
Year 12

English Advanced

Common Module

Lesson 2

Building Empathy

1. An Introduction to Empathy

When reading your prescribed texts for Year 12 one of the key skills that can help you build a rich interpretation of the text is empathy. In Lesson One we talked about the significance of ambiguity to this project and expanded our skills in approaching emotions and reading some short stories for the emotional experiences they offered.

Some of our greatest work as a student of English is *feeling with* the characters. Empathy happens when we feel the frustration and pain with Winston in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, when we feel with one or more of the characters in *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Crucible*, or *Billy Elliot*; and when we feel the complexities with the personas of poems. When we ‘feel with’ others, their experiences resonate with our own, and we can begin to develop insightful interpretations.

Media Viewing: Brené Brown on Empathy

Class Discussion

- What is empathy according to Brown?
- What are the four qualities for practising empathy?
- Think about how you approach reading for English. Do you apply these four steps when reading literature?
- How might empathising with characters in texts enhance the meaning you take away?

Personal Reflection

Let's practice developing an empathetic reading of a text. Our aim is to consider the text below carefully and to identify who you most *feel with* and why.

Consider the photograph and the accompanying caption. Spend two minutes noting down the emotions that you see each person display in this photograph. Try to go beyond simple emotional states like 'happiness' or 'sadness'. Given your understanding of the context, who do you *feel with* most in this photograph and why. Your teacher may ask you to share your response with the class.

Barbara Davidson, December 29, 2010 – Los Angeles Times



“A wreath honouring slain student Dannie Farber Jr. is given a prominent seat at the Narbonne High graduation ceremony. Farber, who played wide receiver on the school’s football team, died after he was shot three times while eating dinner in Compton. He was three weeks from graduation when he was killed.”¹

¹ The caption on this Pulitzer Prize winning example of photojournalism:
<http://www.pulitzer.org/winners/barbara-davidson>

Pair Discussion

Talk to a fellow student and discuss who you most empathised with and why. Note down any ideas or additional insights that you discover from this conversation.

Class Discussion

- What do you find emotionally powerful about this photograph?
- How has the photograph captured these emotions?

Focus Question

Discuss one significant experience depicted in this photograph. Aim to include an example and technique in your response.

In the video we watched, Brené Brown cites the scholarship of Theresa Wiseman on empathy.² According to Wiseman, the four qualities of empathy are:

- Seeing the world as others see it (taking their perspective)
- Being non-judgemental
- Recognising emotion in other people
- Communicating that recognition

Let's apply these qualities in order to build an interpretation of the painting below. Consider the exercises on the following page.

Raul G. 2011. Brit Pop, A Portrait of James Myhill³



² Wiseman, T. 1996. 'A concept analysis of empathy' *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 23, 1162-1167

³ <http://www.byraulg.com/>

Brainstorm

What do you think James' perspective on the world might be, based on this painting? Write down anything that comes to mind as class!

Visualisation

Imagine yourself as James, the subject of this portrait. What emotions do you recognise in James? You might consider his facial expression, his body language, and how he wears his clothes. Imagine yourself in this pose or try to replicate it in your own chair!

Note down the feelings that come to you. Aim to not pass judgement on the emotions and experiences that come up when you do this.

You'll notice that the process of developing an empathetic reading is not about techniques in any direct way. By trying to *feel with* characters, narrators, and personas, our aim is to appreciate the complexities of their experience. This will ultimately make it easier to discuss the meaning we take away from the text.

Why might this be helpful? Part of the challenge in English is to discuss *how* a writer, director, or poet has conveyed meaning. But we can't discuss the *how* confidently unless we have established *what* the meaning might be. By starting with an empathetic reading of a text, we're engaging in the process of exploring the meaning of the text. So far we have considered *Brit Pop*, *A Portrait of James Myhill* in terms of an empathetic reading for meaning.



In one or two sentences, write out what you see as the essential meaning of this painting (*what* experiences and emotions does it depict?)

