

Background *An event can be so dramatic and so haunting that it compels the generations that follow it to dissect its details and to trace its impact. A deadly disaster occurred in New York City in 1911 at a company in the ten-story Asch Building. Known today as the Brown Building, it is now a National Historic Landmark. These history writings are detailed accounts of what happened and the long-term effects.*

The Triangle Factory Fire

from **Flesh & Blood So Cheap: The Triangle Fire and Its Legacy**

History Writing by Albert Marrin

Albert Marrin (b. 1936) taught social studies in a junior high school and then became a college teacher. But he realized that he missed telling stories as he had as a teacher. That's when Marrin decided to write history for young adults. He has now produced more than thirty nonfiction books, for which he has won numerous awards.

from **The Story of the Triangle Factory Fire**

History Writing by Zachary Kent

Zachary Kent is the author of over fifty books for young readers. He writes primarily about history and has written biographies of various noted figures, including Abraham Lincoln and Charles Lindbergh.

SETTING A PURPOSE As you read, think about how each writer presents information on the same event. How are the pieces similar? How are they different? Write down any questions you have while reading.



As you read, mark up the text. Save your work to **myNotebook**.

- Highlight details
- Add notes and questions
- Add new words to **myWordList**

from **Flesh & Blood So Cheap**

by Albert Marrin

The Triangle Waist Company occupied the top three floors of the Asch Building. On the eighth floor, forty cutters,¹ all men, worked at long wooden tables. Nearby, about a hundred women did basting² and other tasks. Paper patterns hung from lines of string over the tables. Although cutters wasted as little fabric as possible, there were always scraps, which they threw into bins under the tables. Every two months or so, a rag dealer took away about a ton of scraps, paying about seven cents a pound. He then sold them back
10 to cotton mills to remake into new cloth. The last pickup was in January.

On March 25, the cutters prepared for their next day's work. Since it was Saturday, everyone would leave early, at 4:45 P.M. Workers from other firms had already left; Triangle employees had to stay longer to fill back orders. Carefully, cutters spread "lawn" (from the French word *lingerie*) on their tables 120 layers thick. Lawn was not just *any* cotton fabric. Sheer and lightweight, it was beautiful and comfortable—and burned as easily as gasoline. Each layer was separated from the
20 others by a sheet of equally **flammable** tissue paper.

After cutting, the various pieces would go by freight elevator to the ninth floor for sewing and finishing. There, eight rows of sewing machine tables, holding 288 machines in all, occupied the entire width of the room. Only a narrow aisle separated one row from another; the tables were so close together that chairs touched back to back between the rows. From time to time, workers would take the finished shirtwaists³ to the tenth floor for inspection, packing, and shipping. This floor also held the showroom and
30 owners' offices.

By 4:40 P.M., the cutters had finished their work. With five minutes to go, they stood around, talking until the quitting bell rang. Although it was against the rules, some lit cigarettes, hiding the smoke by blowing it up their jacket sleeves. On the floor above, workers had begun to walk toward the lockers to

flammable

(flăm'ə-bəl) *adj.*

If something is *flammable*, it is easy for it to catch on fire and burn.

¹ **cutters:** people who cut cloth in a clothing factory.

² **basting:** stitching.

³ **shirtwaists:** women's blouses that resemble men's shirts.

get their coats and hats. They looked forward to Sunday and family visits, boyfriends, dances, and nickelodeons.⁴ Although they had no inkling of what was about to happen, many had only minutes to live.

40 We will never know for sure what started the Triangle Fire. Most likely, a cutter flicked a hot ash or tossed a live cigarette butt into a scrap bin. Whatever the cause, survivors said the first sign of trouble was smoke pouring from beneath a cutting table.

Cutters flung buckets of water at the smoking spot, without effect. Flames shot up, igniting the line of hanging paper patterns. “They began to fall on the layers of thin goods underneath them,” recalled cutter Max Rothen. “Every time another piece dropped, light scraps of burning fabric began to
50 fly around the room. They came down on the other tables and they fell on the machines. Then the line broke and the whole string of burning patterns fell down.” A foreman ran for the hose on the stairway wall. Nothing! No water came. The hose had not been connected to the standpipe.⁵ Seconds later, the fire leaped out of control.

