

# The Value of a Sherpa Life

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## BACKGROUND

Located between Tibet and Nepal in southern Asia, Mount Everest is the tallest mountain in the world and one of the most dangerous to climb. More than 200 people have died attempting to reach the summit, including 17 Sherpa porters in 2014. Sherpas are a Nepalese ethnic group famous for their superior mountaineering skills. Companies that run expeditions up the mountain often employ Sherpas to guide climbers.

SCAN FOR  
MULTIMEDIA 

- 1** On April 18, at about 6:30 a.m. local time, an avalanche swept down off the west shoulder of Everest and killed 16 climbers. To anybody who's familiar with Everest climbing, it should come as no surprise that all of the men were Sherpa porters. Sherpas are Everest's workforce—the literal backbone of the climbing industry there. The men who were struck were either carrying 80-pound loads to Camps I and II,<sup>1</sup> or they were on their way back to Base Camp.<sup>2</sup> Without the hard work of the Sherpa porters, it would be largely impossible for Americans and Europeans with slightly above-average **physiology**, and well above-average disposable income, to scale the world's tallest mountain.
- 2** Increasingly, the pinnacle of adventure tourism—the summit of Everest—comes at too steep a cost. In the August 2013 issue, I wrote a story titled "Disposable Man," about the routinization of Sherpa deaths on Everest. Today's avalanche was the worst accident in the history of the mountain. Add to this the April 2 death of Sherpa Mingma Tenzing, who was working for the Peak Freaks expedition, as well as at least a dozen serious injuries from the avalanche, and 2014 stands out as the bloodiest year in Everest history—all before most teams have even set foot on the mountain.

1. **Camps I and II** *n.* campsites located at 19,500 feet and 21,000 feet, respectively.

2. **Base Camp** *n.* located at 17,500 feet on the south side of Everest in Nepal; where the true climb up the mountain begins.

## NOTES

Mark context clues that help you determine meaning.

**physiology** (fihz ee OL uh jee) *n.*

MEANING:

## NOTES

Mark context clues that help you determine meaning.

**mortality** (mawr TAL uh tee) *n.*

MEANING:

- 3 Yes, something needs to be done.
- 4 There's no question that guiding on Everest is ethically fraught. But shutting the industry down would anger the outfitters, clients, and, most of all, the Sherpas. That last group would lose jobs that pay between \$2,000 and \$6,000 per season, in a country where the median income is \$540 per year. If, say, 1 percent of American college-aged raft guides or ski instructors were dying on the job—the **mortality** rate of Everest Sherpas—the guiding industry would vanish. But Himalayan climbing is understood to be extremely dangerous, and people who play the game still cling to its romantic roots in exploration rather than its current status as recreational tourism.
- 5 The answer isn't decreasing, or ending, the climbing business on Everest; the solution is increasing the value of a Sherpa life. Because right now—despite what anybody may feel in their heart—the industry clearly values life on a two-tiered basis: Westerners at the top, Sherpas at the bottom.
- 6 Want to know what a Sherpa life is worth? You only need to review the numbers that I reported last year: lower pay, lower standards for rescue insurance, lower payouts on accidental-death coverage in general. And, perhaps most significantly, the amount of time that Sherpas spend making laps through the deadly Khumbu Icefall<sup>3</sup> and up the Lhotse Face<sup>4</sup>, ferrying loads for predominantly Western expeditions so that clients can arrive fresh and minimize their exposure to the hazards of the mountain. Several organizations, including the Juniper Fund and Alex Lowe Charitable Foundation, have made valiant efforts to teach Sherpas the latest climbing, rescue, and first-aid skills via projects like the Khumbu Climbing School, but the hazards of the mountain remain.
- 7 Last June, after I'd finished reporting "Disposable Man," the Nepalese government announced that it would double the amount of insurance that high-altitude porters were required to carry, to \$11,000. But for about \$200 per policy, at least one Kathmandu<sup>5</sup>-based insurance company will cover Sherpas for \$23,000. Even that is clearly insufficient to cover the loss. What's left instead is a patchwork of charity, in which some families find help from climbers to send their kids to school and others don't.
- 8 The change I'd most like to see would start at the very beginning of the tragedy, when outfitters describe what has happened to these men, in words that, at this point, sound rote. A typical blog post on an expedition website follows a predictable pattern, like this one from earlier this month: "Our team is overwhelmed with sadness. Our prayers go out to his family at this extremely difficult time. Tea lights have been lit, we hang our heads in sorrow." But after sorrow should come an acknowledgement of the deep sense of responsibility that is

3. **Khumbu Icefall** (KUHM boo) *n.* dangerous area between Base Camp and Camp I where ice often shifts and snaps off over the heads of climbers.