Class Collaboration

Now let's see what examples and techniques we can draw out to help us discuss *how* that meaning has been brought to life by the artist Raul G.



2. Writing Task

Spend 15 minutes composing a response to the question below

Compose your response on loose paper for submission to your teacher at the end of the lesson

Let's take the work you've done so far on building an empathetic reading and drawing out examples and techniques to produce an analytical response. The following question is similar to one you might find in Section I of Paper 1: Texts and Human Experiences. Many students end up feeling underprepared for this part of the HSC exam, but early practice will help you build your confidence around the requirements.

Consider the following question:

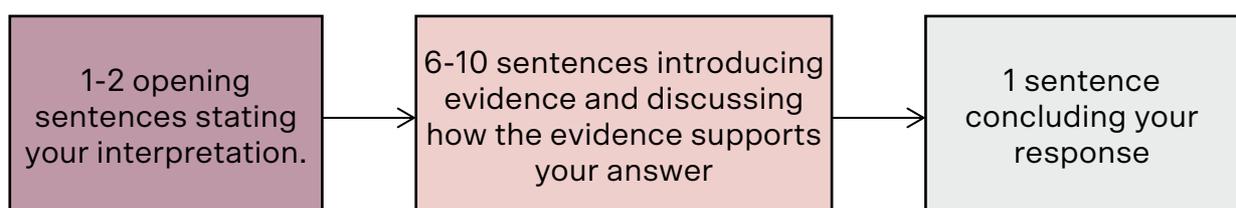
How does the portrait *Brit Pop, A Portrait of James Myhill* represent the teenage experience?

A question like this—focused on a single text—is likely to be worth 4-5 marks in the Paper 1 exam. This means that under exam conditions you would have between 9-12 minutes to complete your response.

In order to do well, you'll need to:

- Consider your interpretation of the meaning of the portrait. *What* experiences of being a teenager are depicted in the painting?
- Consider what examples and techniques will best support your interpretation. This will ensure you answer the *how* component of the question
- Compose a clear answer that follows a logical argumentative structure, such as the one below

Suggested structure for your answer:



3. Syllabus Requirements

Understanding the requirements of the Common Module is an important step in focusing your study. NESA use this document as the foundation for the HSC exam questions for Paper 1 and your teachers use it to structure your study and set assessment tasks.

In Lesson One we considered the opening paragraph of the syllabus outline, let's now consider the second paragraph:

NESA 2017. HSC English Prescriptions 2019-2023, p 10.

Students explore how texts may give insight into the anomalies, paradoxes and inconsistencies in human behaviour and motivations, inviting the responder to see the world differently, to challenge assumptions, ignite new ideas or reflect personally. They may also consider the role of storytelling throughout time to express and reflect particular lives and cultures. By responding to a range of texts they further develop skills and confidence using various literary devices, language concepts, modes and media to formulate a considered response to texts.

Personal Reflection

Choose one of the following ideas and explain what it means to you. You may be asked to share your thoughts with the class.

The anomalies, paradoxes and inconsistencies in human behaviour and motivations	The role of storytelling throughout time [which expresses] and reflect[s] particular lives and cultures
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Class Discussion

Let's consider some of these ideas in light of the two texts we've looked at in this lesson: Davidson's photograph and Raul, G.'s painting.

- Are there any anomalies, paradoxes or inconsistencies in human behaviour and motivation that we can observe in either of these texts?
- Does either text invite us to see the world differently? And if so, how?
- Has either text challenged your assumptions?
- What modes and media are at play in these two texts?

NESA notes that students "may also consider the role of storytelling throughout time to express and reflect particular lives and cultures.". Whose lives and which cultures are significant in your prescribed text for Common Module?