Yet help was already on the way. At exactly 4:45 p.m., someone pulled the eighth-floor fire alarm. In less than two minutes, the horse-drawn vehicles of Engine Company 72 arrived from a firehouse six blocks away. The moment
60 they arrived, the firefighters unloaded their equipment and prepared to swing into action. As they did, the area pumping station raised water pressure in the hydrants near the Asch Building. Other units soon arrived from across the Lower East Side with more equipment.

Meanwhile, workers on the eighth floor rang furiously for the two passenger elevators. Safety experts have always advised against using elevators in a fire. Heat can easily damage their machinery, leaving trapped passengers dangling in space, to burn or suffocate. Despite the danger, the
70 operators made several trips, saving scores of workers before heat bent the elevators’ tracks and put them out of action.

Those who could not board elevators rushed the stairway door. They caused a pileup, so that those in front could not open the door. Whenever someone tried to get it open, the crowd pinned her against it. “All the girls were falling on me

⁴ **nickelodeons:** early movie theaters that charged five cents for admission.

⁵ **standpipe:** a large pipe into which water is pumped.

and they squeezed me to the door,” Ida Willensky recalled. “Three times I said to the girls, ‘Please, girls, let me open the door. Please!’ But they would not listen to me.” Finally, cutter Louis Brown barged through the crowd and forced the
80 door open.

Workers, shouting, crying, and gasping for air, slowly made their way downstairs. There were no lights in the stairway, so they had to grope their way in darkness. A girl fell; others fell on top of her, blocking the stairs until firefighters arrived moments later. Yet everyone who took the stairway from the eighth floor got out alive, exiting through the Washington Place doors. Those on the ninth floor were not so lucky.

90 New Yorkers say that March comes in like a lion (with cold wind) and leaves like a lamb (with April’s warm showers). Now, as fire raged on the eighth floor, the elevator shafts became wind tunnels. Wind gusts made eerie sounds, like the howling of great beasts in pain, while sucking flaming embers upward. On the ninth floor, embers landed on piles of finished shirtwaists and cans of oil used to make the sewing machines run smoothly. Instantly, the air itself seemed to catch fire.

Had there been fire drills, surely more would have survived. Unfortunately, confusion **reigned**. Workers had to make life-and-death decisions in split seconds amid fire,
100 smoke, and panic. It was everyone for themselves. “I was throwing them out of the way,” Mary Bucelli said of the women near her. “No matter whether they were in front of me or coming from in back of me, I was pushing them down. I was only looking out for my own life.” Mary joined others who ran to the Greene Street stairway. They made it down to the street or up to the tenth floor and the roof, before flames blocked this escape route.

Others headed for the elevators and stairway on the Washington Place side of the building. Forcing open the
110 doors to the elevator shaft, they looked down and saw an elevator starting what would be its last trip from the eighth floor. “I reached out and grabbed the cables, wrapped my legs around them, and started to slide down,” recalled Samuel Levine, a sewing machine operator. “While on my way down, as slow as I could let myself drop, the bodies of six girls went falling past me. One of them struck me, and I fell on top of the elevator. I fell on the dead body of a girl. Finally I heard

reign

(rān) v. If some things *reign* over something else, it means they dominate it.



Firefighters in a horse-drawn fire engine race to respond to the fire at the Triangle Waist Company.

the firemen cutting their way into the elevator shaft, and they came and let me out.”

120 Those who reached the ninth-floor stairway door found it locked. This was not unusual, as employers often locked doors to discourage latecomers and keep out union organizers. “My God, I am lost!” cried Margaret Schwartz as her hair caught fire. Nobody who went to that door survived, nor any who reached the windows.

130 With a wave of fire rolling across the room, workers rushed to the windows, only to meet more fire. Hot air expands. Unless it escapes, pressure will keep building, eventually blowing a hole even in a heavy iron container like a boiler. Heat and pressure blew out the eighth-floor windows. Firefighters call the result “lapping in”—that is, sucking flames into open windows above. That is why you see black scorch marks on the wall above the window of a burnt-out room.

