On the cover of our ninth-grade core nonfiction text, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot, is a photograph of Henrietta Lacks.

In the prologue to the book titled “The Woman in the Photograph,” Skloot explains how this photograph inspired her to find out about the woman behind the cells and the contribution that HeLa cells made to science:

There’s a photo on my wall of a woman I’ve never met, its left corner torn and patched together with tape. She looks straight into the camera and smiles, hands on hips, dress suit neatly pressed, lips painted deep red. It’s the late 1940s and she hasn’t yet reached the age of thirty. Her light brown skin is smooth, her eyes still young and playful, oblivious to the tumor growing inside her—a tumor that would leave her five children motherless and change the future of medicine. Beneath the photo, a caption says her name is “Henrietta Lacks, Helen Lane or Helen Larson” . . . . I’ve spent years staring at that photo, wondering what kind of life she led, what happened to her children, and what she’d think about it. (1)

Skloot’s curiosity drives a decade-long investigation into the story behind the photo of Henrietta Lacks, in which she uncovers the ethical dilemmas surrounding the use of the HeLa cell in the medical industry as well as the racial and economic inequities that underlie the Lacks children’s lifelong struggles. Specifically, at the heart of Skloot research is the story of Deborah Lacks, who becomes the voice behind Skloot’s call to action.

Although Skloot discovered Henrietta Lacks’s photo in a science textbook, our historical memories are filled with images taken by journalists committed to preserving moments in history that inform and challenge. Their photos act as witnesses with “tales to tell” that evoke our curiosity, elicit our emotions, and urge us to care about and take action for a cause. After we finish *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, students mimic Skloot’s research by choosing an iconic or award-winning photograph of their choice that represents a current local, national, or global issue. The purpose of this media literacy–based research paper is to explore photojournalism as a catalyst for social action. Students investigate both the story behind the photo—the context, the subject, and the photographer—and the opposing viewpoints on the social issue it represents. Ultimately, the research guides students toward a call to action that reflects the best interests of the subject in their photo and urges others to work toward a solution to the issue.
second or less attention. Can you believe that? In this age of instant visual satisfaction, I think people get addicted to YouTube, Instagram, Facebook and other social media yet they’re visually illiterate. What’s the message or lesson learned from giving an image less than a second of attention?

Although the definition of literacy has evolved to include film, graphic novels, political cartoons, and art, media literacy is a critical skill for future global citizens trying to make sense of the images representing the current and ever-changing state of society.

To that end, the *New York Times* Teaching & Learning page publishes a weekly feature titled “What’s Going on in This Picture?” that can be used as a way of preparing students to begin examining news photography with a critical lens. It also helps students understand the difference between the paparazzi of celebrity culture and the photojournalists of news media.

Unlike the paparazzi, photojournalists face trying and even dangerous conditions to offer a rare glimpse into the reality of vulnerable subjects and volatile regions. They consciously struggle with treading a fine line between being witness to global tragedy and exploiting others’ suffering. In “Front Lines: ‘Witness’: Capturing Photographers in Conflict Zones,” director David Frankham identifies three central questions that I have adapted for student reflection before they choose a photograph:

- How do we view images of others’ suffering without becoming desensitized or exploitative?
- How do we develop empathy for subjects that are removed from our experience?
- How do we use photos of human tragedy as a catalyst for social action? (Kreindler)

Using these questions, we examine the controversy surrounding photographs of human tragedy such as the Newtown school shooting or the Boston Marathon bombing. We read excerpts from Ethnics in Photojournalism

I have the great privilege of being both witness and storyteller.

