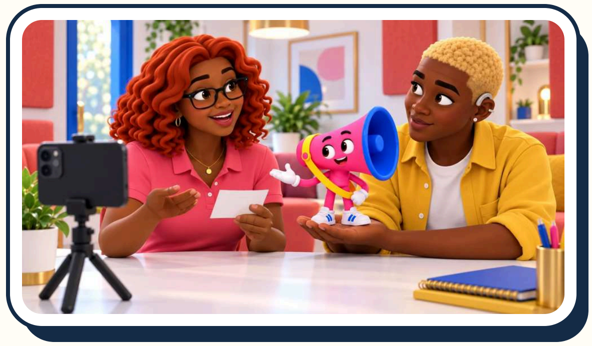
Case 5: Why is my deposit smaller than what I earned?

Gia's bank deposit is smaller than the pay she worked out, so she reads her pay statement line by line before asking payroll.

On your own Read What happened and underline the two hour totals that do not match. About 5 minutes.



Gia holds a small card and talks beside a phone on a tripod. Jordy holds Voz, one of the crew's companions, on an open hand.

Your role: You're the one who adds up Gia's hours before she writes to payroll. **New skill:** Read a pay statement line by line.

What happened

It is Thursday evening, and it is payday for Gia. She works café shifts around her college classes. She checks her bank account and sees a deposit that is smaller than the pay she worked out. Gia keeps a shift log in her notes app. The log says 18 hours, but her pay statement says 15.

Jordy works event shifts, and their deposit looks different too. Jordy's shifts fall on different dates and hours, so their pay cannot explain Gia's. Jordy asks Gia to name the line that worries her instead of posting her whole statement.

Gia's pay statement lists her hours, her hourly rate and four tax lines. She expected the lines for Social Security and Medicare. She does not understand the line for federal income tax. Before she writes to payroll, she wants to know what her own records show.

Your question: Why is Gia's deposit smaller than her own count, and what should she ask payroll?

Key terms

On your own Read each key term and its example, then write your first guess in the box. About 6 minutes.

Gross pay Gross pay is the money you earn before any taxes or other deductions are taken out.

En español: salario bruto

In this case: Gia's statement pays 15 hours at $17.00 an hour, so her gross pay is $255.00.

Net pay Net pay is the money left after taxes and other deductions, often called take-home pay.

En español: salario neto

In this case: The $220.99 that reached Gia's bank account is her net pay, not the amount she earned.

FICA FICA is the federal payroll tax that funds Social Security and Medicare.

En español: FICA (Seguro Social y Medicare)

In this case: On Gia's statement, FICA appears as two lines: Social Security tax, $15.81, and Medicare tax, $3.70.

Withholding Withholding is money an employer takes out of each paycheck to pay taxes or other costs for the worker.

En español: retención

In this case: Federal income tax withheld, $8.40, is a separate line from FICA. The IRS says its amount depends partly on the W-4.

Who is involved

Gia

Works café shifts and keeps her own shift log

"My notes say 18 hours. The statement says 15. I counted twice, so where did three hours go?"

Jordy

Works event shifts on different dates

"Mine is event work. Different dates, different hours. My deposit can't tell Gia anything about hers."

Your first guess

Before you look at the evidence, why do you think Gia's deposit is smaller than she expected?

I think the deposit is smaller because ___.

Notes

Reading passage

Where did three hours go?

On your own Read the passage. At each Stop and think box, pause and answer the question in your head or with a partner. About 4 minutes.

Words to know

- **Gross pay**: Gross pay is the money you earn before any taxes or other deductions are taken out.
- **Net pay**: Net pay is the money left after taxes and other deductions, often called take-home pay.
- **FICA**: FICA is the federal payroll tax that funds Social Security and Medicare.
- **Withholding**: Withholding is money an employer takes out of each paycheck to pay taxes or other costs for the worker.
- **Claim**: A claim is a statement that something is true. You can check a claim with evidence.

The story: Payday for Gia

It is Thursday evening, and it is payday. Gia works café shifts around her college classes. She opens her bank app and frowns. The deposit is smaller than the pay she worked out.

Gia keeps a shift log in her notes app. It lists five shifts and 18 hours. Her pay statement says 15 hours. “I counted twice,” she says. “So where did three hours go?”

Jordy works event shifts, and their deposit looks different too. But Jordy’s shifts fall on other dates and hours, so their pay cannot explain Gia’s. Jordy asks Gia not to post her whole statement. Just name the line that worries you.

You are sitting next to Gia. Your job is to add up her hours before she writes to payroll.

Stop and think. What is the first thing you would check when a paycheck looks too small?

Reading the statement line by line

Gia thinks payroll shorted her. That is a **claim**, a word you learned in Case 1. A claim is a statement that something is true. You can check a claim with evidence. So check the original source: the pay statement.

