I have always been interested in science, but I must admit I wasn’t looking forward to reading textbook-like essays by dry scientists. I can’t remember reading anything by Stephen Gould or Lewis Thomas before it was assigned in class, and I came into the readings with negative preconceived ideas. I assumed that Lewis’ The Lives of a Cell would be reminiscent of my tenth grade biology book and that Gould’s essay would be a rehash of all the dinosaur books I read as a kid. I was wrong. Gould and Thomas were both very interesting to me, but in different ways. Gould and Thomas may both be members of the science-writing genre, but their style, technique, and results are very different.

Gould’s writing style seemed less scientific than Thomas’. By less scientific, I mean more down to earth with more obvious humor than Thomas’ writing. Thomas used subtle humor which took a second glance to realize and Gould went as far as to use the phrase “fried testicles and terminal trips” in his “Sex, Drugs, Disasters, and the Extinction of Dinosaurs” essay. Neither author used vocabulary that was difficult to understand, but Thomas used words like “mitochondria” in The Lives of a Cell and Gould used the word “highfalutin” in one of his essays. Another reason Gould’s writing was much less formal than Thomas’ was his use of parentheses and postscripts as an aside. Gould constantly used parentheses to make it seem like he was talking to the reader personally. A good example of this is when he told a quick, not quite relevant story about the color of toilet paper in a bathroom in Erie. Thomas’ style of writing just seemed a lot more formal than Gould’s.

One of the main reasons I found both Gould and Thomas interesting is that they wrote about science and nature but addressed societal issues at the same time. However,
Assignment – Response paper for a first-year seminar to compare two authors read for class: Lewis Thomas and Stephen Jay Gould. The two-page paper was to follow an essay format of thesis-support.

25 they differed in this aspect as well. Lewis Thomas wrote of deep aesthetic issues such as
26 the will to live, the acceptance of death, and mankind’s impossible drive to control
27 Mother Nature herself. He also speculated about the existence of a planet-sized
28 organism. Gould addressed issues not found in a science textbook in his essays as well,
29 but his were more domestic than Thomas’. Gould argued for more education in our
30 country, and revealed some facts about the scientific community that few of us know
31 about, such as the big deal about naming dinosaurs and why some hypotheses are
32 indisputable and worthless at the same time.
33 It was a pleasant surprise to me that both Gould’s essays and Thomas’ The Lives
34 of a Cell were interesting and informative without being dry and simply a list of facts and
35 big words. However, I found them interesting in different ways. Thomas made me think
36 with some of his deep speculation and “twisting” writing style that has to be read
37 carefully to catch completely. Gould captivated my attention with his behind the scenes,
38 earthy essays. Although their styles are quite different, they both managed to make
39 “science writing” entertaining in a different way.