Evidence Under Fire

Judge what different sources can reveal about the Triangle factory fire.

USH.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 For each of these three sources, the survivor's account, the building plan, and the newspaper report, underline what it can show and circle one limit or possible bias. Number two details about the historical setting that could affect how you judge the sources.

Investigating an Escape

1. On March 25, 1911, a fire swept through the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in New York City. The factory occupied the upper floors of a building, and many workers were young immigrant women who sewed clothing for low wages. More than 140 people died. A historian asks, "Why was it so hard for workers to escape?" A survivor's account recorded decades later might describe a crowded stairway or a blocked exit from the place where she stood. Her account offers firsthand experience, but memory can change over time, and she could not see every exit.

2. A building plan made before the fire can show where stairs, elevators, and doors were designed to be. It cannot prove that a door was unlocked or that an escape route remained usable during the fire. The historian should check when the plan was drawn and whether later changes were recorded. A newspaper article published the next morning may capture early witness reports and public reaction. Yet reporters worked under tight deadlines, and early claims might be wrong. A newspaper that favored factory owners might also give managers more space than workers. Its publication date and editorial stance both matter.

3. The larger setting helps explain why each account needs scrutiny. Garment workers had organized to demand safer conditions before 1911. Employers and workers could have different reasons to describe factory practices in particular ways. To investigate the escape problem, the historian can compare a survivor's account with the building plan and several news reports, then seek fire department findings or sworn testimony. Agreement across independent sources strengthens a claim, but matching stories alone do not prove it. A plan shows design; a witness describes experience; an official inquiry can test claims against other evidence.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Which source could describe what happened along one escape route? Explain one limit of that source.

2. Why can't the building plan prove an exit was usable during the fire? What should a historian check about the plan?

3. How might a next-day newspaper report be useful but also give a misleading account of the fire?

4. How could workers' earlier demands for safer conditions affect your evaluation of an employer's account? Name another kind of evidence you would check.

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

A museum label says, "One next-day newspaper report blamed workers for the escape problems, so the case is settled." Write four or five sentences correcting the label. Use two source formats, explain one credibility or bias concern, and connect your judgment to the historical setting.

ANSWER KEY

Evidence Under Fire

HIGH SCHOOL · USH.P.2.2.A

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

For each of these three sources, the survivor's account, the building plan, and the newspaper report, underline what it can show and circle one limit or possible bias. Number two details about the historical setting that could affect how you judge the sources. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Which source could describe what happened along one escape route? Explain one limit of that source.	**A survivor's account could describe the route she experienced, but she could not see every exit, and her memory might change over time.**
2	Why can't the building plan prove an exit was usable during the fire? What should a historian check about the plan?	**The plan shows where exits were designed to be, not whether they were unlocked or usable. Check when it was drawn and whether later changes were recorded.**
3	How might a next-day newspaper report be useful but also give a misleading account of the fire?	**It may preserve early witness reports and public reaction, but deadline pressure could lead to errors. A paper favoring owners might give managers more space than workers.**
4	How could workers' earlier demands for safer conditions affect your evaluation of an employer's account? Name another kind of evidence you would check.	**The demands show that safety was already disputed, so an employer might have reason to defend factory practices. Check a survivor's account, fire department findings, or sworn testimony.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

A next-day newspaper report cannot settle why workers struggled to escape because early reports may contain errors. A paper that favored factory owners might also minimize unsafe conditions. A survivor's account could describe an actual route, while a building plan could show where exits were designed to be, but neither alone proves every exit was usable. Since garment workers had demanded safer conditions before 1911, I would compare these sources with sworn testimony before deciding whether the report's claim is credible.

Accept other source comparisons grounded in the passage. Responses should distinguish what a source can show from what it cannot prove and use the historical setting to assess its credibility.