Tracing the Fire

Weigh evidence and context in the Triangle factory fire

E.P.2.2 "Develop skills which demonstrate an understanding of historical events and the people who shaped our history. Gather and evaluate the usefulness of various formats of evidence for specific inquiry, analyzing the broader historical context..."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline three details about what different sources can show, circle two limits or possible biases, and number the events in time order. Use your marks to decide what the evidence can and cannot prove.

What Can the Sources Tell Us?

1. On March 25, 1911, fire swept through the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York City. The factory occupied the upper floors of a building, where workers made women's blouses. Many workers were young immigrant women. Some could not reach safe exits, and the outside fire escape collapsed. The fire killed 146 people. To investigate why so many died, a historian needs more than one account. A newspaper story published the next morning might describe what witnesses saw, but its early details could be mistaken. A building plan could identify where exits were designed, but not whether a door was open that afternoon.

2. Testimony from a worker who escaped could reveal which routes were blocked on that worker's floor. Yet smoke, fear, and a limited view might affect what the worker remembered. Factory owners could offer records about safety practices, but they had a reason to defend their business. Comparing these sources matters: if a plan shows a doorway and several workers report that its door was locked, the plan alone cannot settle the dispute. A historian should ask when each source was made, what its creator could know, and what the creator stood to gain.

3. The fire also belongs in a longer story. In 1909, New York garment workers went on strike over pay and working conditions. The 1911 disaster increased public pressure for change, and New York passed new workplace safety laws in the years that followed. Workers, owners, and lawmakers faced different pressures: workers needed wages and safer workplaces, owners worried about costs, and lawmakers answered to voters and businesses. A timeline can put the strike, fire, and laws in order, but it cannot by itself prove that the fire caused every reform. To explain change, historians compare dates with testimony, records, and the wider debate over factory safety.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Why should a historian check a newspaper story published the morning after the fire against other sources?

2. A building plan shows a doorway. What could worker testimony add to an inquiry about whether that exit was usable, and what is one limit of the testimony?

3. How might the different pressures on owners and lawmakers shape their views of new safety rules?

4. Put the strike, fire, and new laws in order. Why does that order alone not prove the fire caused every reform?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a 70 to 90 word research plan for this inquiry: Did workers' and owners' accounts of exit safety match? Name two evidence formats from the passage, explain a limit of each, and show how the 1909 strike helps you interpret the accounts.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · E.P.2.2

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline three details about what different sources can show, circle two limits or possible biases, and number the events in time order. Use your marks to decide what the evidence can and cannot prove. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Why should a historian check a newspaper story published the morning after the fire against other sources?	**It might preserve immediate witness observations, but early details could be mistaken.**
2	A building plan shows a doorway. What could worker testimony add to an inquiry about whether that exit was usable, and what is one limit of the testimony?	**A worker could report whether the route was blocked on that worker's floor. Smoke, fear, or a limited view could affect the account.**
3	How might the different pressures on owners and lawmakers shape their views of new safety rules?	**Owners might focus on costs, while lawmakers might weigh the demands of voters and businesses.**
4	Put the strike, fire, and new laws in order. Why does that order alone not prove the fire caused every reform?	**The 1909 strike came first, followed by the 1911 fire and then new laws. The strike shows that workers had raised concerns before the fire, so dates alone cannot establish the cause of every law.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

I would compare escaped workers' testimony with factory owners' safety records. Workers could describe routes they tried during the fire, but smoke and fear might affect their memories. Owners' records might describe official safety practices, but owners had a reason to defend their business. The 1909 garment workers' strike shows that workplace conditions were already disputed before the fire. If the accounts disagree, I would check whether they describe the same floor and time. That comparison would help me judge the sources without assuming either one tells the whole story.

Accept other supported source limits or explanations of perspective. Research plans should distinguish what a source could show from what it could not establish.