—Jim Goldberg, photographer

In the age of social media, adolescents process hundreds of visual images every day without actively questioning the authorship, intended audience, credibility, or purpose of these images. During our photo research paper, one of my students contacted Don Bartletti, a Pulitzer Prize–winning photojournalist for his documentary photo essay “Bound to El Norte—Enrique’s Journey” depicting undocumented Central American youth riding through Mexico to the US border atop freight trains. After exchanging several emails with my student, Bartletti wrote a personal email to me speaking to the value of this assignment:

I applaud your goal of encouraging students to carefully examine a good photograph for its storytelling details. Our web research here at the [Los Angeles Times] has shown that most photos get a
Tom Junod’s article, “The Falling Man,” which argues for the preservation of the photo portraying the unknown man who jumped from the World Trade Center on 9/11. As my high school students react to the photo in both awe and horror, I ask them to reflect: What makes this photo powerful? What does the photo say about what it means to be human? What legacy does the photo leave for future generations?

To provide students with a model that explores these questions, we view the National Geographic video The Power of Photography to Witness in which photojournalist Marcus Bleasdale presents his photos of child miners and child soldiers to raise awareness about the exploitation of natural resources in eastern Congo. During this presentation, he uses a world map to show how these natural resources are shipped to production factories in Asia and then turned into electronic products that are sold around the world, suggesting the complicity of developing nations in the exploitation of these children and natural resources. Using Bleasdale’s presentation, we brainstorm criteria by which students will select their own photos:

1. The photograph must be iconic or award-winning and taken by a credible photographer.
2. The photograph must represent a current local, national, or global issue/conflict.
3. The issue represented by the photo must directly affect us as Americans or hold us responsible for or complicit in the problem.
4. The student must feel comfortable working with the photograph and researching the conflict it represents.
5. The student must be prepared to argue the position that reflects the best interests of the subject in the photo.

Students refer to these criteria as they browse online image galleries such as the Pulitzer Prize or World Press Photo archives (see Figure 1). Over the years, popular student selections have ranged from Paul Nicklen’s majestic polar bears standing on melting glaciers, Finbarr O’Reilly’s photo of a distraught mother’s struggle to feed her malnourished child during the Niger food crisis, Lu Guang’s grotesque images of the pollution in China, Jo-Anne McArthur’s exposé of animals in captivity, Jon Lowenstein’s haunting memorial to victims of Chicago gang violence, and Jean Marc Bouju’s tragic photo of a hooded Iraqi prisoner of war comforting his son. The students’ selections cover a range of social issues such as gang violence and educational inequity at the local level; poverty, the home foreclosure crisis, immigration, school shootings, and domestic violence on a national level; and natural disasters, war, famine, terrorism, and climate change on a global level. Since these photos elicit deeply emotional reactions, I make it a priority to remain impartial to student selections, consciously checking my personal biases and refraining from sharing my viewpoint on issues their photos represent.

After students confirm their photo selections, I challenge students’ perception of the research process as dry or objective by asking them to spend time looking at the photo and journaling why they are drawn to the photo and their initial reactions to the photo. They then identify what they literally see in the photo. In an effort to place themselves in the moment, students describe the photo using sensory details. Finally, students analyze the photo using the elements of photography such as lighting, angle, perspective, and so on. Students use their brainstorming to write a descriptive paragraph introducing their photo using imagery to tell

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**Figure 1. Recommended Photo Sources**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Link</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NPPA Best of Photojournalism Awards</td>
<td><a href="https://nppa.org/competitions/best-of-photojournalism">https://nppa.org/competitions/best-of-photojournalism</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Pulitzer Prize - Feature Photography</td>
<td><a href="http://www.pulitzer.org/bycat/Feature-Photography">http://www.pulitzer.org/bycat/Feature-Photography</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Press Photo</td>
<td><a href="http://www.worldpressphoto.org/">http://www.worldpressphoto.org/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Geographic</td>
<td><a href="http://www.nationalgeographic.com/">http://www.nationalgeographic.com/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associated Press Photo Awards</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ap.org/company/awards/photo-awards">http://www.ap.org/company/awards/photo-awards</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pictures of the Year International</td>
<td><a href="http://www.poyi.org/">http://www.poyi.org/</a></td>
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</table>

