Someone claims the owners' acquittal proves every exit worked. How would you assess that claim using the passage?	**The claim goes beyond the verdict. Prosecutors did not prove the owners knew a door was locked, but that does not establish that every exit worked.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

I would compare New York State inspection reports from before and after the fire to look for changes in exit problems. Inspection reports might miss factories or reflect pressure to show progress. I would also seek workers' accounts from several factories to learn whether doors opened during shifts, though each account would cover only one workplace. I would compare accounts with inspection reports for the same buildings. The 1911 fire and the state's later safety laws provide a reason to check whether conditions changed by 1913.

Accept other relevant source formats if students explain what each could establish and identify a credible limitation or possible bias. Responses should distinguish evidence of a new rule from evidence that factories followed it.