In the 1994 film Reality Bites, high-flying Leilaina Pierce—college graduate, class valedictorian, aspiring documentary filmmaker—loses her job as a production assistant on a TV talk show and, after a series of futile attempts to find a replacement job within the media industry, is driven to desperation to apply for work at a fast-food company called “Wienschnitzel.” Leilaina is interviewed for the fast-food job by a cashier in a “Wienerdude” cap, who—while in constant motion preparing food, serving customers, and barking out orders to subordinates—asks: “Miss Pierce, do you have any idea what it means to be a cashier at Wienschnitzel?” When Leilaina suggests that being a cashier might involve taking orders and handling cash, the Wienerdude laughs:

*Wienerdude:* No, it's a juggling act... I mean, you got people coming at you from the front, coming at you from the back, from the side, people at the condiment exchange, people at the drive-through, kids on bikes, and all depending on who?

*Leilaina:* Me?

*Wienerdude:* Yeah... You got to be 150 percent on your toes 150 percent of the time.

The Wienerdude then gives Leilaina a math quiz, asking her to add 85 and 45 in her head as quickly as she can. After Leilaina three times comes up with the wrong number—“140? 150? 160?”—the Wienerdude shakes his head and scoffs, “It’s not an auction, Miss Pierce. There’s a reason I’ve been here six months.” Leilaina, needless to say, is not offered the job at Wienschnitzel. She does, however, eventually manage to get her life back on track, enjoys some success as a filmmaker, and, by the end of the film, is even able to find true love in an old college friend. Meanwhile, the Wienerdude, after his brief but action-packed cameo, is never heard from again.

This [article]... is about the Wienerdudes of the world. It is about the young workers in those low-end service and retail jobs that are the butt of countless jokes—jobs that, as many would say, “any trained monkey could do.” Stereotypes of fast-food and other low-end service jobs (including grocery) typically trade on these jobs’ simplicity and simple-mindedness. Indeed, Reality Bites finds humor in parodying the Wienerdude’s apparently ludicrous and self-important inflating of the complex and demanding nature of his work at Wienschnitzel. What this chapter seeks to show is that the Wienerdude is, in many ways, absolutely right: Work in fast-food, grocery, and other low-end service jobs is, or can be, difficult, demanding, and unrewarding. Fast-food and grocery work is high-stress, low-status, and low-wage work. It is work that, on the one hand, is subject to routinization, close surveillance, and management control but, on the other, calls for high levels of self-motivation and investment from workers. It can also be physically dangerous: Grocery and restaurant workers throughout North America face some of the highest risks of all occupational groups of being injured, attacked, or even killed on the job.

**HIGH STRESS, LOW STATUS, LOW WAGES**

“I would say the stress is the worst thing about it,” a young Fry House cashier says of her fast-food job. “Sometimes I get so stressed out, cause some days you’re in a bad mood yourself, you know, having to deal with people, you just don’t want to, you’d rather be somewhere else, anywhere except work.” High stress levels are the most widespread complaint young workers in Box Hill and Glenwood have about their grocery and fast-food employment. Stress can be caused by many aspects of grocery and fast-food work: difficult relations with customers and managers; repetitive work tasks; low occupational status and small paychecks; continual workplace surveillance; and hot, greasy, and often dangerous work environments. But the number-one factor young workers point to as the cause of workplace stress is the lack of time to do the work they are expected to do. Either there are not enough workers on shift to cover customer rushes and necessary preparation and cleaning work, or workers are not given long enough shifts to get their work stations ready for lunch and evening rushes and clean up after such rushes are through.

Lack of time lies behind almost all other causes of workplace stress. Young workers regularly endure abuse from their customers. Workers are yelled at, sworn at, and insulted by customers; they are frowned at, glaring at, and sneered at; they are ignored, treated as social inferiors, and assumed to be servants whose role in life is to cater to and anticipate a customer’s every whim and fancy. There are different reasons for such abusiveness. Young grocery and fast-food workers make easy targets for the displacement of hostility. “Often people come into Fry House,” a cashier in Glenwood says, “because they’ve been yelled at by their bosses, they don’t have anybody they can yell at, so they yell at us ‘cause they think they can.” “Customers go off on some grocery employee,” says a stocker in Box Hill, “cause it makes ‘em feel powerful.”

Grocery and fast-food workers also incite abuse when their job responsibilities put them in conflict with customers’ interests.
Checkers in Box Hill, for example, become the target of customers’ anger when they are put in the position of having to police company rules on accepting checks or enforce government laws for using food stamps or selling alcohol. In one supermarket, I witnessed a checker politely decline to sell alcohol to a young couple who were clearly intoxicated—as she was required to do by law, under penalty of losing her job. The couple stalked out of the store, and on their way out turned to yell at the checker, “Fuck you! Fuck you, you fucking bitch!” while giving her the finger.

