

STUDY GUIDE: NICKEL AND DIMED: ON (NOT) GETTING BY IN NORTH AMERICA

BOLD- ALL STUDENTS

BOLD UNDERLINED – STUDENTS READING SERVING

UNDERLINED – STUDENTS READING SCRUBBING

ITALICIZED – STUDENTS READING SELLING

1. Early in her book *Nickel and Dimed*, author Barbara Ehrenreich admits that she has many advantages over "real" low-wage workers. What sets her apart from the average low-wage worker? In her desire to "experience poverty," what rules does she set for herself?
2. Minimum wage workers often report feeling invisible. Where do you encounter minimum wage workers? What sorts of services do they provide? Have you ever worked in a low-wage job? If so, what was your experience?
3. On page 27, Ehrenreich writes: "There are no secret economies that nourish the poor; on the contrary, there are a host of special costs." Describe some of these costs. How do the people in *Nickel and Dimed* deal with these costs?
4. Most of the low-income workers Ehrenreich encounters are women. Is there a connection between "women's work" and low wages? Explain some of the social and historical reasons for this situation.
5. The Poverty Guideline is issued each year by the Department of Health and Human Services. In 2004, HHS found that for a family of four to live above the poverty line, they had to earn \$18,850. Describe life in your hometown for a family of four living just above the poverty line. Where would they live? Work? What would they eat? What daily challenges would they face?
6. Perspective: What appears to be the author's ideological perspective (i.e., what are her political and social views)? How do you know this and how do you think it will affect her interpretation of what she experiences and sees?
7. When cleaning houses, what is supposed to be the maid's focus, cleanliness or appearance? Why is this the case? Can you think of other products or services where something similar might happen?
8. On p. 91, Ehrenreich writes that hiring a cleaning person was "not the kind of relationship that she wanted to have with another human being." What does she mean? How would such a relationship be similar to or different from the one's that she must have with the person that changes the oil in her car, or the person who cuts the meat that she buys at her grocery store, or the person who cleans the offices in the building that she might work in at her real job? Is society better off because Ehrenreich does not personally hire a maid?
9. While working for *The Maids*, Ehrenreich hears Ted claim that he's "not a bad guy . . . and cares a lot about his girls." How do the assumptions of supervisors such as Ted affect their employees? How does Ted compare to Ehrenreich's other bosses? To yours?
10. What is meant by the term "mother's hours," a "benefit" offered by the maid service in Maine? Is this job trait likely to raise wages, lower wages, or leave wages unaffected? Should we think of this as a benefit? Can you think of other job characteristics that would be associated with higher or lower wages?
11. What are the economic benefits to the firm from installing surveillance systems to monitor employees and administering questionnaires and drug tests to prospective employees? Do these activities constitute infringements on civil rights? Do the economic benefits to the firm justify these activities?
12. Make a list of privileges you experience as a person of your "class." Make a list of drawbacks. How would you characterize your relationship to the American Dream? Do your goals seem achievable?
13. As a reader, we get to know many of Ehrenreich's coworkers. Why does the author use personal narratives in *Nickel and Dimed*? Choose one person's story to examine. What about the story surprises you?
14. Ehrenreich reports at length about the sorts of physical ailments low-wage workers have to endure. What are they? How are they dealt with?