140 With fire advancing from behind and flames rising before them, people knew they were doomed. Whatever they did meant certain death. By remaining in the room, they chose death by fire or suffocation. Jumping ninety-five feet to the ground meant death on the sidewalk. We cannot know what passed through the minds of those who decided to jump. Yet

their thinking, in those last moments of life, may have gone like this: If I jump, my family will have a body to identify and bury, but if I stay in this room, there will be nothing left.

A girl clung to a window frame until flames from the eighth floor lapped in, burning her face and setting fire to her hair and clothing. She let go. Just then, Frances Perkins reached the scene from her friend's town house on the north side of Washington Square. "Here they come," onlookers shouted as Engine Company 72 reined in their horses. "Don't
150 jump; stay there." Seconds later, Hook and Ladder Company 20 arrived.

Firefighters charged into the building, stretching a hose up the stairways as they went. At the sixth-floor landing, they connected it to the standpipe. Reaching the eighth floor, they crawled into the inferno on their bellies, under the rising smoke, with their hose. Yet nothing they did could save those at the windows. Photos of the **portable** towers show streams of water playing on the three top floors. (A modern high-pressure pumper can send water as high as one thousand feet.)
160 Plenty of water got through the windows, but not those with people standing in them. A burst of water under high pressure would have hurled them backward, into the flames.

Hoping to catch jumpers before they hit the ground, firefighters held up life nets, sturdy ten-foot-square nets made of rope. It was useless. A person falling from the ninth floor struck with a force equal to eleven thousand pounds. Some jumpers bounced off nets, dying when they hit the ground; others tore the nets, crashing through to the pavement. "The force was so great it took men off their feet," said Captain
170 Howard Ruch of Engine Company 18. "Trying to hold the nets, the men turned somersaults. The men's hands were bleeding, the nets were torn and some caught fire" from burning clothing. Officers, fearing their men would be struck by falling bodies, ordered the nets removed. The aerial ladders failed, too, reaching only to the sixth floor. Desperate jumpers tried to grab hold of a rung on the way down, missed, and landed on the sidewalk.

People began to jump singly or in groups of two or three, holding hands as they stepped out the windows.
180 William G. Shepherd, a reporter for United Press, watched the "shower of bodies" in horror.

portable
(pôr'tə-bəl) *adj.*
If something is *portable*, it can be carried or moved easily.

I saw every feature of the tragedy visible from outside the building. I learned a new sound—a more horrible sound than any description can picture. It was the sound of a speeding, living body on a stone sidewalk.

Thud—dead, thud—dead, thud—dead, thud—dead. Sixty-two thud—dead. I call them that, because the sound and the thought of death came to me each time, at the same instant. . . . Down came the bodies in a shower, burning, smoking—flaming bodies, with the disheveled hair trailing upward. . . .

On the sidewalk lay heaps of broken bodies. A policeman later went about with tags, which he fastened with wires to the wrists of the dead girls. . . . The floods of water from the firemen’s hose that ran into the gutter was actually stained red with blood.

Onlookers saw many dreadful sights, none more so than the end of a love affair. A young man appeared at a window. Gently, he helped a young woman step onto the windowsill, held her away from the building—and let go. He helped another young woman onto the windowsill. “Those of us who were looking saw her put her arms around him and kiss him,” Shepherd wrote. “Then he held her out into space and dropped her. But quick as a flash he was on the windowsill himself. . . . He was brave enough to help the girl he loved to a quicker death, after she had given him a goodbye kiss.”

Meanwhile, others managed to reach the fire escape. It had not been designed for a quick exit. FDNY⁶ experts later declared that those on the three top floors of the Asch Building could not have made it to the ground in under three hours. In reality, they had only minutes.

People crowded onto the fire escape. As they walked single file, flames lapped at them through broken windows. Worse, the human load became too heavy for the device to bear. Bolts that fastened it to the building became loose. It began to sway, then collapsed at the eighth floor, tumbling dozens into the courtyard. “As the fire-crazed victims were thrown by the collapse of the fire escape, several struck the sharp-tipped palings,”⁷ the New York *Herald* reported. “The body of one woman was found with several iron spikes driven

⁶ **FDNY:** the Fire Department of New York City.

