Culminating Writing Task Exemplar Student Response #1

Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor and author, has spoken about the need to view people as more than mere "abstractions," to treat each and every person with dignity, to see each person as a "universe with its own secrets." Rebecca Skloot illustrates this belief in her depiction of Henrietta Lacks, a poor woman, whose life was cut short by cervical cancer, but whose cells have gone on to unlock the secrets of treatments and vaccinations that have saved millions of lives. Like other science writers, such as Robert D. Truong and his colleagues, Skloot argues that the the humanity of a patient should be an integral part of medical research in tissue cultivation. Unlike other science writers, Skloot's narrative style is more effective because it highlights the story of Henrietta Lacks and makes it more accessible to a wider audience by explaining scientific concepts. Skloot uses details about Henrietta Lacks' life, conversational diction, and easily accessible metaphors in order to reveal that the issues surrounding bioethics as a story that touches everyone. In contrast Robert D. Truog, et. al. in their article for the magazine *Science*, "Paying Patients for Their Tissues" takes a clinical, cold approach, emphasizing the ethical debate and disregarding the need for everyone to understand the science that affects all of humanity.

In Skloot's writings she deftly weaves details of Lacks' life together to create a picture of the person behind the bioethics. She describes the day that Lacks was diagnosed by describing how her family, her husband and five children, "two still in diapers" waited outside the hospital ("Henrietta's Dance"). It is the details such as these that reveals that the matter of HeLa cells cannot be separated from the woman, whose body grew those cells. The juxtaposition of the two facts, that the researcher George Gey was on national television with a vial of Henrietta's cells on the very day of her funeral depicts the contrasting positions of patients and the conglomerate of scientists, who make up the medical research community.

Skloot's inferred claim that everyone has a stake in this debate is shown through her use of conversational diction. She employs first and second person in her prologue to *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, telling readers that the genetic information in cells is what "makes you you". She also entrenches the

debate of bioethics in terms of Lacks' point of view, asserting that Lacks would "be shocked to know" that her cells had been the source of so much lucrative medical research.

This research is a topic that Skloot endeavors to explain by immediately following any jargon with an explanation rich in figurative language. When describing the inner workings of a cell, for example, she paints a metaphor of New York City, where "cytoplasm buzzes"("Prologue"). In another depiction, she explains the size of cells as being so tiny that "several thousand could fit on the period at the end of the sentence".

By contrast Robert D. Truong, et. al, adopts a clinical style, more appropriate for a lab than an explanation of the debate over patients and their rightful compensation. The authors' style is appropriate to their intended audience, the scientific community, but the concerned citizenry at large would hardly be expected to rally around the language of "financial compensation," "mitigation," and "residual clinical tissue." In employing this style, the authors' feed into the same divisive attitude that keeps an uneasy trust between the medical community and their patients.

Skloot's portrayal of Henrietta's story shows that the humanity of bioethics should be emphasized ahead of the medical-industrial complex's race to sell a cure. Society should be cautious of anytime a human's parts are considered separated from the humanity of the person who created those parts. If scientists want to continue to solicit donations of "raw materials" then they must understand that the motivation for donation of tissues truly comes from a place of humanity, a desire "solely for the benefit of others" (Truong).

Culminating Writing Task Exemplar Student Response #2

At the cellular level, the human body is a hive of activity. Through the delicate process of mitosis, nearly two trillion cells divide each day. Most of the time everything goes smoothly, but when the process goes wrong, it can result in cancer. In the 1950s when Henrietta Lacks' cervical cells began splitting uncontrollably, it meant the end of her life but the beginning of a medical revolution that would save millions of lives. The story of Henrietta's cells, called HeLa by scientist, is the subject journalist Rebecca Skloot researched for nearly ten years. Her style effectively persuades her audience that the story of HeLa cells is as much about the people as it is about the science in sharp contrast to the more clinical view of much of the scientific community.

In the prologue to Skloot's book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, she asserts that the story of tissue cultivation can be fascinating. Skloot supports this claim by telling her own story and how she became obsessed with HeLa and the woman whose body grew those cells. She begins with a confession:"I was the kid who'd failed freshman year at the regular public high school because she never showed up" ("Prologue"). All of this changed when Skloot found out about HeLa cells and all of the treatments that were developed using those cells; she became obsessed with finding out more about HeLa and the source of the cells, a woman named Henrietta Lacks ("Prologue"). In "Henrietta's Dance", an article Skloot wrote for John Hopkins magazine, Lacks extends her claim and argues that Henrietta Lacks and her family were mistreated by the doctors, who used her cells in research. Henrietta's husband was reluctant to let doctors take samples of the cancer, but he relented when the doctors convinced him that the research might help treat the children if they ever got cancer ("Henrietta's Dance"). The Lacks family never received any treatment nor any information. Skloot quotes Henrietta's husband, "'They were supposed to tell me about it, to let me know, but I never did hear'" ("Henrietta's Dance").

