What Sparked Reform?

Compare evidence and interpretations of a turning point in labor history

USH.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 one record-based detail that supports each historian's interpretation, circle the point they agree on, and number their differing interpretations 1 and 2.

Before and After the Triangle Fire

1. On March 25, 1911, a fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in New York City killed 146 workers. A supporting question for historians is: Did this fire begin the push for safer factories, or did it speed up an existing movement? Cornell University's Triangle Fire archive preserves contemporary newspaper accounts, witness statements, and official records. Together, these sources document dangerous exits and a large public response to the deaths. Yet a newspaper's description of a crowd cannot, by itself, show what lawmakers thought or why they voted. Historians must compare records made for different purposes before explaining a change in policy.

2. One historian, focusing on the fire and the state response, argues that the tragedy was a turning point. New York created a Factory Investigating Commission in 1911, and later laws strengthened workplace safety rules. The short time between the disaster and the investigation supports this reading, though timing alone does not prove the fire was the only cause. Another labor historian emphasizes what came before: in 1909, thousands of shirtwaist workers struck over pay and conditions. Their organizing made workplace dangers a public issue before 1911. These historians disagree about where the push began, but both recognize the fire's political force.

3. The two readings use reliable information in different ways. Commission records show that officials investigated factories after the fire, but they do not prove that workers had been silent earlier. Strike accounts show organized demands before the fire, but they do not prove lawmakers would have acted without it. To test how much each factor mattered, a historian could examine union petitions dated before 1911 alongside lawmakers' letters and debates after the fire. If those debates mention both the strike and the tragedy, the evidence would support a combined explanation, not a single cause.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. What do the two historians agree about the fire? Which information supports that point of agreement?

2. Where do the historians disagree about when the push for safer factories began? Give one piece of evidence for each view.

3. Why can't commission records alone settle whether workers sought change before the fire? What other information affects that interpretation?

4. Could a newspaper account of crowds after the fire, by itself, settle which historian better explains the later laws? Explain.

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Consider a new supporting question: Were New York's strengthened safety rules followed in factories after they became law? Name two kinds of reliable records you would compare, describe one way their findings might disagree, and explain how you would evaluate that disagreement.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · USH.P.1.2.B

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline one record-based detail that supports each historian's interpretation, circle the point they agree on, and number their differing interpretations 1 and 2. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	What do the two historians agree about the fire? Which information supports that point of agreement?	**Both recognize that the fire had political force. New York created a Factory Investigating Commission in 1911 and later strengthened workplace safety rules.**
2	Where do the historians disagree about when the push for safer factories began? Give one piece of evidence for each view.	**One sees the 1911 fire as a turning point, supported by the commission created that year. The other sees an earlier movement, supported by the 1909 shirtwaist workers' strike.**
3	Why can't commission records alone settle whether workers sought change before the fire? What other information affects that interpretation?	**The commission investigated factories after the fire, so its records do not establish whether workers acted earlier. Accounts of the 1909 strike show earlier organizing.**
4	Could a newspaper account of crowds after the fire, by itself, settle which historian better explains the later laws? Explain.	**No. A crowd shows public response, but it does not reveal why lawmakers voted or account for the workers' earlier organizing.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

I would compare official factory inspection reports with workers' statements from the same factories and years. Inspectors might report that exits met the rules, while workers might say those exits were blocked during shifts. I would check when each record was made and whether both describe the same exits. I would also look for repeated reports from different workers and later inspections before deciding which account better reflects everyday conditions.

Accept answers that distinguish what a source directly shows from a historian's explanation of cause. For Part 3, students should compare two plausible record types, describe a specific disagreement, and explain how they would evaluate it.