**What is Empathize?**

Empathize is the first stage of the [design thinking](https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/design-thinking) process. Design teams conduct research to get personal grasps of their users’ needs. They set aside assumptions to obtain insights into the users’ world by observing and consulting with users. This way, they can understand users’ experiences, motivations and problems.

*“If you want to build a product that’s relevant to people, you need to put yourself in their shoes.”*  
  
*— Jack Dorsey, Programmer, entrepreneur, co-founder of Twitter & founder of Square*

**Empathize with Real People – Leave Your Assumptions Outside**

Empathize is design thinking’s first stage for a reason. It’s the first step on the road to thoughtfully designed products that prove the designers built with a compassionate eye for their users. Empathy is a naturally occurring characteristic which people have in varying degrees. However, they can improve their ability to empathize as a soft skill. Anyone in a design team will have preconceived ideas about the many situations people find themselves in as users. It’s unavoidable – you can’t unlearn your life experience. Therefore, you should always **adopt a beginner’s mindset to be able to view and analyze situations with users *objectively***.

*Empathize is the first stage in the design thinking process.*

To empathize is to research. So, you should constantly remind yourself to question everything you observe instead of judging. You should also listen to others open-mindedly rather than focus on points that confirm your biases. Because our biases will naturally creep into how we view the world and the situations we consider, as designers—or *design thinkers*—we must catch and overcome these before they distort our research. You must become fully objective before you can start to see through your users’ eyes and interpret their viewpoints optimally. They are the experts. You must understand the users’ dimensions of use (e.g., tasks) and their feelings (e.g., motivations) before you can work towards delighting them through your design.

Diagram

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*When you empathize you try to understand you users’ perspective.*

**How to Empathize to Get the Right Insights**

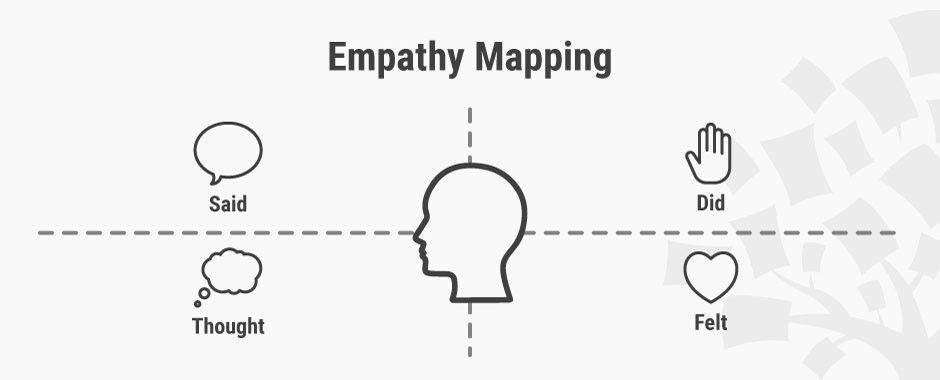
You have a range of options, including:

1. **Observing real users**. Ask these questions to shift from concrete observations to abstract motivations:
   1. “What?” – You detail your observations.
   2. “How?” – You analyze how users do things (e.g., with difficulty).
   3. “Why?” – You make educated guesses about the users’ emotions and motivations.
2. **Conducting photo- and/or video-based studies in users’ natural environments or sessions with the design team or consultants** – You record these users while they try to solve an issue you propose to resolve with your design.
3. **Personal photo/video journals** – You ask users to record their own experiences with approaching a problem. These may capture their pain points more accurately.
4. **Interviewing users** – Your team uses [brainstorming](https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/brainstorming) to first find the right questions to ask in a generally structured and natural flow. Then, you can directly ask users for their insights in an intimate setting where they can respond earnestly to open-ended questions.
5. **Engaging with extreme users** – You find the extreme cases within your userbase to determine the greatest degrees of users’ needs, problems and problem-solving methods. You can then see the full scope of problems which typical, non-extreme users might run into. If you can satisfy an extreme user, you can satisfy *any* user.
6. **Analogous empathy** – Your team finds effective analogies to draw parallels between users’ problems and problems in other fields. This way, you can get insights you’d otherwise overlook.
7. **Sharing inspiring stories**– Your team shares stories about what they have observed so you draw meaning from these and note fascinating details.
8. **Bodystorming** – You wear equipment (e.g., goggles, gloves, torso attachments) to gain first-hand experience of your users in their environment.
9. [Empathy maps](https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/empathy-map-why-and-how-to-use-it) and [customer journey maps](https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/customer-journey-map) – Your team should have at least one of these as a reference point to appreciate the users’ perspectives.
10. [Personas](https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/personas) to establish accurate portraits/profiles of users who’ll interact with your product.