⁷ **palings:** fences with stakes.



This is a photograph of the gutted tenth floor of the Asch Building that was taken in the aftermath of the fire.

entirely through it.” Others crashed through the skylight into the room below, where they died on the cement floor.

The tenth floor was the best place to be. Those who worked there, or reached it from the floor below, survived by dashing up the stairs to the roof. When they arrived, they found the roof fifteen feet lower than its Washington Place neighbor’s, a building shared by New York University and the American Book Company.

230 Luckily, Professor Frank Sommer was teaching his law class in a room that overlooked the Asch Building. When Sommer realized what was happening, he led his class to the roof of their building. There they found two ladders left by painters during the week. Students lowered the ladders, climbed down, and helped survivors to safety. For some women, said Sommer, “it was necessary to beat out the flames that had caught their clothing, and many of them had blackened faces and singed hair and eyebrows.” Yet only one person from the tenth floor died. Seeing flames licking up from the ninth floor, she panicked and jumped out a window.

240 By 5:15 P.M., exactly thirty-five minutes after flames burst from beneath a cutting table, firefighters had brought the blaze under control. An hour later, Chief Croker made his **inspection**. He found that the Asch Building had no damage

inspection
(in-spĕk´shən) *n.*
An *inspection* is an official examination or review.

to its structure. Its walls were in good shape; so were the floors. It had passed the test. It was fireproof.

The woodwork, furniture, cotton goods, and people who worked in it were not. Of the 500 Triangle employees who reported for work that day, 146 died. Of these, sixteen men were identified. The rest were women or bodies and body
250 parts listed as “unidentified.” The Triangle Fire was New York’s worst workplace disaster up to that time. Only the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center took more (about 2,500) lives.

Chief Croker was no softie; he was used to the horrors that came with his job. But this was different. As he explored the top three floors of the Asch Building, he saw sights “that utterly staggered him,” the *New York World* reported. “In the drifting smoke, he had seen bodies burned to bare bones, skeletons bending over sewing machines.” Those sights sent
260 him down to the street with quivering lips.

Next morning, March 26, Chief Croker returned for another look. The only creatures he found alive were some half-drowned mice. He picked one up, stroked it gently, and put it in his pocket. The chief would take it home, he said. “It’s alive. At least it’s alive.”



Determine Central Idea and Details

The **central idea**, or main idea, in a piece of history writing is the most important idea about the topic. It may be stated explicitly in a sentence, or it may be implied. The main idea is often suggested by smaller key ideas, each developed in a paragraph or a longer section of the work.

Main ideas are supported by **details**, facts and other pieces of information that build upon or clarify the main ideas. When you read history writing, notice the details that answer basic questions, such as, *When and where does the event take place? Who is involved? What are the causes and the immediate and long-term effects?*

As you read, you can keep track of key ideas and details by taking notes in outline form. Restate the main ideas of paragraphs or sections, numbered in Roman numerals. Below each idea, list the supporting details.

The Triangle Waist Company Fire

I. *The Triangle factory was a dangerous firetrap.*

A. *Paper scraps hung from the rafters.*

B. *There were always scraps under the tables.*

C.

Once you have completed an outline for the entire text, look to see how all the main ideas and details help to develop the main idea of the entire text. What other details from *Flesh & Blood So Cheap* could you add to this outline?

Analyzing the Text

Cite Text Evidence

Support your responses with evidence from the text.

- 1. Summarize** Review the text to find details about the different floors of the building. What is important to understand about these locations?
- 2. Cause/Effect** Reread lines 97–100. Why does the author give a detail about fire drills?
- 3. Draw Conclusions** According to the author, why might workers have jumped from the windows?
- 4. Cite Evidence** What does the author seem to think of the firefighters' efforts during this disaster?
- 5. Evaluate** What is most important to understand about this event?
- 6. Connect** Why is the story of the Triangle Fire still being told?