

Using Trigger or Content Warnings on Your Syllabus

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Trigger warnings have become a common recognition of difficult material presented in movies, television, on social media, and in academic settings, but in higher education, they are not without debate. Many believe that trigger warnings contribute to an inclusive classroom and allow students to prepare themselves for difficult content. However, others have suggested that they are politicized statements that prevent students from dealing with challenging subject matter. It is important to note that some scholars (for example, Bellet et al, 2020) suggest that trigger warnings may actually temporarily increase anxiety for some students. An excellent meta-review of the literature conducted by Bryce, Horwood, and Gildersleeve (2022) encourages trigger warnings as a strategy for inclusive practice and trauma-informed teaching with the caveat that they should not be “one and done” isolated statements, but rather a representation of consistent care and pedagogical practice shown toward students.

Trigger warnings do not mean that students can exempt themselves from completing parts of the coursework. Ideally, a student who is genuinely concerned about being re-traumatized by forthcoming course content would privately inform the instructor of this concern. The instructor would then accommodate the student by proposing alternative content or an alternative learning activity, similar to how an instructor might proceed when presented with a documented ADA accommodation.

Content and trigger warnings are intended to serve all students, not only those who have a clinical diagnosis of PTSD and are meant to communicate recognition of students' lived experiences. It is hoped that content and trigger warnings give students agency to mentally prepare for their interactions with the content and to make choices about how to engage with it. We offer basic definitions, templates, and instructional strategies to allow instructors to make their own pedagogical choices and decisions about trigger and content warnings.

Definitions

Content Warnings (sometimes called content notices): A content warning is a written or oral statement given before presenting certain material that discloses that the content covered may be sensitive in nature. A content warning anticipates that some students may feel uncomfortable.

Trigger Warning: A trigger warning is a written or oral statement given directly before presenting material commonly known to cause trauma. This material may include any content that touches on any of the following 18 topics: (1) rape, (2) sexual assault, (3) abuse (physical,

sexual, emotional, verbal), (4) child abuse or pedophilia, (5) animal cruelty or animal death, (6) self-injurious behavior (ex. Self-harm, eating disorders), (7) suicide, (8) excessive or gratuitous violence, (9) violence and trauma connected to racism and racial conflict, (10) racial slurs, (11) needles, (12) depiction of pornography (including child pornography), (13) incest (including any and all elements of romantic or sexual relationships between family, tonal in theme, thought, or activity), (14) kidnapping (forceful deprivation of/disregard for personal autonomy), (15) death or dying, (16) pregnancy or childbirth, (17) miscarriages or abortion, and (18) blood. A trigger warning anticipates that the material may be triggering for trauma survivors.

Instructional Strategies

- Best practices in instructional practice suggest that when a content or trigger warning is included in a syllabus, an instructor will also pair it with a verbal announcement before the class where the material referred is presented to support a safe, inclusive, and engaged learning environment. Instructors might also consider offering this notification in advance so that students can prepare themselves. For example, even if your syllabus contains a trigger warning about content that may be particularly difficult, consider making an announcement in class to remind students that said topic will be discussed in the coming weeks. The point is not to retraumatize or coddle students by warning them, but rather to allow them the opportunity to manage their distress if needed. Depending on your course content, multiple in-class content warnings throughout the semester may be appropriate.
- Scaffolding offers progression into difficult materials. For example, instead of beginning a class with graphic photographs, perhaps a discussion of context will offer time for preparation and space for progression of thought.
- Consider shifting cultural narratives. For example, while a particular film might be historically valued as a masterpiece, it may portray sexual violence in a way that would trigger some students. Pointing this out in a brief note at the start of the discussion could be useful.
- It may help to ask students to view disturbing materials outside of class so that they are more comfortable while seeing vulnerable materials in a space of their choice.
- Consider asking students to show sensitivity to others who may experience discomfort or trauma from discussions of difficult content. This recommendation focuses on a simple acknowledgement of difficult course content with the goal of a healthy, thoughtful classroom environment.

- You might reassess your content with a lens of justice or equity that has grown with time. For example, a historic painting or photograph might be viewed differently today than it was a few decades ago. This is another opportunity for open discussion with students.
- Checking in with students (asking them how they are doing or if they need a break and acknowledging the difficulty of the material) demonstrates your recognition of emotionally challenging topics.
- It may be appropriate to issue a blanket content warning, particularly if the overall content of your course may be triggering.
- Think about how you might help your students see the difference between emotional trauma and intellectual discomfort. An individual must have experienced trauma to experience being triggered, whereas an intellectual challenge has nothing to do with trauma. Content that is intellectually challenging may be uncomfortable, for example, it may bring about questioning of long-held beliefs. While challenging and even uncomfortable content may engage students in their learning and promote inquiry, triggering content does the opposite: it prevents learning from taking place.
- Ensuring an inclusive and safe classroom extends beyond content and trigger warnings. Listening to student concerns and connecting students to additional support resources on campus must be part of our practice.

Sample Content Warnings

I acknowledge that each of you comes to Texas Tech with unique life experiences. This contributes to the way you perceive various types of information. In **[class name]**, all class content, including that which may be intellectually or emotionally challenging, has been intentionally curated to achieve the learning goals for this course. The decision to include such material is not taken lightly. These topics include **[list topics]**. If you encounter a topic that is intellectually challenging for you, it can manifest in feelings of discomfort and upset. In response, I encourage you to talk to me, your friends, or family about it. Class topics are discussed for the sole purpose of expanding your intellectual engagement in the area of **[subject/major]**, and I will support you throughout your learning in this course.

Our classroom provides an open space for the critical and civil exchange of ideas. Some readings and content in this course will include topics that some students may find offensive and/or traumatizing. I will provide you with advance notice about potentially disturbing content and I will ask all of you to help create an atmosphere of mutual respect and sensitivity.

Sample Trigger Warnings

I acknowledge that each of you comes to Texas Tech with unique life experiences. This contributes to the way you perceive several types of information. In **[class name]**, we will cover a variety of topics, some of which you may find triggering. These topics include **[list topics]**. Each time this topic appears in a reading or unit, it is marked on the syllabus. The experience of being triggered versus intellectually challenged are different. If you are a trauma survivor and encounter a topic in this class that is triggering for you, you may feel overwhelmed or panicked and find it difficult to concentrate. In response, I encourage you to take the necessary steps for your emotional safety. This may include leaving class while the topic is discussed or talking to a therapist at the [Texas Tech Student Counseling Center](#). Should you choose to sit out on the discussion of a certain topic, know that you are still responsible for the material; however, we can discuss if there are other methods for accessing that material, and for assessing your learning on that material. Class topics are discussed for the sole purpose of expanding your intellectual engagement in the area of **[subject/major]**, and I will support you throughout your learning in this course.

At times this semester, we will discuss historical events that may be disturbing, even traumatizing, to some students. If you are aware of particular course material that may be triggering to you, I'd be happy to discuss any concerns you may have with it before it comes up in class.

In the next class, our discussion will probably involve conversation about sexual assault as depicted in the last chapter of our text. This content is disturbing, so I encourage you to prepare yourself emotionally beforehand. If you believe you will find the discussion to be traumatizing, you may choose to not participate in the discussion or to leave the classroom. You will still, however, be responsible for material that you miss, so if you leave the room for a significant time, please arrange to get notes from another student or see me individually.

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