Whichever approach/es you take, beware of formulating solutions at this stage. Aim to realistically envision possible scenarios where users experience problems. Empathize is not just a key part of design thinking. It’s also *pivotal* to [user-centered design](https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/user-centered-design) and [user experience (UX) design](https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/ux-design). When your design team remains aware of your users’ realities and passionate about helping real people solve real problems, you’ll reap precious insights which you can ultimately translate into products your users will love.

Featured article

**Empathy Map – Why and How to Use It**



*Did you know that users are more likely to choose, buy and use products that meet their needs as opposed to products that just meet their wants? An*[*Empathy*](https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/empathy)*map will help you understand your user’s needs while you develop a deeper understanding of the persons you are designing for. There are many techniques you can use to develop this kind of empathy. An*[*Empathy Map*](https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/empathy-mapping)*is just one tool that can help you empathise and synthesise your observations from the research phase, and draw out unexpected insights about your user’s needs.*

An Empathy Map allows us to sum up our learning from engagements with people in the field of design research. The map provides four major areas in which to focus our attention on, thus providing an overview of a person’s experience. Empathy maps are also great as a background for the construction of the [personas](https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/personas) that you would often want to create later.

An Empathy Map consists of four quadrants. The four quadrants reflect four key traits, which the user demonstrated/possessed during the observation/research stage. The four quadrants refer to what the user: **Said**, **Did**, **Thought**, and **Felt**. It’s fairly easy to determine what the user said and did. However, determining what they thought and felt should be based on careful observations and analysis as to how they behaved and responded to certain activities, suggestions, conversations, etc.

**Best practice**

**Step 1: Fill out the Empathy Map**

* Lay the four quadrants out on a table, draw them on paper or on a whiteboard.
* Review your notes, pictures, audio, and video from your research/fieldwork and fill out each of the four quadrants while defining and synthesising:
  + What did the user SAY? Write down significant quotes and key words that the user said.
  + What did the user DO? Describe which actions and behaviours you noticed or insert pictures or drawing.
  + What did the user THINK? Dig deeper. What do you think that your user might be thinking? What are their motivations, their goals, their needs, their desires? What does this tell you about his or her beliefs?
  + How did the user FEEL? What emotions might your user be feeling? Take subtle cues like body language and their choice of words and tone of voice into account.

**Step 2: Synthesise NEEDS**

* Synthesise the user’s needs based on your Empathy Map. This will help you to define your design challenge.
* Needs are *verbs***,** i.e. activities and desires. Needs are*not* nouns, which will instead lead you to define solutions.
* Identify needs directly from the user traits you noted. Identify needs based on contradictions between two traits, such as a disconnection between what a user says and what the user does.
* Use the American psychologist [Abraham Maslow](https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/abraham-maslow)’s [Hierarchy of Needs](https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/hierarchy-of-needs) to help you understand and define which underlying needs your user has. In 1943, Maslow published his paper, *“A Theory of Human*[*Motivation*](https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/motivation)*,”* in which he proposed that [human needs](https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/human-needs) form a hierarchy that can be visualised in the shape of a pyramid with the largest, most fundamental physiological levels of needs at the bottom, and the need for self-actualization at the top. Maslow suggested that humans must first fulfill their most basic [physiological needs](https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/physiological-needs), such as eating and sleeping, before fulfilling higher-level needs such as safety, love, [esteem](https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/esteem) and finally [self-actualisation](https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/self-actualisation). The most basic level of needs must be met before the individual will strongly desire or focus motivation on the higher level needs. Different levels of motivation can occur at any time in the human mind, but Maslow focussed on identifying the basic and strongest types of motivation and the order in which they can be met. When a lower level of need fulfillment is not in place, it is technically possible to be fulfilled at a higher level. However, Maslow argues that this is an unstable fulfillmen*t. For example, if you’re starv*ing, it doesn’t matter if you’re the world’s leading [User Experience](https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/ux-design) designer, because eventually your hunger is going to overwhelm any satisfaction you get from your professional status. That’s why we naturally seek to stabilise the lowest level of the hierarchy that is uncertain before we try to retain higher levels.
* Consult all five layers in Maslow’s Pyramid to help you define which needs your user is primarily focused on fulfilling. Start reflecting on how your product or service can help fulfill some of those needs.
* Write down your user’s needs.

**The Hierarchy of Needs**

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**Step 3: Synthesise INSIGHTS**

* An “Insight” is your remarkable realization that can help you to solve the current design challenge you’re facing.
* Look to synthesise major insights, especially from contradictions between two user attributes. It can be found within one quadrant or in two different quadrants. You can also synthesise insights by asking yourself: “Why?” when you notice strange, tense, or surprising behaviour.
* Write down your insights.

