

The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire:

The Story of Immigrants, Factory Girls, Labor Unions, and a Deadly Fire that Changed History

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Grade Level 11-12

Description

The story of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire is multidimensional. The tragedy, which caused the death of 146 garment workers, highlighted many of the issues that defined urban life in turn-of-the-century America. These topics include, but are not limited to labor unions, immigration, industrialization, and factory girls working in sweatshop conditions in Manhattan's garment district. March 25, 1911 became a benchmark moment in the Progressive Era that ultimately resulted in drastic changes in labor standards for factories across New York City, and later the nation. However, with the horrifying death toll, mostly young immigrant women, it is a story that highlights early 20th century labor activism, the power of big business, and the emerging voice of women, still silenced at the voting booths. Through this tragic event, we can learn about not only the women who died but the movement that they provoked and the conditions of labor that they forever changed.

Short Description

With focus on the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire tragedy, this lesson is intended to broaden students' understanding of the roots of effective female activism and the reactive nature of American labor laws.

Time 60-80 minutes

Objective: Student will use primary and secondary sources to gain a richer understanding of women's activism and how the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire led to changes in labor and safety regulations in America.

- Using both primary and secondary sources, students will research the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire to explore how the tragedy led to labor changes in America.
- Students will discuss how The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire served as an impetus for women's activism and how that movement impacted both society and labor laws.

Prerequisites:

This lesson should be taught as part of a unit on the Progressive Era in the United States.

Before beginning class discussion, students will read assigned articles that will inform the classroom discussion and activities.

- *Pauline Newman: Organizer:*
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/biography-pauline-newman/>
- *Shirtwaist Kings:*
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/shirtwaist-kings/>
- *The Triangle Shirtwaist Strike:*
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/triangle-fire-shirtwaist-strike/>
- *Clara Lemlich and the Uprising of the 20,000:*
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/biography-clara-lemlich/>

Tell students to frame their assessment of each article in response to the following: ***On the Eve of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, what were the conditions in the sweatshops of Manhattan in 1911 and how were individuals seeking change? To what extent had change been achieved before the fire?***

Classroom activity should not be scheduled until all readings are completed.

Materials:

- PBS American Experience materials
 - *Pauline Newman: Organizer:*
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/biography-pauline-newman/>
 - *Shirtwaist Kings:* <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/shirtwaist-kings/>
 - *The Triangle Shirtwaist Strike:*
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/triangle-fire-shirtwaist-strike/>
 - *Clara Lemlich and the Uprising of the 20,000:*
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/biography-clara-lemlich/>
- Library of Congress website: <https://www.loc.gov/rr/news/topics/triangle.html>
- Online discussion board forum which can be set up by the teacher via Google Docs (pg 6)
- Computers (if not available, teacher will have to make printed out copies of each document)
- Graphic Organizer (pg 5)

Procedures

Activity I Getting Started:

Poll Students: What do they believe is necessary for a safe and comfortable working environment?

Then, ask them to imagine working 16-hours a day with little pay and few, if any, breaks or safety regulations. They likely would work in an unsanitary factory, with extreme heat or extreme cold depending on the season. Encourage students to speak with a partner and then share with the class. Finally, ask students to discuss what upset them or surprised them from pre-lesson readings.

Hook (10 Minutes):

Divide students into groups of three and ask them to respond to the following quote in a think-pair-share format.

“There was a stricken conscience of public guilt and we all felt that we had been wrong, that something was wrong with that building which we had accepted or the tragedy never would have happened. Moved by this sense of stricken guilt, we banded ourselves together to find a way by law to prevent this kind of disaster.” — Frances Perkins

Extend this activity by assigning outside research on who Frances Perkins was and what her significance was in American history. Encourage them to use the following website:

<http://francesperkinscenter.org/resources/>

Activity II (10 Minutes):

Students will remain in their groups of three and discuss their response to the Homework Question from the homework:

- On the Eve of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, what were the conditions in the sweatshops of Manhattan in 1911 and how were individuals seeking change?
- To what extent had change been achieved before the fire?

How are their answers different?

Next, open a class discussion and exploration focusing on the homework readings and the Query posed.

Prompt students to discuss knowledge gained:

- What role did women play in the effort to unionize during the Progressive Era?
- What role did the conditions of the Triangle Shirtwaist factory building and the attitudes of those who owned the company (Isaac Harris and Max Blanck) as well as those who worked there play in instituting change?

Activity III (30-40 minutes depending on class time):

Students will remain in their groups of three. Each group will be given two primary source articles related to the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire from the Chronicling America collection at the Library of Congress. These primary source articles reveal the broad impact of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. With the help of their classmates, each student will complete the graphic organizer relating the fire to the essential impact topics provided on the chart.

Each group will share their consensus with the class. The entire class will listen to what each group has to offer based on their readings.

<https://www.loc.gov/rr/news/topics/triangle.html>

Closing/Assessment (10 minutes):

Quick-Write: Students will provide a quick-write exit card to the teacher. The exit card must finish the following thought: “Based on your many readings and discussions on the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, explain how women were agents of change...”

In assessing the assignment, punctuation and grammar are not essential. Students should focus write a detailed account reflecting on what they have learned from the readings and classroom discussion about the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. Students can participate by sharing their writing out loud with the class if they choose. All students must turn in their quick-write for a participation grade.

Homework:

For homework students will read about the reforms that were created in response to the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. They will be asked to read the article provided by the Cornell University website and respond on a discussion board to the following prompt:

Why is reform necessary for democracy? Cite evidence from the reading and your knowledge of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire.

<http://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/legacy/legislativeReform.html>

Future Research/Resources: In 1962 a journalist named Leon Stein compiled testimonials about the fire from survivors. The testimonials are provided on the following website:

<http://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/primary/testimonials/index.html>

CORE STANDARDS:

Common Core

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7](#)

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.6](#)

Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

C3

- D2.His.1.9-12. Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.
- D2.His.3.9-12. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.
- D2.Geo.8.9-12. Evaluate the impact of economic activities and political decisions on spatial patterns within and among urban, suburban, and rural regions.

Graphic Organizer:

How does the Triangle Shirtwaist incident highlight the following topics?

After reading the articles provided by the Library of Congress, fill out the chart offering insights that you learned regarding the topics listed below.

GENDER	IMMIGRATION	WORKING CONDITIONS
UNIONIZATION	CHILD LABOR	NEW YORK CITY
PROGRESSIVISM	INDUSTRIALIZATION	BIG BUSINESS

Teacher Note: Copy and paste into Google Doc and share with the class.

Why is reform necessary for democracy? Cite evidence from the reading and your knowledge of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire.

<http://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/legacy/legislativeReform.html>

Student Name	Student Response to Prompt