4. **Lhotse Face** (loht SEE) *n.* 3,700-foot wall of glacial ice on the southern face of Lhotse, the fourth-highest mountain in the world; connected to Everest and in the path of climbers.

5. **Kathmandu** (kaht man DOO) *n.* capital of Nepal.

tied in to hiring somebody to do such a dangerous job—for an end result that’s ultimately meaningless.

- 9 In the press, largely as a result of a faulty translation to English, the deceased are always referred to as Sherpa “guides.” It’s generally a misleading job title for the men—and one or two women—who, each day, lean into their pack straps and haul supplies up the mountain for paying clientele.
- 10 As guides and Sherpas begin to wake up today in Nepal, they’ll commit themselves to finding the remaining bodies. They’ll loiter for hours, shovels in hand, under the same serac<sup>6</sup> that killed their friends. The Buddhist tradition is strict about needing a body to cremate if the deceased is to find a speedy **reincarnation**.
- 11 In the days to come, there will be 16 different puja<sup>7</sup> funeral ceremonies, most of them in the small villages of the Khumbu Valley.<sup>8</sup> In every village, there are already houses with missing men. Their photos, usually faded, smiling, and standing on the summit of the world, are still hung for visitors to see. Now there are 16 more. ❧

6. **serac** (suh RAK) *n.* pinnacle, sharp ridge, or block of ice among the large cracks in glaciers.  
7. **puja** (POO jah) *n.* (in Buddhism) expressions of honor, worship, and devotion.  
8. **Khumbu Valley** *n.* valley below Everest on the Nepalese side.

## NOTES

Mark context clues that help you determine meaning.

**reincarnation** (ree ihh kahr NAY shuhn) *n.*

MEANING:

## Comprehension Check

Complete the following items after you finish your first read.  
Review and clarify details with your group.

1. What event prompted the author to write this essay?
2. According to the author, why would Sherpa porters likely object to scaling back or shutting down the climbing business on Everest?
3. What is the author saying about the value of a Sherpa life?
4.  **Notebook** Confirm your understanding of the text by writing a summary.

## RESEARCH

**Research to Explore** This essay may spark your curiosity to learn more. Briefly research a topic that interests you. You may want to share what you discover with your group.



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## Close Read the Text

With your group, revisit sections of the text you marked during your first read. **Annotate** details that you notice. What **questions** do you have? What can you **conclude**?



**TIP**

### FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Keep in mind that group members will have different interpretations of the text. These different perspectives enable group members to learn from one another and to clarify their own thoughts. Very often there is no single interpretation or conclusion.

**CITE TEXTUAL EVIDENCE**  
to support your answers.

## Analyze the Text

Complete the activities.

- 1. Review and Clarify** With your group, reread paragraph 4 of the selection. Discuss the author’s counterargument to shutting down the Everest industry. Do you think that he would prefer the climbing industry to stop, or is there another alternative?
- 2. Present and Discuss** Now work with your group to share the passages from the selection that you found especially important. Take turns presenting your passages. Discuss what you notice in the selection, the questions you asked, and the conclusions you reached.
- 3. Post** Work with your group to write a test question about the selection. Keep your question to 140 characters or less.

## Concept Vocabulary

physiology      mortality      reincarnation

**Why These Words?** The concept vocabulary words from the text are related. With your group, determine what the words have in common. How do these word choices enhance the impact of the text?

### Practice

**Notebook** Confirm your understanding of these words from the text by using them in sentences. Be sure to use context clues that hint at each word’s meaning.

## Word Study

**Latin Roots: root -mort-** In “The Value of a Sherpa Life,” the author draws attention to the *mortality rate* of Everest Sherpas—the number of deaths in the Sherpa population. The English word *mortality* is built from the Latin root, *-mors-*, which means “death.” Find several other words that have this same root. Record the words and their meanings.

### STANDARDS

**RI.9–10.2** Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

**RI.9–10.5** Analyze in detail how an author’s ideas or claims are developed and refined by particular sentences, paragraphs, or larger portions of a text.

**L.9–10.1a** Use parallel structure.

## Analyze Craft and Structure

**Author’s Claims and Ideas** An **argumentative essay** is a brief nonfiction work in which an author attempts to persuade readers to accept a point of view. The writer presents a position, or **claim**, and develops it through a sequence of logically linked ideas and evidence.

Use this chart to analyze how the author of “The Value of a Sherpa Life” introduces, develops, and refines his argument.