The substance of the story, a reporting of just the facts, does not accurately describe Skloot's claims, because it is the style the journalist uses that clinches her claims. Through the use of poignant details and a

conversational tone, Skloot creates a narrative style that reinforces her argument that the science of tissue cultivation should attend to the humanity of its research subjects. This tone is evident as she describes Henrietta's migration to the north: Skloot writes "she came by train … leaving her kin behind" ("Henrietta's Dance"). Likewise, the tone of Skloot's prologue to *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* is appropriate for drawing attention to Henrietta's humanity. This writing describes Henrietta, using the same kind of words an author would use to describe a character in a short story: "hands on hip, dress suit neatly pressed, lips painted deep red" ("Prologue"). Similarly, Skloot's use of poignant details also help to convey her argument. One of the most compelling examples of this is when she reports that the same day scientist George Gey "appeared on national television" to announce that HeLa cells could be used to "wipe out cancer" Henrietta died and her "body lay" in the morgue ("Henrietta's Dance"). These two facts, when placed side-by-side show the depth to which science viewed cells as inanimate objects, ignoring that they are a part of a human life.

In contrast, Ruth Faden's article "Immortal Cells, Moral Issues", published in the *Baltimore Sun*, employs a purely objective tone when talking about Henrietta Lacks, wrapping her personal details up in one phrase: "the African-American woman from Virginia". This leaves the reader with a clinical view of Henrietta. The body of Faden's piece uses details that emphasize the voice of the biomedical field. She uses phrases, such as "cursory", "access to adequate healthcare", and "common good" to describe the plight of Henrietta Lacks and the legacy left to her family by science. After being exposed to Skloot's style, Faden's approach leaves the reader wishing that Faden would work on her bedside manner.

Overall, the science writers and Skloot agree on several basic premises: patients have rights that should be protected, Henrietta Lacks' contribution to science is significant, and the stories of science can be deeply personal. Certainly, the clinical style of traditional science writing has its place, communicating ideas objectively and thoroughly. It is, after all, the way people want to be treated as patients; society prefers to safely relegate its melodramatic surgeons to television dramas. However, the rise of narrative nonfiction, like Skloot's, points to a missing and much needed style that continues to speak as the voice of humanity in the field of research.

Culminating Writing Task Exemplar Student Response #3

Few people, except maybe academics, would describe the literature of tissue culture as dramatic, compelling, or touching, but when told in creative nonfiction, real-life science can be as captivating as science fiction. One such case is the work by science journalist Rebecca Skloot, who spent ten years writing the story of Henrietta Lacks. In her writings Skloot, argues that society should recognize the sacrifices of research subjects as much it heralds the discoveries of science. She uses a narrative style, rich with conversational diction and poignant details to effectively persuade the general public to take a second look at the practices of scientific research. Conversely, when the issue is handled by other science writers, it fails to reach the same level of interest or invoke the same level of compassion as Skloot's style.

In "Henrietta's Dance" Skloot begins with a brief biography of Henrietta Lacks, recounting her family life, her cervical cancer diagnosis, her death, and finally, how the tissue sample doctors took from her became the legendary HeLa cells. Skloot adopts a conversational tone to speak to *John Hopkins Magazine*, mostly alumni of the research university. This is evident as she describes Henrietta's migration to the north: Skloot writes "she came by train ... leaving her kin behind" ("Henrietta's Dance"). The oral qualities of Skloot's approach emphasizes to her researcher audience that it's time the science of tissue cultivation attended to the stories of its research subjects. Likewise, the tone of Skloot's prologue to *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* is appropriate for drawing attention to Henrietta's humanity. This writing describes Henrietta, using the same kind of words an author would use to describe a character in a short story: "hands on hip, dress suit neatly pressed, lips painted deep red" ("Prologue"). In contrast, Ruth Faden's article "Immortal Cells, Moral Issues", published in the *Baltimore Sun*, employs a purely objective tone when talking about Henrietta Lacks, wrapping her personal details up in one phrase: "the African-American woman from Virginia". This leaves the reader with a clinical view of Henrietta.

Skloot's use of poignant details also help to convey her argument. One of the most compelling examples of this is when she reports that the same day scientist George Gey "appeared on national television" to announce that HeLa cells could be used to "wipe out cancer" Henrietta died and her "body lay" in the morgue ("Henrietta's Dance"). These two facts, when placed side-by-side show the depth to which science viewed cells as inanimate objects, ignoring that they are a part of a human life. The claim that scientists forgot Henrietta is furthered in the prologue to Skloot's book when she describes how the scientific literature she found on the Internet during the 1990s often got Henrietta's story confused, calling her "Helen Lane", giving an incorrect diagnosis of her cancer, or providing only "snippets" of information ("Prologue"). Details about Henrietta are corrected but remain sparse in today's articles. In *Science* magazine, writers Robert D. Truog, Aaron S. Kesselheim, and Steven Joffe gloss over details about Henrietta after briefly noting that her story is "moving" (27). The authors' omission of any more information about Henrietta reveals that they still see the cells as more important than the person who grew them.

However, not all science writers outside of Skloot have completely ignored the humanity of Henrietta. Another article that appeared in *John Hopkins* magazine, "Immortal Cells, Enduring Issues" written by Dale Keiger, employs the same choice of personal details as Skloot. Keiger begins his article by relaying the memory of the lab technician who distinctly remembers looking at Henrietta's "chipped red toenail polish" and thinking, "'Oh jeez, she's a real person.'" Later, Kieger continues to interweave details of Henrietta and the Lacks family; finally, taking care to mention how he contacted the family through Skloot to interview for the story, although the Lacks declined to comment(Kieger). This approach, unfortunately, is rare in the commentary about tissue culture.

Skloot pushes the issues of humanity to the forefront of the science. She raises questions of ethics and explains science through the lense of Henrietta. At the end, the reader is left feeling that tissue cultivation and the sacrifices of the Lacks family is the tale of us all.