“Women on the Breadlines” by Meridel Le Sueur is an essay that aims to instill certain values and the idea of the futility of labor within capitalist society, while informing the reader of the plight of women in the city during The Great Depression.

Initially, she describes the setting, a domestic employment bureau, and sets the essay's hopeless tone. Next come the stories of Bernice, a lonely, middle-aged Polish woman, and Ellen, a young lady who eventually breaks down and resorts to prostitution. Le Sueur then goes on to demonstrate how few options women have. The essay concludes with the story of Mrs. Grey, a haggard old lady, and a healthy dose of rhetoric. Mrs. Grey and the conclusion are grouped together in order to drive home Le Sueur's Marxist values in the most effective way. By combining one of her best examples with rhetoric, she is able to leave readers with a more profound impression. Taken together, these women’s stories explore the theme of the difficulty of adapting within our society.

The essay is visibly divided into five sections, shown by one-line section breaks.

The first section is an introduction and can be broken down into two subsections. In the first three paragraphs, Le Sueur tells of the humiliating reality of sitting and waiting for something that will never come, and introduces the woman in the wire cage, who is employed by the bureau. In the next two paragraphs, she gives further detail on the setting and describes the women typically seen in the employment bureau. She also shows that women adapt to hunger in different ways. The cunning take charity while the proud, unable to adapt, starve.
The second section of the essay is the story of Bernice. The first subsection is a one-paragraph description. She is a large, simple woman from the country in love with the city. In the following two paragraphs Le Sueur describes how she was taken advantage of upon arriving in the city, and subsequently learned to mistrust everyone from shady characters who have failed to adapt properly themselves, as they have resorted to an immoral lifestyle. In contrast, Bernice's minimalistic way of life might be considered an appropriate adaptation, since she is able to ration her food supply and survive. However, this is no way to live and the system provides no options, no means to adapt. Finally, we learn of Bernice's dream of owning a houseboat and her current situation.

The third section focuses on Ellen. The first subsection recounts her meltdown and feud with the woman in the wire cage. Unable to adapt to an impossible situation, both women have resorted to anger. The next two paragraphs consist of comments made by other women. It is implied that Ellen will engage in prostitution in an attempt to adapt. In the final paragraph one woman insists that no one saves their money, and Le Sueur implies that it is likely a psychological maladaptation to living in capitalist society. After having no money for periods of time, a little bit of cash in one's hand can feel like freedom and many people waste it for one moment of happiness, despite the hardship this creates later.

The fourth section of the essay deals mostly with a number of unfavorable methods in which women attempt to adapt. In the first subsection Le Sueur compares prostitution to selling the coat off one's back. In the following subsection, consisting of only one paragraph, Le Sueur recalls a rare instance of a job opening. The next subsection brings to light the lack of options for women. The women who do not take advantage of the few, humiliating options, starve. In the fourth subsection Le Sueur explains that many
of the younger women attempt to adapt by soliciting strange men. The final subsection bears a warning: no matter how hard these women try, “there is only starvation [and] humiliation in front of them.” There is no good way to adapt. They are destined for hardship.

Section five consists of the last nine paragraphs and serves as a conclusion. The first subsection describes Mrs. Grey, the strongest example of the futility of labor. Her attempts to adapt have been equally futile. In the final paragraphs of the essay Le Sueur states that the young refuse to marry and reject the suffering of endless labor. By rejecting the social norms they are some of the few with a chance of adapting in their society. This is the cost of proper adaptation. It is unlikely that many would choose this lifestyle unless it was absolutely necessary.

The majority of the evidence in “Women on the Breadlines” is anecdotal. There are four major anecdotes and several smaller ones, including some about the author herself and some that involve one of the major characters. For example, Ellen's friend says that she saw Ellen the night before, showing her legs for change. This small story supports the idea that Ellen is unable to adapt to her situation properly. One should not be forced by the structure of the economic system, to sell one’s body. There are also a few anecdotes that have no particular subject, mostly in the first and fourth sections. One example is in the fourth paragraph: “Hard times and the man leaves to hunt for work... She isn't surprised. She struggles alone to feed the many mouths. Sometimes she gets help from charities, if she's naturally a lick spittle, naturally a little docile and cunning. If she's proud then she starves silently...” This shows that it is possible adapt on some level, yet many cannot due to social stigmas. Those that take charity are considered improperly adapted. However, in time of desperation, taking charity is the price of adapting, necessary if it allows one to eat, or keep oneself clothed.
Ellen's story, which starts at the bottom of page 167, shows what can happen when one is unable to adapt. This passage contains numerical evidence (“She hadn't had work for eight months”), at least one name (Y.W.), and physical detail (dialogue and the description of Ellen “stamping her feet and screaming”), in addition to the anecdotes which represent the main type. “The woman in charge flew into a rage that likely came from days and days of suffering on her part... This woman told me once that she could hardly bear the suffering she saw, hardly hear it, she couldn't eat sometimes and had nightmares at night.” Neither woman in this situation is able to adapt. Not surprisingly, both women turn to frustration and rage. Le Sueur then further demonstrates how Ellen has failed to adapt: “In the eight months of unemployment she had gotten ragged, and the woman was shouting that she could not send her out like that....” Something as simple as her appearance signals this failure to all who see her. The physical description of Ellen “stamping her feet and screaming” gives the reader an image, reinforcing the idea that neither woman has properly adapted. Women on both sides of the cage, one employed, the other not, have failed, showing the flaws within the system which prevent true adaptation.