□ The Challenges of Being Human

The great joys and challenges of life come from our relationships with other people. And yet despite the fact that our relationships with others are so fundamental there are complexities bound up in this. While we experience our own feelings very vividly, trying to understand how other people feel and what motivates their actions is often much harder to pin down. These challenges are summed up in the Common Module syllabus by the idea that “[s]tudents explore how texts may give insight into the anomalies, paradoxes and inconsistencies in human behaviour and motivations”. Let’s begin by defining the key terms:

Class Collaboration

Work together to come up with definitions for the following terms and discuss an example from life that represents each concept.

Anomaly <i>noun</i>	
Paradox <i>noun</i>	
Inconsistent <i>adj.</i>	
Motivation <i>noun</i>	

When we consider the world around us, the complexity of people is essential to this. Some of our most fundamental questions relate to trying to understand others, for example:

- Why is it the case that sometimes the people we love act in ways that don't make sense to us?
- Why do we end up arguing with our friends even though we have so much in common?

These kinds of questions often drive novels, poems, and films, and we as the reader or audience are given the opportunity to not only consider situations from our own perspective, but to also get into the thoughts of others as they explore their competing desires, responsibilities, and fears.

Our relationship with other people begins with ourselves. It is common to act first and to think later. When people (like our parents) ask us to justify why we've acted in a certain way, it can be challenging to come up with an answer that makes reasonable sense when actually we acted the way did because it felt good in the moment. You may wonder why you make certain choices even though you know they don't lead to great conclusions. The choice to go online, for example, is compelling, but now you're late for an assignment that you wanted to do well on. We're all capable of self-sabotage, which means that we sometimes act in ways that are counterintuitive to success because failing allows us to tell a certain story about ourselves. If this is happening for each of us, it is no wonder that we sometimes struggle to understand how others feel or what motivates them!

Personal Reflection

Consider a moment in your life where you have misunderstood the feelings or motivations of someone you are close to. What were the consequences of this situation?

Why might it be interesting to explore such a moment in a piece of writing such as a short story or a personal essay?

Let's consider some of the major ways we might understand ourselves and consequently others. John Locke, a seventeenth century English philosopher, offers the following ideas about the self:

Locke, J. 1689. An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Book II - Extract

Everyone is conscious to himself that he thinks; and when thinking is going on, the mind is engaged with ideas that it contains. So it's past doubt that men have in their minds various ideas, such as are those expressed by the words 'whiteness', 'hardness', 'sweetness', 'thinking', 'motion', 'man', 'elephant', 'army', 'drunkenness', and others. The first question, then, is *How does he acquire these ideas?* It is widely believed that men have ideas stamped upon their minds in their very first being.

2. [But] Let us ... suppose the mind to have no ideas in it, to be like *white paper* with nothing written on it. How then does it come to be written on? From where does it get that vast store which the busy and boundless imagination of man has painted on it—all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from *experience*. Our understandings derive all the materials of thinking from *observations* that we make of external objects that can be perceived through the senses, and of the internal operations of our minds, which we perceive by looking in at ourselves. These two are the fountains of knowledge, from which arise all the ideas we have or can naturally have.

Personal Reflection

What do you think about the idea that we acquire our ideas from experience? Are there other ways we might acquire ideas?

Class Discussion

Locke describes the human mind as “like white paper with nothing written on it”. How do you feel about this idea? Do you agree or disagree? Explain your position.

Locke (right) compares the mind to a blank writing tablet (Latin *tabula rasa*).⁴ Locke’s assertion that our ideas are the product of our experiences can be a useful one when considering characters in novels and films, and personas in poems.



Encyclopædia Britannica 2018. ‘Tabula Rasa’ - Extract

Tabula rasa, (Latin: “scraped tablet”—i.e., “clean slate”) in epistemology (theory of knowledge) and psychology, a supposed condition that empiricists attribute to the human mind before ideas have been imprinted on it by the reaction of the senses to the external world of objects.⁵

⁴ This idea was popularised by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle in his c. 350 BCE work *De Anima* ‘On the Soul’! Portrait: Herman Verelst Date Unknown, *John Locke*

⁵ Empiricist *n.* a person who supports the theory that knowledge is based on experience derived from the senses.

