

**Assignment #1**  
***America's Working Poor***  
Barbara Ehrenreich: *Nickel and Dimed*

**The Topic:**

One of the central tenets of the American Dream is that if one works hard and is basically honest, one will succeed. In fact, the majority of Americans cling to this view. However, as Judith Chafel argues in "Societal Images of Poverty: Child and Adult Beliefs," and as Barbara Ehrenreich illustrates in her book *Nickel and Dimed*, often hard work is simply not enough to get ahead, or even to ensure a modest living. Through her undercover investigation and her research, Ehrenreich provides us with a glimpse of the "working poor" in the United States, of what it means to be a low-wage worker. The picture she paints is a gloomy one, in which fully employed workers must share cramped living quarters, must go without sufficient food and medical care, and are worn down by monotonous, physically exhausting jobs.

**Your Task:**

For this assignment I want you to identify one of the obstacles low-wage workers encounter in their efforts to get by, and explain how that obstacle works to keep the poor working in low-wage jobs (or how it keeps the poor poor). I encourage you to draw on some of the supplemental readings I gave you, but all of your papers must draw on *Nickel and Dimed* to help you develop and illustrate your central point (thesis). It will be important to first establish for your reader that the obstacle does, indeed, exist before you go to explain how the obstacle actually works.

**Specifics of the paper:**

- Your introduction should provide readers with whatever background information you think they will need to understand your position. This will likely include a brief summary of the book and some discussion of the particular issue you have chosen to focus on. (Assume your reader is intelligent but has not read the book.)
- Your thesis should clearly state which obstacle you have identified and how you think it keeps the working poor in low-wage jobs.
- The body of your essay should provide sufficient evidence and explanation to support your thesis.

- Body paragraphs should generally develop a single point or idea related to the thesis and should begin with topic sentences that make that point clear to your reader.
- Direct quotations should be introduced, punctuated and cited correctly. Any references to other information, facts, or ideas should also be cited correctly.
- You will include a Works Cited list with your final draft. See pages 222-223 in *Handbook for College Research*.

**Special note:** The following comes directly from *Handbook of College Research*, by Robert Perrin (page 211).

A paper in MLA style has no separate title page. Instead, in the upper left-hand corner of the first page, two spaces below the header, type on separate lines your name, your instructor's name, the course number, and the date. Two lines below the date, center the paper's title. Capitalize all important words in the title but do not italicize it, place it in quotation marks, or follow it with a period. Two lines below the title, begin the first paragraph of the paper.

*Peer response draft due: Monday, February 13 (bring 4 copies)*  
*Final draft due: Tuesday, February 21*