

Empathy vs. Sympathy

The terms empathy and sympathy are two words that people are often confused with. This may be attributed to the fact that both terms focus on a person's relationship with the feelings and experiences of another person. This post will help you distinguish between the two and enable you to properly use them in your writing.

Both empathy and sympathy are rooted from the Greek word pathos which means "suffering" or "a quality that evokes pity or sadness." The prefix em- means "in" or "within" while the prefix sym- means "with."

As a noun, empathy refers to "the ability to understand and share the feelings of another." It is often used to denote the ability of a person to imagine himself in the situation of another person, including his emotions, ideas, or opinions. For example, if a friend of yours tells you news about a death in her family and it made you feel as if it's also your loss, then you have empathy.

"A Sad Liberal's Extremely Short Thanksgiving Plea for Empathy"

[Huffington Post](#)

"Why the country is having a big debate about empathy after Donald Trump's election"

[Vox](#)

"Empathy by the Book: How Fiction Affects Behavior"

[Wall Street Journal](#)

On the other hand, sympathy as a noun denotes "feelings of pity and sorrow for someone else's misfortune" or "understanding between people; common feeling." It does not require you to have the same feelings with the person you sympathize with but it enables you to have compassion for that person and understand his suffering.

"Nicolas Sarkozy: France reaction veers from sympathy to sarcasm"

[BBC News](#)

"Refugee survivor has no sympathy for Springvale Commonwealth Bank asylum seeker blast suspect"

[Herald Sun](#)

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“Clinton Offers Support, Sympathy to Mayors After Iowa Shootings”

Bloomberg

A simple trick to determine which term to use is to assess what kind of emotion you are feeling towards the emotions or experience of another person. If you can only feel pity, sadness, or compassion towards the difficulty of that person, then you have sympathy for him. However, if you can genuinely put yourself in his situation, then you have empathy for him.