

Individual Learning Packet

**Teaching Unit**

**Nickel and Dimed:  
On (Not) Getting By in America**

by Barbara Ehrenreich

written by Lisa Tetrault

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# Nickel and Dimed

## Objectives

*By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:*

1. understand the economic difficulties low-wage workers experience.
2. discuss how welfare reform affected recipients.
3. identify stereotypes of low-wage workers and compare them to Ehrenreich's descriptions of her coworkers.
4. explain how lower-paying jobs affect the physical and mental health of workers.
5. discuss whether unionization would improve the situation faced by these workers.
6. explain how Ehrenreich's citation of sources lends credence to her assertions.
7. discuss how Ehrenreich's decisions affected her ability to save money for the next month's rent.
8. analyze the effect of Ehrenreich's rhetorical questions and direct addresses to the reader.
9. define the following literary terms and identify examples of them within the text:
  - allusion
  - metaphor
  - repetition
  - simile
10. understand Ehrenreich's Marxist views toward workers, corporations, and consumers.
11. write a short essay describing the relationship between employees and management.
12. analyze Ehrenreich's diction and the tone it creates.
13. identify how race and ethnicity determine the types of jobs people obtain.

# Nickel and Dimed

## Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Ehrenreich wrote *Nickel and Dimed* during a time of relative prosperity. Discuss how the lives of low-wage workers are likely affected by economic recessions.
2. Though the Introduction is written in past tense, the other chapters are written in the present tense. Why do you think Ehrenreich decided to use these tenses, and what are the effects in terms of the pacing of the book?
3. How do the footnotes and citations of studies contribute to the persuasiveness of Ehrenreich's writing?
4. While working in Key West, Ehrenreich occasionally went out and visited friends from her everyday life. How do these visits affect her dedication to and the credibility of her social experiment?
5. Discuss the ways in which employers have tried to increase efficiency in the hiring process and on the job. How does this increased efficiency affect employees or potential employees?
6. Despite the many "help wanted" ads, jobs in Portland pay no better than positions elsewhere do. What do these low wages suggest about how companies view and treat employees?
7. Ehrenreich notes that maids are more likely to be disregarded or looked down upon than other low-wage employees are. Why do you think maids are treated so poorly? How might the roles of their job factor into their treatment?
8. How do corporate mentalities and high turnover rates of workers affect the relationships between employers and employees?
9. How do companies make it difficult for employees to negotiate for better pay or hours?
10. Different types of low-wage jobs are divided along ethnic and racial lines. Debate the extent to which this division may be practical, in terms of communication, and how much it may be based on prejudice.
11. Who do you think is the primary audience for this work? Discuss whether this book appeals to multiple demographics.

**unencumbered** – not slowed down; not having burdens  
**wonks** – people who study and are highly knowledgeable in a subject

1. Why does Ehrenreich mention the price of her “\$30 lunch” of “salmon and field greens”?

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2. What main effect of welfare reform does Ehrenreich mention?

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3. Why is Ehrenreich particularly reluctant to research the difficulties of poverty by working low-paying jobs?

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4. How does Ehrenreich’s scientific background influence her decision to go undercover as a journalist?

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5. Ehrenreich expresses her willingness to “get [her] hands dirty.” Identify this literary term and analyze how it affects the tone of the narrative.

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19. In the meeting, Phillip complains about “gossip.” What does the repetition of this word indicate about him?

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20. How has management taken away employees’ civil liberties?

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21. The statement “You might imagine...that people who live...on \$6 to \$10 an hour have discovered some survival stratagems unknown to the middle class” is an example of what literary term?

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22. Describe the living situations of the restaurant employees.

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23. What are some of the hidden costs of poverty?

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24. How is the tip-based pay of serving preferable to receiving a paycheck at other low-paying jobs? How is it problematic?

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**sentient** – aware  
**smelted** – rock that is melted to obtain metals  
**soteriological** – relating to the religious belief in salvation through Christ  
**squalid** – filthy; unpleasant; miserable  
**subtext** – the underlying or implied meaning  
**sullenness** – unhappiness; a gloomy silence  
**sustenance** – food; the means of maintaining life  
**tangible** – able to be seen or touched  
**tarty** – inappropriately or offensively sexy; relating to or suggesting a prostitute  
**tchotchke** – a trinket; a knickknack  
**tentatively** – hesitantly; uncertainly  
**tics** – frequent behavioral traits; unusual mannerisms  
**transcendent** – going beyond ordinary limits or experiences  
**untoward** – unfavorable; bad  
**ushers** – leads to a place  
**vagrant** – a beggar; a person who has no permanent home or job  
**vigorous** – strong; forceful; energetic  
**vivacious** – lively; cheerful; spirited  
**wanly** – in a manner that shows or suggests poor health  
**wayward** – unpredictable; not following what is proper  
**wizened** – wrinkled from old age

1. Why does Ehrenreich decide to work in Portland, Maine?

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2. Ehrenreich describes job fairs in which a person looks at “employers’ tables, like a shopper at the mall.” What literary term is this phrase an example of, and what is its significance?

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