

Teaching Aid for  
*The Shift: One Nurse, Twelve Hours, Four Patients' Lives*  
by Theresa Brown

*Suggested paper topics*

1. The epigraphs (quotations) at the start of *The Shift* seem to have little to do with the book. Why do you think Brown included them? Pick one or both and discuss.
2. In chapter 6, “Paperwork,” Brown writes, “I sometimes wonder if sadists designed our software.” Nursing students often hear, “If it isn’t charted it isn’t done.” Write about your own impressions of charting in the hospital. Does the required level of record-keeping help or hurt patient care, or both? Use examples to explain.
3. In chapter 7, “No Time for Lunch,” Brown depicts her own hypoglycemia (without calling it that) before she decides to eat lunch. Nurses often work through lunch despite being entitled to a real lunch break. Talk about the importance of self-care for nurses. Do you think Brown cares for herself well?
4. Chapter 4, “Worries,” begins with a Code Blue—a clinical patient emergency—that is called a “Condition C” in *The Shift*. What did you learn from Brown’s depiction of this event? Did it proceed as you expected or did aspects of the Code surprise you?
5. Pick one of the patients in *The Shift* and reflect on their day in the hospital. What conclusions about illness or health care can you draw from your observations?
6. On p. 19 of *The Shift*, Brown writes RN/P=TLC, showing that the more patients a nurse has, the less tender-loving-care she is able to give each one. Research nurse staffing ratios and elaborate on this idea, using examples from the book.
7. Brown writes on p. 3: “Home is a vaccine against the stresses of nursing.” Describe several moments of high stress in the book and say whether each situation could be made less stressful or if stress is unavoidable in nursing. How do you see the stress affecting nurses?
8. Read the Ernest Hemingway short story “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” (can be downloaded from [TheresaBrownRN.com](http://TheresaBrownRN.com)) and discuss whether the phrase is a good description of a hospital. Use examples from *The Shift*.

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*Discussion Questions*

1. Staff in the Emergency Department did not investigate Sheila Fields's abdominal pain. Why not? What are your reactions to this kind of mistake?
2. Candace Moore is a "difficult patient." Explain why she has earned this label. How do you feel about staff applying this label to patients like Candace?
3. On p. 135 Brown writes, "I do this all day long: run through a mental checklist that changes unpredictably." React to this characterization of nurses' work.
4. Did this book excite you about nursing, scare you, both, or neither? There is no wrong answer.
5. In Chapter 8, "Duo Damsel," Brown describes being constantly pulled in too many directions and wishing she could split in two like Duo Damsel, a superhero in a comic book. Talk about your reaction to this challenge and to the portrayal of nurses needing to be like superheroes.
6. Dorothy's discharge takes forever to complete. In radio interviews that Brown had when *The Shift* was published, a large number of interviewers said they appreciated finally understanding why hospital discharges take so long. Is the timing a problem? If so, how could it be fixed?
7. Data shows that nurses' error rates go up after ten hours on shift. Talk about the ethics of nurses working 12-hour shifts. Is working 8-hour shifts a solution, or would that create a new set of problems?
8. Page 208-211 retells the strange story of a patient's lost dentures. Discuss this short anecdote and outline all that it reveals about modern health care.
9. Brown aspires to be a "good nurse," which in some ways is the highest compliment a nurse can receive. Delineate all the characteristics of a "good nurse" that you see in *The Shift*.
10. Patients have so little privacy or autonomy in the hospital. Can you see a way to improve that?
11. Standard hospital jargon can be dehumanizing: a patient is a "train wreck," a very sick person is "circling the drain," patients placed on an atypical floor are "overflow."

These terms were left out of *The Shift* because they are problematic. Discuss why such terms might evolve and why they are problematic.

12. The threat of death is a constant when working with patients who receive bone-marrow transplants. How do you see Brown and the rest of the staff cope with the threat of death? What ideas do you have to help yourself or others emotionally deal with having patients die?