

**Title:** Empathy: Handle With Care

**Synopsis:**

This blog argues that empathy, often hailed as humanity's secret sauce, is actually more of a condiment you need to use sparingly. We explore three categories of empathy: constructed (the IKEA flatpack of emotions, prone to "me too" hijacking), emotional (contagious tears that sometimes outshine the original mourner), and compassionate (deeply understanding and moved to act, but at risk of smothering with unsolicited fixes).

Elon Musk's warning about "civilizational suicidal empathy" frames the risks, while the piece challenges fiction writers to bring these messy, flawed forms of empathy into their characters' conversations.

The Snark's Blog: [here](#)

**Discussion Questions**

*Use these questions to spark conversation and reflection in the classroom:*

- How does "constructed empathy" differ from "emotional empathy" in real conversations? Which one do you find yourself using more often?
- When does compassion (especially compassionate empathy) cross the line into control?
- Have you ever experienced someone hijacking your pain by making it about their own? How did it feel?
- In what ways can empathy both strengthen and undermine relationships?
- If empathy is so flawed, why is it still necessary?
- Do you agree with Musk's framing of empathy as a weakness? Can empathy at the societal level really be "too much"?

**Writer's Prompts**

*Creative exercises to help students apply the themes of the topic:*

- **Prompt 1:** Write a scene where your protagonist pours their heart out, only to have their friend respond with terrible "constructed empathy" ("That reminds me of when I..."). Is it funny, tragic, or both?
- **Prompt 2:** Craft a funeral scene where emotional empathy gets out of hand – someone cries louder than the actual mourner. What happens next?
- **Prompt 3:** Imagine compassionate empathy gone wrong: a character swoops in with plans, solutions, and interventions that nobody asked for. How does the protagonist react?
- **Prompt 4:** Take Musk's line about empathy being "civilizationally suicidal" and show it at the micro level: a family, friend group, or small community falling apart because they care too much.

- **Prompt 7:** Write a dialogue where two characters compete in an AA-style “rock-bottom Olympics.”
- **Prompt 8:** Show a protagonist trying (and failing) to express constructed empathy without making it about themselves. What phrase finally lands right?

### **Class Activities**

*These activities will help expand on the themes of the topic:*

- **Roleplay Roulette:** Students pair up and practice responding to a “confession” in three ways: constructed, emotional, compassionate. Then, as a group, discuss which felt most authentic and which went off the rails.
- **Empathy Autopsy:** Take a short story or film clip where empathy plays a role (e.g., a character comforting another) and analyze which type of empathy is being used. Could it have been done differently?
- **Flatpack Challenge:** Have students “assemble” an empathy response by starting with “I haven’t experienced that, but...” and work on making it more and more annoying.
- **Rock-Bottom Improv:** In small groups, stage a mini “rock-bottom Olympics” where characters try to one-up each other with increasingly absurd tragedies. Discuss why it’s both comic and disturbing.
- **Fix-It Frenzy:** Assign one student the role of the “overhelpful empath” and the other the “speaker.” Observe how unsolicited solutions derail a conversation.

### **Closing note from the blog’s writer, The Snark**

*Ah, empathy – the duct tape of human interaction: sticky, useful, and utterly disastrous if you wrap someone too tightly in it. Musk may call it a weakness, but without it, we’d be no better than robots (and trust me, even the robots are working on their empathy scripts). For writers, empathy is where your dialogue gets messy, real, and uncomfortable – the exact opposite of Hallmark-card perfection. So go ahead, break your characters’ hearts and then wrap them in bubble wrap. Just don’t let them pop all the bubbles themselves.*