Beyond these various motivations, however, many young workers feel that grocery and fast-food customers are abusive primarily because they fail to appreciate the time pressure under which workers labor:

That’s the worst aspect of it for me, having to explain to people [customers] that, well, this is how it works, because they don’t know. . . . I’ve said, you’re welcome to come back here, take a tour; sit here for an hour, watch us when it’s busy, please. Actually, a lady who worked here for about a month, and then she got another job . . . she said, “You know, I used to get really mad when I had to wait for stuff, but I have a total new respect for people that work in fast-food. I know what you have to do. I know what it’s like. I feel so bad for any time I ever blew up at anybody.” She says, “I don’t know how you guys do it; how you can handle it. I really, really, really admire you guys for that, for keeping your cool the way you do, ‘cause it’s hard to do.”

“They think we’re dumb and slow,” a Fry House cashier complains of his customers, “but they don’t understand. If they came in here and tried to do what we’re doing, they’d be about three times as slow as we are.” Young workers are often caught in difficult situations in their relations with customers: On the one hand, they are not given enough time or staff support by their employers to perform at the speed and quality levels their customers would prefer; on the other, they lack the status to be able to persuade customers to respect them for the work that they do manage to do under what are often difficult and stressful working conditions.

Managers are another primary source of workplace stress. Like customers, some managers yell and swear at their young employees, talk down to them, and call them “stupid,” “incompetent,” and “lazy.” Many workers believe that the younger the worker, the more latitude managers feel they have in verbally attacking and belittling that worker. Managers in fast-food and grocery, young workers say, often “go on power trips,” order workers around, and “tell you every little thing you do wrong”—all the while, failing to provide encouragement or acknowledgment of jobs well done. Managers criticize workers behind their backs; worse, they dress employees down to their faces, in front of coworkers and customers. Young workers in both Box Hill and Glenwood complain widely of the stress caused by managerial favoritism—by managers picking on workers they dislike and conferring favors on workers they prefer. Many feel that managers will abuse their power by trying to get rid of employees they don’t want working in their stores. “When a manager doesn’t want you to work there,” explains a cook in Glenwood, “they look for things, they kinda set you up so they can give you something bad.’

As it does with customer-caused stress, time pressure often stands behind manager-caused workplace stress. Workers, for example, sometimes encounter what they refer to as “office managers”—managers who hide in their offices (claiming to be doing needed paperwork) and avoid helping with rushes. Because stores’ labor budgets generally assume that managers will work on the floor when needed, “office managers” put increased stress on already overloaded workers. Workers have to deal with “cheap managers”—managers who (in efforts to keep costs low and earn year-end bonuses) skim on allocating labor hours. Workers have to deal with managerial error—with managers who regularly screw up when submitting hours to company payroll, so that workers’ checks are late or incorrect, or with managers who screw up scheduling, ordering, or inventory tasks. “I notice our managers forget a lot,” one Fry House worker complained, “so we have to explain to our customers, ‘We have no fried chicken tonight.’ How can you have no fried chicken when it’s Fry House? ‘Well, our manager forgot to order chicken.’ It’s crazy!”

Managers in the grocery and (especially) fast-food industries come and go with great frequency. Fry House store managers change over about every six months, while area managers change over every couple of years. Store managers in Box Hill chain supermarkets change over less frequently, but assistant managers come and go every few months. Workers find that they can develop a relationship and system of doing things with one manager; then that manager will quit or be fired, transferred, or promoted. They will then have to start over, building up a new relationship and new system with a new manager. Over time, management instability can be as stressful and wearing as bad or abusive management. “Every time a new manager comes in, they change everything,” complains a Fry House cashier. “It’s just like being hired. They have to retrain you on everything. It’s pretty
hard, because once you get into something, you just keep with it. Then somebody else comes in, and they’re like, ‘No, no! You’re doing it wrong; you have to do it this way.’ ”

Grocery and fast-food work is low-status work. Fast-food work especially carries a stigma, and fast-food workers are stereotyped as being stupid, lazy, slow, and lacking in life goals and initiative. . . . Fast-food and grocery “youth” jobs (barkers, stockers) are also low in status simply because they are seen as typically being held by young workers. “What’s the image of a fast-food job?” a Fry House cashier asks rhetorically. “You get the image of some kid with about a hundred pimples on his face trying to take an order for somebody, and he doesn’t understand what to do.” Young workers in Box Hill and Glenwood are well aware that if the work they perform were considered glamorous and important, it would be adults and not youths who would be taking on these jobs.

