Evidence After the Fire

Use historical context to weigh sources about a factory disaster.

MWH.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 two details that place the fire in a longer timeline, circle three kinds of evidence a historian could use, and number two reasons a source might give an incomplete picture.

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 upper floors of the Asch Building, and 146 workers died. Many were young immigrant women making shirtwaists, a popular type of blouse. Some exits were blocked or locked, and the fire escape collapsed. Firefighters' ladders could not reach the highest floors. The disaster was not sudden proof that workers had never objected to danger. In 1909, garment workers in New York had staged a major strike for better pay and working conditions. That earlier protest gives the fire a longer history.

2. A historian investigating why so many people died might compare witness accounts with building records. A survivor's account could describe a blocked exit or a crowded stairwell, but fear and a limited view might affect what that person noticed. An owner's statement might explain factory routines, yet the owner had reason to defend management decisions. A building inspection record could identify conditions observed before the fire, but it might miss hazards that appeared later. No single source answers every question. Comparing when each record was made and who made it helps a historian judge what it can and cannot show.

3. Public debate continued after the fire. Newspaper stories spread accounts of the deaths and helped draw attention to workplace safety, but a reporter might choose dramatic details over typical conditions. New York lawmakers created a factory investigating commission in 1911. Its investigators gathered testimony and examined workplaces; New York passed many new labor and safety laws in 1912 and 1913. A reformer might cite the fire as evidence that government oversight was urgent, while a factory owner might worry about the cost of new rules. Their different interests shaped how they interpreted the same event.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How does the 1909 strike change the way you might understand the 1911 fire?

2. Which source in the passage could help show what a worker encountered while escaping? Give one reason its account might be incomplete.

3. Why might a reformer and a factory owner interpret the fire differently?

4. To investigate typical factory conditions before the fire, would a newspaper story or a building inspection record be more useful? Explain one limit of your choice.

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Suppose you are investigating whether New York's new safety laws improved everyday factory conditions by 1914. In 4 or 5 sentences, name two types of evidence you would seek, explain what each could show and one limit of each, and include one event from the passage that explains why your inquiry matters.

ANSWER KEY

Evidence After the Fire

HIGH SCHOOL · MWH.P.2.2

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two details that place the fire in a longer timeline, circle three kinds of evidence a historian could use, and number two reasons a source might give an incomplete picture. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How does the 1909 strike change the way you might understand the 1911 fire?	**It shows that garment workers had protested working conditions before the fire, so concerns about factory conditions did not begin with the disaster.**
2	Which source in the passage could help show what a worker encountered while escaping? Give one reason its account might be incomplete.	**A survivor's account could describe an exit or stairwell, but fear or a limited view might affect what the survivor noticed.**
3	Why might a reformer and a factory owner interpret the fire differently?	**A reformer might see an urgent need for government oversight, while an owner might focus on the cost of new rules.**
4	To investigate typical factory conditions before the fire, would a newspaper story or a building inspection record be more useful? Explain one limit of your choice.	**A building inspection record would be more useful because it identifies conditions observed at a workplace. It might still miss hazards that appeared after the inspection.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

I would compare factory inspection reports from 1911 and 1914 to see whether recorded hazards decreased. Inspectors could miss problems between visits, so the reports would not capture every workday. I would also seek interviews with workers employed in 1914 to learn whether exits stayed usable during shifts. A worker could describe only the factories and days they knew. The 1911 Triangle fire, which killed 146 workers, makes it important to test whether later rules changed conditions in practice.

Accept other well-supported source choices if students explain what each could reveal and identify a plausible limit. For the marking task, timeline details may include the 1909 strike, the 1911 commission, and the 1912 and 1913 laws.