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Chicago gang violence, and Jean Marc Bouju’s tragic photo of a hooded Iraqi prisoner of war comforting his son. The students’ selections cover a range of social issues such as gang violence and educational inequity at the local level; poverty, the home foreclosure crisis, immigration, school shootings, and domestic violence on a national level; and natural disasters, war, famine, terrorism, and climate change on a global level. Since these photos elicit deeply emotional reactions, I make it a priority to remain impartial to student selections, consciously checking my personal biases and refraining from sharing my viewpoint on issues their photos represent.
the photo's story in a way that appeals to the reader's emotion as shown here in this student example:

Flames crash to the ground in Ferguson like elegant drops of water and chemical-infused puffs of smoke rise to the sky in debilitating clouds. Following the flames to the source is a man. In the darkness of the night, a man is decorated with the red and white stripes of the country he proudly represents, appearing almost too comfortable with the danger around him. As he sends a flaming tear gas canister into the sky, his dreadlocks cover his face concealing his identity. The stark contrast of potato chips gripped in the fingers of his left hand and the tear gas canister in the other exposes his inexperience. Behind him are spectators accompanied by the only reminder of law and order, road signs. Breathing in the toxic smells as the gas burns their eyes, they hold their hands high into the pitch black sky as a sign of support, but the enchanting darkness is interrupted by green and red traffic signals and the natural light of the moon. Hidden by their own shadows are black people, ordinary citizens, standing in protest for one man who no longer can stand for himself.

—Grace Lyman

Developing Visual Literacy through the Research Process

Once the students have internalized their subject's humanity, we begin the research phase of the project, and I shift the students' focus to establishing their ethos—credibility and trustworthiness—as researchers. Their first tasks include researching basic facts about the photo and getting to know the photographer. Students find the latter task intriguing as they look up photographers' personal websites, Facebook pages, and Twitter feeds. Some students even take the initiative to contact their photographers (one even used Google translator to write an email in the three languages his photographer speaks), and the communication heightens students' sensitivity to their subject. For example, when the aforementioned student contacted Don Bartletti, he wrote back describing the sensory experience—taste, smell, movement—of photographing the young boys in the Honduran garbage dump. In an email to another student, Paul Souders, who photographed “The Ice Bear,” also provided a first-person account of the photo using descriptive detail:

[This] photograph that won the National Geographic prize was shot on a day of record high temperatures. It was above 90° as I explored the rapidly melting ice edge. The sun was out, but smoke from distant forest fires filled the sky and turned the sunset a strange orange color. I found this young female polar bear asleep in the heat on an ice floe, and followed her as she swam in the bay, more than 30 miles from shore. With the warming climate, she will be forced to spend more time on land, away from the ice and from any reliable source of food, for longer and longer periods.

When another student emailed Jessica Hill about her iconic photo of the Newtown shooting, she learned that Hill does not grant interviews out of respect for the victims' families. Another student who contacted St. Louis Post-Dispatch photographer Robert Cohen learned what his Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of the Ferguson protests represented to him:

[The photo] means various things to various people. To some, it is an act of defiance, a warrior of sorts, to be celebrated. To others it is an act of violence, to be punished. Others see “payback” in the image, an act of aggression toward injustice. But for me, it really doesn’t represent anything other than a moment in time that I was lucky enough to capture. I don’t have an angle, or an interpretation. I’m not trying to get my point across to anyone. I’m just documenting what I see. That’s my role as a photojournalist.

The next research task involves identifying the central conflict that the photo represents and gaining a thorough understanding of that conflict. Students research a historical overview of the topic, important terminology, contributing factors, relevant facts/statistics, key people and events, what has been done so far to address the conflict, and the current debate surrounding the conflict. For example, a student who chooses Craig Walker’s Pulitzer Prize-winning photo of a US soldier suffering from combat stress will research the military deployment, military health services, and psychological conditions soldiers experience. This phase of the research process involves teaching students digital literacy using the Documents by Readdle app browser on their iPads to search Gale Databases
Photos as Witness: Teaching Visual Literacy for Research and Social Action

such as Opposing Viewpoints and Global Issues in Context portals for topic overviews. We also review note-taking skills with an emphasis on identifying key words for later research using PDF annotation tools. Students use their notes to draft a paragraph that contextualizes the central conflict for the reader and presents a clear position statement: What is the problem? Who/what is responsible? What should be done to address this problem?