You can download and print the Empathy Map template here:

**Get Your Free Template For “Empathy Map”**

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

Some of the world’s leading brands, such as Apple, Google, Samsung, and General Electric, have rapidly adopted the design thinking approach, and design thinking is being taught at leading universities around the world, including Stanford d.school, Harvard, and MIT. What is design thinking, and why is it so popular and effective?

The overall goal of this design thinking course is to help you design better products, services, processes, strategies, spaces, architecture, and experiences. Design thinking helps you and your team develop practical and innovative solutions for your problems. It is a human-focused, prototype-driven, innovative design process. Through this course, you will develop a solid understanding of the fundamental phases and methods in design thinking, and you will learn how to implement your newfound knowledge in your professional work life. We will give you lots of examples; we will go into case studies, videos, and other useful material, all of which will help you dive further into design thinking.

This course contains a series of practical exercises that build on one another to create a complete design thinking project. The exercises are optional, but you’ll get invaluable hands-on experience with the methods you encounter in this course if you complete them, because they will teach you to take your first steps as a design thinking practitioner. What’s equally important is you can use your work as a case study for your portfolio to showcase your abilities to future employers! A portfolio is essential if you want to step into or move ahead in a career in the world of human-centered design.

Design thinking methods and strategies belong at every level of the design process. However, design thinking is not an exclusive property of designers—*all* great innovators in literature, art, music, science, engineering, and business have practiced it. What’s special about design thinking is that designers and designers’ work processes can help us systematically extract, teach, learn, and apply these human-centered techniques in solving problems in a creative and innovative way—in our designs, in our businesses, in our countries, and in our lives.

That means that design thinking is not only for designers but also for creative employees, freelancers, and business leaders. It’s for anyone who seeks to infuse an approach to innovation that is powerful, effective and broadly accessible, one that can be integrated into every level of an organization, product, or service so as to drive new alternatives for businesses and society.

<https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/empathize#:~:text=Empathize%20is%20the%20first%20stage%20in%20the%20design%20thinking%20process,points%20that%20confirm%20your%20biases>.

[**Empathy is the cornerstone of any successful design project.**](https://careerfoundry.com/en/blog/ux-design/empathy-and-ux-design/) The extent to which you understand and empathise with your users ultimately determines the outcome of your design. Will it be user-friendly–an apt solution to the user’s problem? Or will it miss the mark because you never fully grasped where your users are coming from?

As a designer, it’s crucial to adopt a Design Thinking mindset. This means building empathy at every opportunity; getting to know your users, experiencing their pain points as if they were your own, and using this empathy to make smart design decisions.

In this guide, we’ll cover everything you need to know about empathy. Why is it so important? Where does it fit into the [**Design Thinking**](https://careerfoundry.com/en/blog/ux-design/what-is-design-thinking-everything-you-need-to-know-to-get-started/) process, and most importantly, how can you become a more empathic designer?

### 1. What is empathy and why is it so important?

[**Empathy is defined as**](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/empathy) “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner.”

It describes the ability to put yourself in another person’s shoes; to truly see the world through their eyes in a given context or situation.

In a social context, empathy is often what drives us to take action. If we see people suffering or struggling, and we are able to empathise with their situation, we are compelled to help relieve them in some way.

Designers need to build empathy for their users in order to take the right course of action. It’s important to understand how the user feels when interacting with a certain product or interface; does the layout of this website evoke feelings of frustration? What emotions does the user go through when navigating this app?

In building empathy, designers can create products which truly please the user and make their lives easier. Without this empathy, the design process lacks that all-important user-centricity which often marks the distinction between product success and failure.

### 2. Where does empathy fit into the Design Thinking process?

We know that empathy is crucial—so where does it fit into the Design Thinking process?

Empathy is considered the starting point for any design project, and constitutes phase one of [**the Design Thinking process**](https://careerfoundry.com/en/blog/ux-design/design-thinking-process/). During the empathise phase, the designer spends time getting to know the user and understanding their needs, wants, and objectives. This means observing and engaging with people in order to understand them on a psychological and emotional level.

The empathise phase requires you to set aside your assumptions. It’s human nature to assume that others will think and feel the same as you in particular situations, but of course this isn’t always the case. The first step in empathising with your users is to suspend your own view of the world around you in order to truly see it through your users’ eyes. When it comes to Design Thinking and [**human-centered design**](https://careerfoundry.com/en/blog/ux-design/guide-to-human-centered-design/), it’s time to stop guessing and start gathering real insights about the user!

