What Drove Reform?

Compare evidence and interpretations of the Triangle fire.

MWH.P.1.2.B "Evaluate points of agreement and disagreement from reliable information and expert interpretations used to answer supporting questions related to content knowledge."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two conclusions the historians share, circle the point where their interpretations differ, and number the records each historian uses as evidence.

After the Triangle Fire

1. On March 25, 1911, fire spread through the Triangle Waist Company factory in New York City. One hundred forty-six workers died, many of them young immigrant women. To investigate the question, "Why did the fire lead to new safety laws?", historians can begin with records made close to the event. Witness testimony described a locked exit, and photographs of the building showed the height from which workers tried to escape. Such records help establish conditions during the fire. They do not, by themselves, explain why lawmakers acted afterward. An eyewitness might know one doorway well but not every decision made in Albany.

2. After the fire, the New York State Factory Investigating Commission examined workplaces and recommended changes. State lawmakers then passed laws improving fire safety, including rules for exits and sprinklers. Commission and legislative records document investigations and laws, rather than relying on a later person's memory. Newspapers reported public outrage. Records of labor organizations show that workers had demanded safer workplaces before the fire. These sources support a shared conclusion: the disaster exposed dangers and helped build pressure for reform. Yet they leave room to debate which kind of pressure mattered most in getting the laws passed.

3. One historian argues that the commission's inspections were the key link between the fire and the new laws: investigators identified hazards and offered specific fixes legislators could adopt. Another historian argues that organized workers and public anger were more important: without their demands, lawmakers might have ignored the commission. Both accept that the fire revealed hazards and that inspections and public pressure preceded reform. They disagree about which force best explains lawmakers' choices. Neither can prove that a single cause was sufficient from the records listed here; testing their disagreement would require evidence about lawmakers' stated reasons and the influence of worker campaigns.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. What do both historians agree happened between the fire and the new laws? Name one kind of record that supports their shared view.

2. Where do the historians disagree, and what evidence does each one emphasize?

3. Why are commission and legislative records more useful than eyewitness testimony for judging how lawmakers responded to the fire?

4. What further evidence could help test the historians' disagreement? Explain what it might reveal.

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

A classmate claims, “No one demanded safer factories until the Triangle fire.” Write one paragraph evaluating the claim using two kinds of records in the passage. Explain how the historians might agree or disagree about the claim, and identify one limit of the evidence.

ANSWER KEY

What Drove Reform?

HIGH SCHOOL · MWH.P.1.2.B

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two conclusions the historians share, circle the point where their interpretations differ, and number the records each historian uses as evidence. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	What do both historians agree happened between the fire and the new laws? Name one kind of record that supports their shared view.	**Both agree that the fire revealed hazards and that inspections and public pressure came before reform. Commission records document the inspections.**
2	Where do the historians disagree, and what evidence does each one emphasize?	**They disagree about what mattered most in getting the laws passed. One emphasizes the commission's inspections and recommendations; the other emphasizes labor organizations' demands and reported public anger.**
3	Why are commission and legislative records more useful than eyewitness testimony for judging how lawmakers responded to the fire?	**They document investigations, recommendations, and laws. Eyewitness testimony describes conditions during the fire but cannot establish why lawmakers acted.**
4	What further evidence could help test the historians' disagreement? Explain what it might reveal.	**Lawmakers' stated reasons or records of worker campaigns could help show whether inspections or public pressure had more influence on their decisions.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

The claim is too strong. Records of labor organizations show that workers demanded safer workplaces before the Triangle fire. The commission's later investigations show that officials examined hazards after the fire, not that demands began then. Both historians could agree that earlier demands existed. They would disagree about how much those demands influenced the new laws: one stresses inspections, while the other stresses organized workers. The passage does not include lawmakers' own explanations, so it cannot settle how much weight they gave earlier demands.

Accept answers that distinguish evidence of earlier safety demands from evidence about what caused lawmakers to act. Students should not treat either historian's interpretation as a proven single cause.