The last research phase focuses on constructing a research question that identifies two opposing viewpoints on the central conflict. Students use their question to identify the affirmative and the negative positions, to research viewpoint articles, and to record the reasons and supporting evidence using a table (see Table 1).

Once students have researched both viewpoints, they choose the viewpoint that serves the best interests of the subject in their photo. For example, the student who chose Craig Walker’s photo of a US soldier suffering from combat stress argued that the government should fund medical and non-medical support for soldiers experiencing combat stress in training or during deployment. This can be a complicated process for students whose personal viewpoint suddenly conflicts with the viewpoint that represents their subject. My student Gigi selected John Tlumacki’s photo of the woman covered in blood (later identified as Nicole Grossman) during the Boston Marathon bombing. Her research focused on immigration restrictions and national security, and initially, she argued that because America is a nation of immigrants, we should not place further restrictions on immigration policies. While her viewpoint was valid, it did not consider the subject’s interests in her photo, so reluctantly, Gigi changed her position. By the end of her paper, however, she shared a moving reflection that thoughtfully merged both viewpoints in a powerful way:

Thumacki’s photo transcends time as it puts a human face on terror, Nicole Gross’ face, that has come to represent the fear and pain and irrationality of terrorism for viewers all over the world. . . . My own family was at the finish line on Boylston Street that afternoon waiting in the stands for my cousin, Sarah, to cross the line. What haunts me in Nicole’s face is the simple realization that some of the bombing victims could have been members of my family. . . . But, as I keep staring at the photo, I also see Nicole clearly attempting to rise up off the ground. An important lesson the image teaches is that, despite the bombings and terror, we have to rise up and we have to continue as Americans, with our values intact. We value our freedom and we welcome people from around the world to join us. We are, after all, a nation of immigrants, and we are a model for the world on how to welcome people from other backgrounds. . . . While the events of April 15, 2013 in Boston were horrible and tragic for many innocent Americans, and while they certainly mean that security

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1. Opposing Viewpoints</th>
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<tr>
<td>RESEARCH QUESTION: SHOULD SOLDIERS WITH COMBAT STRESS RECEIVE GOVERNMENT FUNDED MEDICAL AND NON-MEDICAL ATTENTION?</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POSITION</th>
<th>Viewpoint A: Affirmative</th>
<th>Viewpoint B: Negative</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes… soldiers should receive government funded medical and non-medical attention</td>
<td>No… soldiers should not receive government funded medical and non-medical attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOURCE</td>
<td>Database:</td>
<td>Database:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Title:</td>
<td>Title:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Author:</td>
<td>Author:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHY?</td>
<td>Reason #1 (Because…)</td>
<td>Reason #1 (Because…)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supporting Evidence</td>
<td>Look for research that provide facts, statistics, research data, trends, reasoning, etc.</td>
<td>Look for research that provide facts, statistics, research data, trends, reasoning, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(appeals to logos)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting Evidence</td>
<td>Look for personal anecdotes, interviews, inflammatory statements, etc.</td>
<td>Look for personal anecdotes, interviews, inflammatory statements, etc.</td>
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<td>(appeals to pathos)</td>
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Call to Action

In an NPR *Talk of the Nation* interview, “College Freshmen Learn from ‘Henrietta Lacks,’” Rebecca Skloot explains that the purpose of her book is to tell a story and not to present a specific call to action. However, she acknowledges that the power of writing lies in its ability to spark “public discussion . . . and so in a lot of ways, it does become a conversation about action, and that your voice can actually do something in the world.” As their final writing task, my students reflect on the urgency of their conflict, specifically the short-term and long-term consequences if no action is taken. For example, in her paper about Sara Lewkovicz’s World Press photo collection about domestic abuse, Caroline focused on the impact spousal abuse has on children: “10%–20% of children witness domestic abuse and may become antisocial, become more aggressive and have a poorer academic performance . . . there is a greater possibility that a child who witnesses domestic violence will either become a victim or the perpetrator of abuse . . . we should care because they are our future generation.” Their reflection guides them to articulate a clear call to action—what do you want your audience to think, feel, believe, or do about this issue?