Reading the statement line by line, continued

The statement covers the pay period ending Friday the 12th. It lists 15 hours at $17.00 an hour. That makes $255.00. **Gross pay** is the money you earn before any taxes or other deductions are taken out.

Now look at the log. Four shifts fall on or before Friday the 12th, and they add up to 15 hours. The fifth shift, 3 hours, was on Saturday the 13th. It belongs to the next pay period. Gia still wants payroll to confirm that.

Next come the tax lines. Social Security tax is $15.81 and Medicare tax is $3.70. Together they are **FICA**, the federal payroll tax that funds Social Security and Medicare. Then comes federal income tax withheld, $8.40, and state and local tax, $6.10. **Withholding** is money an employer takes out of each paycheck to pay taxes or other costs for the worker. What is left is $220.99. **Net pay** is the money left after taxes and other deductions, often called take-home pay.

Stop and think. Why does the Saturday shift not appear on this statement?

FICA is not a person

On the TV show Friends, Rachel opens her first paycheck and asks, “Who’s FICA? Why’s he getting all my money?” (TBS, Friends clip, December 14, 2019). The joke works because the money you earn and the money you receive are two different numbers.

The IRS explains that federal income tax withholding depends partly on Form W-4. A worker fills out that form for the employer (Internal Revenue Service, updated May 1, 2026). Gia wonders whether the W-4 she filled out on her first day explains that line. That is a good question to ask payroll.

Stop and think. Which line on Gia’s statement would you ask payroll about, and why?

Sources

Real source | TBS | December 14, 2019

Rachel Gets Her First Paycheck from Central Perk

Real source | Internal Revenue Service | May 1, 2026

Understanding employment taxes

Look at the evidence

On your own Read the pay statement and the shift log, and fill in both boxes for each one. About 10 minutes.

Evidence A | **Pay statement**

Gia's pay statement

Pay period ending Friday the 12th, paid the following Thursday. Hours: 15.00 at $17.00. Gross pay: $255.00. Social Security tax: $15.81. Medicare tax: $3.70. Federal income tax withheld: $8.40. State and local income tax withheld: $6.10. Net pay: $220.99.

Look closely: Which line shows gross pay? Which two lines together make up FICA?

What it shows

One question I still have

Evidence B | **Notes app**

Gia's shift log for the last two weeks

Mon the 8th: 4 hrs. Wed the 10th: 4 hrs. Thu the 11th: 3 hrs. Fri the 12th: 4 hrs. Sat the 13th: 3 hrs. My total: 18 hrs.

Look closely: Which shift falls outside the pay period? Add the hours inside it.

What it shows

One question I still have

Look at the evidence, continued

What is still missing from the evidence?

Notes

Key idea: gross pay and net pay

On your own Read the key idea and the code of ethics, then answer the question in the box. About 6 minutes.

A bank deposit shows how much money arrived, but the pay statement shows how the employer figured it. **Gross pay** is the money you earn before any taxes or other deductions are taken out. For an hourly worker, gross pay is the hours worked times the hourly rate, plus any other earnings. **Net pay** is the money left after taxes and other deductions, often called take-home pay. Gia's deposit is her net pay.

Deductions are the lines between those two totals. **FICA** is the federal payroll tax that funds Social Security and Medicare. On Gia's statement, FICA appears as two lines: Social Security tax and Medicare tax. **Withholding** is money an employer takes out of each paycheck to pay taxes or other costs for the worker. Federal income-tax withholding is a separate line from FICA, and the IRS says its amount depends partly on the worker's Form W-4.

A statement can also list other deductions, such as benefit contributions, so read each line's name before you decide it is income tax. The federal income tax taken from each paycheck counts toward the tax a worker owes for the whole year. One paycheck cannot show what that yearly total will be. This explanation covers employees in the United States. Self-employed workers follow a different tax process.

Professional standards

Real source | PayrollOrg

PayrollOrg Code of Ethics: Item 2

"To strive for perfect compliance, accuracy, and timeliness of all payroll activities."

In plain words: Payroll professionals who belong to PayrollOrg aim to pay people correctly and on time.

Question: Gia worked Saturday the 13th, after the pay period ended. What should payroll confirm about when she gets paid?

Professional standards, continued

Your answer

Payroll should confirm ___.

In the news

Real source | Two Cents, PBS (YouTube) | April 10, 2019

How Do Your Tax Dollars Get Spent?

Starts with a first paycheck that's smaller than expected and explains FICA and income tax withholding.

Real source | NPR, The Indicator from Planet Money | June 6, 2018

Social Insecurity

A short episode on the Social Security part of FICA and why it comes out of nearly every paycheck.

Notes

Sort the evidence

On your own Compare each piece of evidence with each claim and write supports, challenges or neither in each box. About 8 minutes.

Before calling it an error, sort the evidence. Which facts explain the smaller deposit, and which question is still worth asking payroll?