#### What is empathic design?

Empathic design caters to real user needs, rather than supposed “averages”. One of the main objectives of the empathise stage is to identify user needs and behaviours that are latent, or unarticulated. As a designer, it’s important to distinguish between what people say they would do in a certain situation, and what they actually do. In reality, users may have habits or desires that they’re not aware of, so it’s essential for the designer to observe the user in action.

Empathic research and design is not concerned with facts about the user, such as their age or location. Rather, it focuses on their feelings towards a product and their motivations in certain situations. Why do they behave in a certain way? Why do they prefer to do this instead of that? Why do they click here rather than there when presented with a particular screen or page? These are the kinds of insights you’ll uncover during the empathise phase, and they’ll help you to create user experiences that cater to your audience.

### 3. How to become a more empathic designer

Anyone looking to [**build a career in UX design**](https://careerfoundry.com/en/blog/ux-design/how-to-learn-to-be-a-ux-designer/) will need to master the art of empathy. There is plenty of research to suggest that empathy is not a fixed personality trait; according to the [**largest ever study into the genetic basis of empathy**](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/2018/03/12/empathetic-people-made-not-born-new-research-suggests/), only 10% of the variation between people’s compassion and understanding is down to genes. This indicates that empathy can be learned and improved.

Before we delve into specific methods used during the empathise phase, let’s consider how you might train yourself to become a more empathic designer.

#### Practice empathy in your everyday life

You can become more empathic simply by making empathy a part of your everyday life—by flexing and training your empathy muscle, if you will. Make a conscious effort to observe those around you and empathise with how they might be feeling. The more you practice empathy in the outside world, the easier it will be to put yourself in your user’s shoes when it comes to your next design project.

#### The power of facial expressions

Research has shown that mirroring another person’s facial expressions can help you to feel what they are feeling. [**UCLA researchers found**](https://www.webmd.com/balance/news/20030409/mimicking-emotions-creates-empathy) that empathic actions, such as mimicking someone’s facial expressions, trigger far greater activity in the emotion centers of the brain than when merely observing these facial expressions. You might be familiar with the almost reflexive action of wincing when you see someone stub their toe, for example. When engaging in conversations or observing your users, try mimicking their facial expressions as a way of building empathy.

#### Assume a beginner’s mindset (Listen, don’t judge!)

As already mentioned, setting aside your assumptions is absolutely critical when it comes to building empathy. As human beings, we all come with our own preconceptions, experiences, and misconceptions; this is how we make sense of the world around us. However, these can hinder our ability to build empathy. When listening to and engaging with people, get into the habit of suspending your own judgements and assumptions. You can think of it as a mental reset; assume a “blank” mindset, free of any preconceived ideas and beliefs. Really listen attentively to what other people are saying, and you’ll uncover much deeper insights about how they tick as a person.

#### Pay attention to body language

From the way a person stands and where their arms are positioned, to the tiniest of microexpressions; there is so much to be deduced from body language alone. In your quest to become a more empathic designer, learn to study and interpret these physical signals. For more insights on reading body language while engaging with your users, take a look at this two-part guide: [**Understanding body language in UX research—Part I**](https://uxmastery.com/understanding-body-language-in-ux-research-part-i/) and [**Part II**](https://uxmastery.com/understanding-body-language-in-ux-research-part-ii/).

#### Curious about a career in UX design?

Start learning for free!

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### 4. Key empathy-building methods

During the empathise phase of the Design Thinking process, you’ll need to both observe and engage with your users. There are plenty of empathy-building techniques you can use to gain a deeper understanding of how your users tick. Let’s take a look at some of the most popular empathise methods.

#### Empathy interviews

One way to build empathy is by conducting empathy interviews. The key to an effective empathy interview is to structure it as an open conversation; don’t try to steer the session with a set list of questions. Remember, the goal is to uncover as much insight as possible—not to confirm or negate a preconceived notion.

The [**Stanford d.school**](https://dschool-old.stanford.edu/wp-content/themes/dschool/method-cards/interview-for-empathy.pdf) provides some excellent tips on interviewing for empathy, such as constantly asking “why?” (even if you think you already know the answer!), asking non-binary questions, encouraging storytelling, and paying attention to nonverbal cues. One of the most important things to bear in mind when conducting an empathy interview is that you need to be present and attentive. Don’t be distracted by taking notes; set up a recorder or have someone there to take notes for you.

#### Immersion and observation

It is also extremely useful to observe your users in action, be it in their natural environment or immersed in a certain situation. Observing your users, either by photographing or videoing them, helps to identify needs, motivations, or challenges that they’re not aware of—and therefore not able to articulate.