Critical Thinking

What motivates the protagonist of your Common Module text? Chances are it's more than one thing!

Does the protagonist in your prescribed text act in ways that appear inconsistent to you or other characters? Describe an example.

To what extent would you say that the protagonist in your prescribed text for Common Module is a product of their experiences?

4. Reading with Empathy

What's the value of empathy? It turns out that not only it is a useful approach to reading texts for meaning, but it can also help you live an emotionally nourishing life. This article looks at some practical strategies that you can implement to hone your capacity for empathy in general – a skill that is invaluable for engaging with literary texts as well.

Cain Miller, C. 2019. How to Be More Empathetic, The New York Times – Extract⁶

So what is empathy? It's understanding how others feel and being compassionate toward them. It happens when two parts of the brain work together, neuroscientists say — the emotional centre perceives the feelings of others and the cognitive centre tries to understand why they feel that way and how we can be helpful to them.

Research has shown that empathy makes people better managers and workers, and better family members and friends. But it's bigger than just its personal effect. We're all in this together, and researchers say that connection and compassion are crucial to a sustainable and humane future.

Some people are more naturally empathetic than others, but there are easy, evidenced-based exercises that anyone can do to increase their empathy.

Talk to New People

Trying to imagine how someone else feels is often not enough, researchers have found. Luckily, the solution is simple: Ask them. "For me, the core of empathy is curiosity," said Jodi Halpern, a psychiatrist and bioethics professor at the University of California, Berkeley, who studies empathy. "It's what is another person's life actually like in its particulars?"

Try It:

- Start conversations with strangers or invite a colleague or neighbour you don't know well to lunch. Go beyond small talk – ask them how they're doing and what their daily life is like.

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/guides/year-of-living-better/how-to-be-more-empathetic>

- Follow people on social media with different backgrounds than you have (different race, religion or political persuasion).
- Put away your phone and other screens when you're having conversations, even with the people you see every day, so you can fully listen and notice their facial expressions and gestures.

Try Out Someone Else's Life

Don't just stand in someone else's shoes, as the saying goes, but take a walk in them, said Helen Riess, a psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School and chief scientist of Empathetics, which provides empathy training for health care practitioners.

- Attend someone else's church, mosque, synagogue or other house of worship for a few weeks while they attend yours, or visit a village in a developing country and volunteer.
- Spend time in a new neighbourhood, or strike up a conversation with a homeless person in your community.
- If someone's behaviour is bothersome, think about why. If it's your teenager, for instance, start by acknowledging that he might feel stressed, but go further: Consider what it's like to live his daily life – what his bus ride is like, how much homework he has and how much sleep he gets.

Join Forces for a Shared Cause

Working on a project with other people reinforces everyone's individual expertise and humanity, and minimizes the differences that can divide people, said Rachel Godsil, a law professor at Rutgers and co-founder of the Perception Institute, which researches how humans form biases and offers workshops on how to overcome them.

- Work on a community garden.
- Do political organizing.
- Join a church committee.
- If you have experienced grief or loss, join with others who have experienced something similar.

Personal Reflection

Which of these suggestions for developing your empathy are you open to trying?

We can see from the ideas raised in the syllabus that reading with empathy will be an important part of engaging with the texts:

Students explore how texts may give insight into the anomalies, paradoxes and inconsistencies in human behaviour and motivations, inviting the responder to see the world differently, to challenge assumptions, ignite new ideas or reflect personally.

In order to see the world differently we'll need to explore perspectives other than our own. It may be the case that through empathy our assumptions will be challenged. And, as a result of reading with empathy we'll be inspired by new ideas and personal reflections.

The benefits of reading with empathy don't stop with the Common Module. This approach will enhance your experience of the whole of the Advanced English course.

Class Discussion

- Why is empathy a crucial skill for English?
- Thinking about your prescribed text for Common Module, which character or persona resonates for you? Do you think it will be possible to empathise with any of them?