Evidence	**Claim 1** Payroll shorted Gia's pay.	**Claim 2** The missing 3 hours belong on the next statement.
1 Shift log shows 18 hours; the statement shows 15		
2 The period ended Friday the 12th; the 3-hour shift was Saturday the 13th		
3 Gross pay of $255.00 matches 15 × $17.00		
4 FICA and withholding lines account for the gap between gross and net		

Still open

- Will the Saturday shift actually appear next time? Ask payroll.

Whose perspective is missing?

Whose view is missing from these documents? What would you ask them?

The view that is missing is ___. I would ask ___.

Practice: choose a response

On your own Choose what Gia should do first and explain why, then fix the two marked lines. About 6 minutes.

Gia's deposit is smaller than the pay she worked out. What should she do first?

- [ ] **A** Compare her deposit with Jordy's.
- [ ] **B** Check her hours and the pay period, then read each line of her statement.
- [ ] **C** Treat the whole gap as taxes and let it go.

Why I chose it

Improve a draft

A student's first draft

Hi, my paycheck is wrong. **1** I worked way more hours than what I got paid for and also a lot of money was taken out for taxes which doesn't seem right. I've been working really hard and picking up extra shifts so this is really frustrating. My friend Jordy works similar hours and got more than me. Can you fix it? **2** My account number is 4471-xxxx if you need it. Please let me know as soon as possible because I have bills. Thanks, Gia

Rewrite each marked phrase so it says only what the evidence supports.

Rewrite phrase 1

Rewrite phrase 2

Grades 6—8

Your task

On your own Read the steps and fill in the planner boxes before you start your draft.

Label a practice pay statement and explain to a partner where the money went.

Use: The pay statement and a one-paragraph explanation of FICA.

You'll make: Labeled statement plus 3—4 sentence explanation

Time: 45 minutes

1. Mark the earnings line green and each tax line orange on Evidence A.
2. Check the earnings line by multiplying 15 hours by $17.00.
3. Circle the net pay in blue. This is the amount in Gia's deposit.
4. Find the shift in Evidence B that falls after Friday the 12th.
5. Write 3 or 4 sentences in the Your draft box that explain where Gia's money went.
6. Check your sentences for gross pay, FICA and net pay.

Show it your way

Write it: Write 3—4 sentences with the frame "Gross pay is __. After __, net pay is __."

Say it: Walk a partner through the statement from top to bottom: what Gia earned, what was taken out and what reached her bank.

Show it: Color the statement (earnings green, deductions orange, deposit blue) and draw an arrow from the Saturday shift to the next pay period.

Prefer typing? Scan to open the online workspace.

Your task, continued

Gross pay, and how you checked it

Gross pay is ___. I checked it by ___.

The two FICA lines

The shift for the next pay period

Your draft

Your explanation, 3 or 4 sentences

Gross pay is ___. After ___, net pay is ___.

Check your work

On your own Answer the Check your work questions, mark your level in each rubric row and write one change you made. About 5 minutes.

Did you find gross pay and net pay?	☐ Yes	☐ No
Did you name FICA as Social Security and Medicare?	☐ Yes	☐ No
Did you explain one deduction in your own words?	☐ Yes	☐ No
Did you use only the practice statement, not real pay information?	☐ Yes	☐ No

How your work is scored

Mark one box in each row.

Skill	Beginning	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
Evidence	☐ No specific numbers.	☐ Mentions hours but no period.	☐ Names hours, period and the line in question.	☐ Cites own records and the statement side by side.
Reasoning	☐ Assumes an error or theft.	☐ Assumes all difference is tax.	☐ Separates hours, deductions and period timing.	☐ Explains which differences are expected and which need checking.
Audience & purpose	☐ Shares private details or demands.	☐ Polite but vague.	☐ Clear question payroll can answer.	☐ Clear, private, and offers the right document.
Revision	☐ No change.	☐ Removes one issue.	☐ Adds period and line, removes private data.	☐ Explains why each change helps payroll respond.

Check your work, continued

One change I made

I changed ___ because ___.

Notes

Questions to discuss

On your own Write a short answer to each question, then complete the sentence frames below. About 8 minutes.

1. **What would Gia's statement need to show for the missing hours to be a payroll mistake?**

2. **Why might a new worker think that every missing dollar went to taxes?**

3. **Before a first job, what would you want to know about how and when you will be paid?**

My take

I think Gia should ___ because ___.

The evidence that changed my first guess is ___.

One question I still have is ___.

Talk about this case at home

Case 5: Why is my deposit smaller than what I earned?

In this case, Gia's bank deposit is smaller than the pay she expected. Your student read a practice pay statement line by line and explained where the money went.

Questions to talk about

1. What is the difference between gross pay and net pay?
2. Why might a bank deposit be less than the hours worked times the hourly rate?
3. Who at a workplace can answer questions about a pay statement?

See the case online.

Nobody needs to share personal stories or private information to talk about this case.