There are several ways of observing your users. One option is to bring them in and observe them while they interact with the product, or problem, you are trying to design for. You might video them or record their screen as they navigate a website. Another option is to ask your users to keep their own photo or video journal over a certain time period, or while completing certain tasks in their everyday lives. The advantage of this is that your users aren’t so aware of being watched and may therefore act more naturally.

#### Extreme users

In their quest to build empathy and truly understand the problem that their users face, designers will often turn to extreme users. As [**UX designer Jack Strachan explains**](https://uxplanet.org/why-use-extreme-users-345e97719e52), extreme users help to reframe the problem and uncover new insights: “Extreme users’ needs are somewhat amplified. They need/want less or more of something to solve their problems. They often find workarounds to existing problems, unlike average users.”

Engaging with extreme users can help you to identify problems and needs that so-called mainstream users may have trouble voicing. By building empathy with both the “averages” and the “extremes” of your target user base, you are much better equipped to come up with innovative solutions. You can [**learn how to identify your extreme users here**](https://dschool-old.stanford.edu/wp-content/themes/dschool/method-cards/extreme-users.pdf).

#### Constant curiosity: Ask what, how, and why?

Throughout the empathise phase, you should constantly be considering the what, how, and why of your users’ behaviour. The what-how-why framework can help you translate your (assumption-free) observations into more abstract user motivations. Divide your page into three sections and break down what you’ve observed as follows:

* **What?** Refers to the details of what has happened: for example, the user took the following actions when entering their payment details on an ecommerce website.
* **How?** Here you will consider how the user has completed these actions. What were their facial expressions? Were they exerting a lot of effort? Did they seem at ease, frustrated, or confused?
* **Why?** Now it’s time to make some educated guesses about the user’s motivations and emotions as they complete these tasks.

The more you reflect on how and why your users might behave in a certain way, the more you can empathise with (and design for!) them.

#### Empathy maps

[**Empathy maps**](https://careerfoundry.com/en/blog/ux-design/what-is-an-empathy-map/) are another great tool not only for getting to know your users, but for sharing this knowledge across the wider team. As defined by the [**Nielsen Norman Group**](https://www.nngroup.com/articles/empathy-mapping/), an empathy map is “a collaborative visualization used to articulate what we know about a particular type of user. It externalizes knowledge about users in order to 1) create a shared understanding of user needs, and 2) aid in decision making.”

Empathy mapping requires you to consider your users in relation to four different quadrants:

1. **Says:** Contains direct quotes based on what the user has said, for example during an empathy interview.
2. **Thinks:** Considers what the user might be thinking, but may not want to explicitly reveal. For example: “Am I stupid for not being able to navigate this website?”
3. **Does:** Looks at concrete actions the user takes, for example: refreshing a page, clicking a button, comparing different options before making a purchase.
4. **Feels:** Considers what emotions the user is experiencing at certain points. For example: “Frustrated: Can’t find what they are looking for on the page.”

Empathy maps will also help you to [**define user personas, which you can learn more about here**](https://careerfoundry.com/en/blog/ux-design/how-to-define-a-user-persona/).

### 5. What comes after the empathise phase?

As [**Maya Angelou once said**](https://www.goalcast.com/2017/04/03/maya-angelou-quotes-to-inspire-your-life/), “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

In order to create positive experiences for your users, you need to first understand their wants, needs, frustrations, and pain points. This requires building empathy, so make this the starting point of any design project.

After the empathise phase, you’ll go on to [**define your problem statement**](https://careerfoundry.com/en/blog/ux-design/stage-two-design-thinking-define-the-problem/) based on what you’ve learned about your users. This will then be followed by [**ideation**](https://careerfoundry.com/en/blog/ux-design/what-is-ideation-in-design-thinking/), [**prototyping**](https://careerfoundry.com/en/blog/ux-design/design-thinking-stage-four-prototyping/), and [**testing**](https://careerfoundry.com/en/blog/ux-design/user-testing-design-thinking/). But remember: the Design Thinking process is not linear, and you’ll often have to loop back to various stages in order to find the right solution.

Want to learn more about empathy? Here are [**5 must-read articles about empathy and UX design**](https://careerfoundry.com/en/blog/ux-design/5-must-read-articles-on-empathy-and-ux-design/). Want to learn how to run a Design Thinking workshop? Then this [**guide to Design Thinking workshops**](https://careerfoundry.com/en/blog/ux-design/design-thinking-workshop/) is exactly what you need!

https://careerfoundry.com/en/blog/ux-design/what-is-empathy-in-design-thinking/