Since students are writing about ongoing and unresolved social issues, even as they are drafting their call to action, events continue to unfold in the news and media. This prompts students to not only keep up to date but also think deeply about how they can enter the evolving discussion. When my students first drafted their call to action on the Ferguson incident, they pushed specifically for the indictment of Officer Wilson. The day after the decision was announced, although disheartened and frustrated by the futility of their call to action, they quickly began broadening their call to end racial profiling by government agencies. For the number of students researching environmental issues such as global warming and species extinction, the feature in *New York Times Upfront Scholastic Magazine*, “Are We Headed for Mass Extinction?”, excerpting Elizabeth Kolbert’s best-selling book, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*, helped students not only make interdisciplinary connections but also present a compelling call to action based on the survival of our species. Similarly, students calling for an end to prison abuse and the shutting down of Guantanamo Bay found further proof in the release of the CIA torture report, while students arguing for increased foreign aid to child refugees of the Syrian war felt a greater sense of urgency when the UN declared it had run out of money for Syrian aid and UNICEF declared 2014 a “devastating” year for children.

Often, students respond to their own call to action. At parent-teacher conferences, Caroline’s mother described how Caroline had become so invested in her research that she wondered if Caroline had discovered a worthy cause to possibly pursue as an extra-curricular interest. In her own reflection at the end of the project, Caroline wrote, “I decided to attend an exhibit where kids shared their stories about how they have been abused in their homes . . . it made me think about how many people around me, without me knowing it, may be struggling . . . even when I walk down the halls, it occurs to me that people can be dealing with a lot at home, so the least I can do is make sure I am nice to everyone.” This touched me because Caroline’s research shattered the lens of abstraction Elie Wiesel refers to in the epigraph of Skloot’s book and replaced it with the lens of empathy, which will hopefully affect Caroline’s worldview throughout her life.

So far, my students have presented their findings in the form of a research paper, but given the popularity of TED Talks, the *National Geographic* presentation we use as a model for our research, as well as the media-literacy focus of this assignment, I would like to supplement the research paper with a media-based presentation that students can share with their classmates, or ideally a larger audience, so they can see how their issue connects to other issues. This jigsaw approach actually reflects the style of Elizabeth Kolbert’s *The Sixth Extinction*, which was named by the *New York Times* as one of the best books of the year. Kolbert’s scientific and historical research are intertwined with compelling narratives that force us, as global consumers, to think about each dollar
we spend as a social, political, and economic choice that affects our life and existence on this planet. When we first started this project, a student who chose a photo about the Syrian conflict said that his default response to current events conversations is, “I don’t know enough to have an opinion.” By guiding students’ research with the photos as a primary medium and sharing their research with one another, they will notice the overlap between different conflicts, borders, and narratives. Hopefully, this will help them recognize that we are all part of a powerful global system that demands our informed opinion as evidence of concern and compassion and the promise of action on behalf of each other.

**Works Cited**


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**ReadWriteThink Connection**

**Lisa Storm Fink, RWT**

Found notes and photographs can provide inspiration for pieces of creative writing. After reviewing a sample story written from a found note and image, students search the Web for found images and notes that they find interesting. They then sketch the found image and label the parts they identify. They select one character from the image and write questions about how that character relates to other elements in the image. Next, students imagine what would happen if the character they identified in the image found the note they selected. They then write an interview with the character from their image or a description of the image from the character’s point of view. Students use an online tool to further develop the character they identified and to map the setting and conflict for a short story. Finally, students draft a short story based on the character, conflict, and setting they created.

http://bit.ly/1KNgQLp