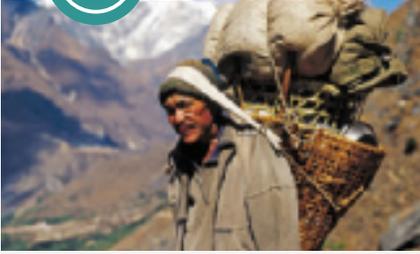
Gather your notes in this chart and share with your group.

INTRODUCTION	
Paragraphs that make up the introduction	
Author’s claim	
Reason(s)	
Evidence	
BODY	
Paragraphs that make up the body	
Support for the claim	
Reason(s)	
Evidence	
CONCLUSION	
Paragraphs that make up the conclusion	
Restate claim	

**TIP**

**WRITING**

An introduction or conclusion may consist of more than one paragraph.



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## Author’s Style

**Use of Rhetoric** Rhetorical devices are language techniques that an author uses to support and emphasize ideas, create rhythm, and make a work memorable. Review the common rhetorical devices described here. Then, discuss the examples of each device with your group.

**Parallelism:** the use of similar grammatical structures to express related ideas

**Example:** We shall pay any price, bear any burden, oppose any foe . . .

**Rhetorical Question:** a question that has no answer (or an obvious answer) or is the point the writer intends to prove

**Example:** If winter comes, can spring be far behind?

**Charged Language:** words that appeal to the emotions to create an impression that may or may not be correct

**Example:** Only a fool or a cheat would oppose these new rules.

### Read It

Work individually. Use this chart to identify each passage from “The Value of a Sherpa Life” as an example of parallelism, rhetorical question, or charged language. Then, explain how each example helps to emphasize the author’s meaning. When you finish, reconvene as a group to discuss your responses.

SELECTION PASSAGE	RHETORICAL DEVICE	HOW IT CREATES EMPHASIS
. . . <i>slightly above-average physiology, and well above-average disposable income</i> . . . (paragraph 1)		
. . . <i>people who play the game still cling to its romantic roots</i> . . . (paragraph 4)		
<i>Want to know what a Sherpa life is worth?</i> . . . (paragraph 6)		

### STANDARDS

**SL.9–10.5** Make strategic use of digital media in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.

**L.9–10.1a** Use parallel structure.

### Write It

**Notebook** Write a paragraph in which you explain what you learned about Everest expeditions from this essay. Use an example of parallelism, a rhetorical question, or charged language.



## Speaking and Listening: Group Presentation

### Assignment

Create a **digital presentation** in which you incorporate text and images to explain a subject. Choose from the following topics:

- a set of **illustrated maps** showing the route taken by most Everest expeditions conducted for tourists, including base camp locations and key topographical points
- a **profile** of the Sherpa people, including information about Sherpa history and culture
- a **report** about a historic expedition to the summit of Everest, including information about Westerners and Sherpas who participated and descriptions of key events

**Project Plan** Before you begin, make a list of the tasks you will need to accomplish in order to complete your digital presentation. Then, assign individual group members to each task. Finally, determine how you will make decisions about choices of images, text, and the overall design of your project.

**Finding Visuals** Make sure the visuals you choose accurately illustrate and enhance the text. Use this chart to collect your ideas. Consult a variety of research sources to gather information and images you will need. Remember to include appropriate citations.

### EVIDENCE LOG

Before moving on to a new selection, go to your Evidence Log and record what you learned from "The Value of a Sherpa Life."

TEXT IMAGE ILLUSTRATES	DESCRIPTION OF IMAGE	SOURCE INFORMATION FOR CITATION



## Meet the Poets



### I Am Offering This Poem

**Jimmy Santiago Baca** (b. 1952) was born in New Mexico. He initially lived with his grandmother but was later sent to an orphanage. Baca ran away at age 13, and circumstances led him to illegal activities and prison. During his time in prison, he learned to read and write. Some of his poems were sent to a publisher, who included them in a book published the year Baca left prison. He continues to write and teach those who are experiencing hardship.



### The Writer

**Richard Wilbur** (b. 1921) earned his first dollar as a poet when he was eight years old. At the time, he did not think that he would pursue the literary career because he was more interested in painting and journalism. As a soldier during World War II, he wrote poems to calm his nerves. After the war, a college friend read the poems and asked Wilbur to write for his literary magazine. Wilbur went on to become the Poet Laureate of the United States.



### Hugging the Jukebox

**Naomi Shihab Nye's** (b. 1952) experiences as a woman of mixed Palestinian and American heritage give her a unique perspective on the duties Americans have as descendants of immigrants. Before attending college in Texas, she lived in Palestine and Jerusalem. In her writing, she often celebrates the extraordinary nature of everyday, ordinary life. After the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, Nye became an activist for Arab Americans, preaching peace and tolerance.