15. "It is common, among the nonpoor," writes Ehrenreich, "to think of poverty as a sustainable condition. They are 'always with us.' What is harder for the nonpoor to see is poverty as acute distress," due to poor nutrition, homelessness and lack of affordable housing, injuries, and little to no health insurance. Ehrenreich argues that far from being sustainable, poverty is a "state of emergency." Do you agree?
16. What are the significance of nutrition and health, a recurrent theme in Ehrenreich's narrative? Who would benefit if the workers were healthier? What incentive do workers have to go to the doctor if they are ill? What happens when people who are ill wait long periods before going to the doctor for treatment?
17. In the wake of recent welfare reform measures, millions of women entering the workforce can expect to face struggles like the ones Ehrenreich confronted in *Nickel and Dimed*. Have you ever been homeless, unemployed, without health insurance, or held down two jobs? What is the lowest-paying job you ever held and what kind of help -- if any -- did you need to improve your situation?
18. Were your perceptions of blue-collar Americans transformed or reinforced by *Nickel and Dimed*? Have your notions of poverty and prosperity changed since reading the book? What about your own treatment of waiters, maids, and sales-people?
19. How do booming national and international chains -- restaurants, hotels, retail outlets, cleaning services, and elder-care facilities -- affect the treatment and aspirations of low-wage workers? Consider how market competition and the push for profits drive the nickel-and-dime of America's lowest-paid.
20. Housing costs pose the greatest obstacle for low-wage workers. Why does our society seem to resist rectifying this situation? Do you believe that there are realistic solutions to the lack of affordable housing?
21. Ehrenreich is white and middle class. She asserts that her experience would have been radically different had she been a person of color or a single parent. Do you think discrimination shaped Ehrenreich's story? In what ways?
22. *Why do you think low-wage workers are reluctant to form labor organizations as Ehrenreich discovered at Wal-Mart? How do you think employees should lobby to improve working conditions?*
23. Many campus and advocacy groups are currently involved in struggles for a "living wage." How do you think a living wage should be calculated?
24. Were you surprised by the casual reactions of Ehrenreich's coworkers when she revealed herself as an undercover writer? Were you surprised that she wasn't suspected of being "different" or out-of-place despite her graduate-level education and usually comfortable lifestyle?
25. *How does managers' scrutiny -- "time theft" crackdowns and drug testing -- affect workers' morale? How can American companies make the workplace environment safe and efficient without treating employees like suspected criminals?*
26. Ehrenreich notes an apparent need for "approval" from the worker's supervisor. She also notes that mass media images are decidedly negative (or absent) regarding low wage workers, and reports a sense of feeling alone in one's circumstance. Do you think that this is an accurate portrayal of mass media imagery (verify by noting TV or magazine images)? What economic incentives would lead the mass media to behave in this manner, assuming that you agree with Ehrenreich?
27. *Ehrenreich concluded that had her working life been spent in a Wal-Mart -- like environment, she would have emerged a different person -- meaner, pettier, "Barb" instead of "Barbara." How would your personality change if you were placed in working conditions very different from the ones you are in now?*
28. The workers in *Nickel and Dimed* receive almost no benefits -- no overtime pay, no retirement funds, and no health insurance. Is this fair? Do you think an increase in salary would redress the lack of benefits, or is this a completely separate problem?
29. Many of Ehrenreich's colleagues relied heavily on family -- for housing and help with child-care, by sharing appliances and dividing up the cooking, shopping, and cleaning. Do you think Americans make excessive demands on the family unit rather than calling for the government to help those in need?

30. *Nickel and Dimed* takes place in 1998-2000, a time of unprecedented prosperity in America. Do you think Ehrenreich's experience would be different in today's economy? How so?
31. One strategy for coping with the challenges posed by low wages and high rents is to share an apartment or hotel room. Think about the family structure and living arrangements throughout the last century. Has marriage and family formation been a social institution or an economic institution? What trends have been observed in extended families (three generations living under one roof, or two older generations living under one roof), and how do these relate to economic well-being?
32. What evidence do you see that the low wage employees are angry about the circumstances in which they find themselves (excluding Ehrenreich)? Why are they angry? Is this anger justified? Are some people more likely to become angry about manual labor than others? Why?
33. Even when Ehrenreich has a job with an adequate salary (relative to her rent), she experiences periods in which she can barely survive, at least temporarily. Why is this the case? What policy initiative to help low wage workers might be suggested by this observation?
34. Ehrenreich's experience points out the economic importance of the spatial layout of cities. Which distances (e.g., from what to what) were important or posed special challenges for Ehrenreich? What do you think were the economic circumstances or incentives that led to the location of these businesses or services?
35. Ehrenreich's life was made much easier by the availability of a car. How would a low wage worker fare in the absence of this convenience? How would it affect their labor supply and housing decisions?
36. Why did Ehrenreich stay in motels for 200 per week, which was more expensive than the going apartment rentals?
37. *Ehrenreich is sympathetic to union but acknowledges that they have some shortcomings. From the businesses', employees', and consumers' perspectives, what are the benefits and costs of unionism?*
38. *Unless you count Budgie, Ehrenreich had no real family responsibility during her experiment. How would her routine have changed if she were responsible for children? How would her economic circumstances have changed? Given the historical patterns of childcare and the current trends in child custody in divorce cases, would these challenges fall more heavily upon low wage women?*
39. In the "Evaluation" chapter of *Nickel and Dimed*, Ehrenreich discusses the personal and social challenges of "achieving a decent fit between income and expenses." What are some of these challenges? What solutions would you propose?
40. Why didn't the low wage workers just switch to higher paying jobs (Ehrenreich notes that there were higher paying jobs available)? What circumstances discourage low wage workers from seeking out and taking the best paying job that they can find?
41. After reading *Nickel and Dimed*, do you think that having a job -- any job -- is better than no job at all? Did this book make you feel angry? Better informed? Relieved that someone has finally described your experience? Galvanized to do something?