For many young workers, grocery and fast-food work lacks real or intrinsic meaning, interest, and value. “You can’t be very proud of yourself as a grocery worker,” says a young stocker in Box Hill. “What is your gift to the world [if] you work at Good Grocers for your whole life?” The problem with grocery and fast-food work, for many young workers, is that it is difficult to feel a sense of accomplishment or progress. A grocery bagger, for example, explains why she would never want a grocery career:

It’s tough to have a job where it’s just a constant flow of people and nothing ever ends or begins, where you’re always just providing a service, the same service over and over again. . . . It seems like, to be a checker, to always be saying hello, how are you, have a good day, to always be doing the same thing, I would like a job better where I started and finished something.

In grocery and fast-food work, tasks tend to repeat themselves almost without end. The work is repetitive, mundane, and often boring. Workers may find getting up to and maintaining speed in what are very fast-paced workplaces initially challenging, but once the basic set of tasks has been mastered, workplace learning plateaus, and workers are left with the drudgery of simply executing tasks that long ago became second nature.

Grocery and fast-food work is often said to be “low-skill” work—and, indeed, many young workers in Box Hill and Glenwood slam their jobs by saying that anyone “with half a brain” could do the work they do. Attributes of skill are notoriously tricky, however: They tend to involve assessments of the social standing of a particular job and the kinds of people who hold that job as much as they refer to any absolute and objective measurement of cognitive demands inherent in a given set of work tasks. Young grocery and fast-food workers develop considerable local expertise in their jobs: knowledge of how best to handle individual customers and managers; of how to bend official work rules to get work done effectively and efficiently on the ground; how to make ad hoc repairs and improvisations in the workplace when machines break down, work tools go missing, or the maddening rush of customer demand overwhelms normal working procedures. What can be said of grocery and fast-food work is that such local expertise emerges within jobs that are seen overall—by workers, customers, and managers—as repetitive and low in status, meaning, challenge, and value.

The low status of grocery and fast-food work feeds into general workplace stress. Young grocery and fast-food workers lack a “status shield” to protect them from customer and manager abuse. . . . As Robin Leidner . . . writes, “Customers who might have managed to be polite to higher-status workers [have] no compunction about taking their anger out on [low-status service-sector] employees.” The low status of grocery and fast-food work also feeds into low industry wages: Because this work is not considered particularly valuable or important, and because workers in these jobs are considered unskilled and easily replaceable, pay levels in Box Hill grocery and Glenwood fast-food outlets remain depressed. Rigid employer determination to keep labor costs at a minimum, of course, further reinforces and institutionalizes downward pressures on wages.

Unionization has had some impact in Box Hill and Glenwood in raising wages and securing benefits that are unusual in North America’s low-end service sector. Wages for some job classification in the Box Hill grocery stores are relatively high compared with wages in the area’s other low-end service industries, and wages in the Glenwood Fry Houses are high compared with those of other fast-food companies in town. Overall, however, wages in these two industries remain low. Even full-time workers earning top dollar in the Box Hill grocery industry stand to make only about the average yearly wage in the United States. The vast majority of grocery workers in Box Hill do not work anywhere near full-time hours—as the grocery industry (like the fast-food industry) mostly provides only part-time work. Grocery wages in Box Hill, furthermore, are divided into three tiers. Only checkers and grocery and produce clerks are paid on the top wage scale. Workers in side deli and bakery departments (who are predominantly women) are paid on .
lower, second-tier wage scale, and baggers and stockers (who are predominantly youths) are not on scale, and are paid on a third wage tier, which starts only slightly above the minimum wage.

Questions for Discussion

1. According to Tannock, what factors contribute to high levels of stress in the service sector workplace? Are these factors unique to service work?
2. In what ways are the service workers in this article abused by their customers and their managers? How do they respond to such abuse?
3. Why do service workers lack a "status shield"? What is this "shield" and how does it protect other types of workers? How does not having this protection affect the way service workers view themselves and how they are treated?
4. The service workers in this article claim that "anyone with half a brain" could do their jobs. What are some of the necessary skills and disciplines required to do their type of work? How does the essay attempt to convince the reader that these jobs and the young workers doing them are worthy of dignity and respect?

Ideas for Writing

1. Write an essay discussing the high levels of stress involved in working in the service sector, providing some examples from experience and research. What factors contribute to this stress, and how could they be alleviated to some degree by employers?
2. Write an essay about your own experiences in service work. Did you experience a great deal of stress or abuse from your customers or managers? What did you learn from the job? Alternatively, if you have not worked in a service position, write about your observations of people who do. Have you ever witnessed service employees being mistreated by either their customers or managers? Are you more empathetic toward them after reading this essay and observing them? Why?