

An Introduction to Content Warnings and Trigger Warnings

Overview

Trigger warnings gained prominence in online spaces for survivors of sexual trauma, as writers and articles would warn readers prior to engaging with the content (Jones, Bellet, & McNally, 2020). From online spaces, trigger warnings entered higher education spaces when students began requesting them in classes. Since their induction into higher education classrooms, there have been both proponents and critics of implementing content and trigger warnings in classroom spaces. Proponents argue that trigger warnings create inclusive spaces and, “provide agency to engage or not engage and that they allow trauma survivors to adequately prepare to engage with difficult material.” (Jones, Bellet, & McNally, 2020). Critics have argued that trigger warnings, “imperil free speech, academic freedom, and effective teaching, which prevents students from engaging with challenging material.” (Jones, Bellet, & McNally, 2020). Despite their prominence in the past decade in higher education, there was limited peer-reviewed research into their efficacy in the classroom. In the past few years, there has been an increase in scientific literature related to the impact of trigger warnings. The article by Jones, Bellet, & McNally (2020), cited in the “Recommended Readings” section, is a review of this associated research.

In Jones, Bellet, & McNally (2020), researchers found that trigger warnings did not reduce anxiety across the sample size and did not reduce anxiety for those in the study who met a clinical cutoff for PTSD symptoms. Additionally, it was found that trigger warnings led to small increases in anxiety rather than decreases. For those who self-identified as trauma survivors, the study showed that trigger warnings can increase the “narrative centrality of trauma” for them. The authors concluded that practices such as implementing trigger warnings must be thoroughly vetted through scientific techniques before adopted. Although there is increasing scientific study regarding the efficacy of trigger warnings in the classroom, it remains likely that you will encounter students who request content and trigger warnings in the classroom. Content and trigger warnings are intended to serve all students, not only those who have a clinical diagnosis of PTSD. According to the [National Center for PTSD](#), approximately 15 million adults have PTSD during a given year. Moreover, about 6 of every 10 men or 5 of every 10 women experience at least one trauma in their lives, with some not receiving a PTSD diagnosis. Thus, it is likely that not every student who asks for content and trigger warnings or who could benefit from them will have a clinical diagnosis of PTSD.

While there continues to be debate over the implementation of content and trigger

	warnings in the classroom, the debate stems primarily from a misunderstanding regarding what they are, how their use can make a classroom more inclusive for students with mental health disabilities, and how they do or don't impact instructor liability. When used in the classroom, content and trigger warnings can empower students to take care of themselves however and whenever it becomes necessary. As Michael Bugeja (2021), an Iowa State journalism professor who implements trigger warnings states: Measuring distress in a clinical experiment is one thing; encouraging discussion about distressing topics over an entire semester is another. Warning an incoming class about the absence of intellectual safe spaces is one thing; providing those spaces is another. Concerns about threats to academic freedom is one thing; exercising freedom responsibly is another. This resource guide is a primer to understanding content warnings (sometimes called "content notices" or "trigger warnings"). This guide explains what content and trigger warnings are, how they can be important to include for inclusive classrooms, and how instructors can implement them. The goal of this resource guide is to provide instructors with the relevant research and information regarding content and trigger warnings. For a variety of viewpoints and research on this topic, review the recommended readings section. Potentially unfamiliar vocabulary is in bold text. Lastly, it should be noted that even with the implementation of content and trigger warnings, there may be a discussion or piece of content that is distressing to students. 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. A list of U-M student support services can be found at the end of this resource guide.
Goals	1) To explain what content and trigger warnings are. 2) To encourage recognition of the importance of the mental and emotional wellbeing of all students. 3) To clarify the value of content and trigger warnings and how they contribute to inclusive pedagogy. 4) To offer various ways to implement content and trigger warnings in your classroom.
Implementation	These resources are best reviewed before the planning phase of course design, so the instructor has ample time to consider how they will implement content warnings in addition to working through any discomfort they may have in advance and reviewing their course content with common triggers in mind.
Challenges	1) Until you develop a sensitization for common triggers, it is easy to forget that they occur and where they occur in your course material.

- 2) Some may feel defensive and resistant to the inclusion of content warnings, feeling as though they put restrictions on the instructor and coddle the students.
 - a. The inclusion of content warnings is neither restrictive (it does not label anything as off-limits to teach) nor coddling (it does not assume that students cannot handle the material, on the contrary, it treats them as adults who can and should attend to their own wellbeing with all available information.

An Introduction to Content Warnings and Trigger Warnings in the Classroom

What are they?

Content warnings are verbal or written notices that precede potentially sensitive content. These notices flag the contents of the material that follows, so readers, listeners, or viewers can prepare themselves to adequately engage or, if necessary, disengage for their own wellbeing.

The following content warnings are the most common. Consider what material covered in your course may include these and how you would like to flag them for your students. Students may request additional tags, as this list is not exhaustive:

- Sexual assault
- Abuse
- Child abuse/pedophilia/incest
- Animal cruelty or animal death
- Self-harm and suicide
- Eating disorders, body hatred, and fat phobia
- Violence
- Pornographic content
- Kidnapping and abduction
- Death or dying
- Pregnancy/childbirth
- Miscarriages/abortion
- Blood
- Mental illness and ableism
- Racism and racial slurs
- Sexism and misogyny
- Classism
- Hateful language direct at religious groups (e.g., Islamophobia, anti-Semitism)
- Transphobia and trans misogyny
- Homophobia and heterosexism

Trigger warnings are a specific variety of content warnings that attempt to forewarn audiences of content that may cause intense physiological and psychological symptoms for people with [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder \(PTSD\)](#) and other anxiety disorders.

- PTSD and other anxiety disorders are real mental health disabilities that have physical, emotional, and mental symptoms that are triggered by stimuli that recall an individual's experience of trauma.

	• Individuals do not have control over what triggers them, but many have personal strategies they use to cope with triggers when they must be encountered. ◦ <i>Those strategies generally work best when the trigger is expected and can be prepared for in advance of the encounter. Hence the importance of content or trigger warnings: they give people the forewarning necessary for them to make use of the strategies that will decrease the harmfulness of encountering triggering material.</i>
Content and Trigger Warnings in Your Classroom	In the context of the classroom, content warnings might be provided on the syllabus, spoken verbally in lectures, sent out as emails, or posted on a class website. They might include forewarnings of challenging moments in texts they will read for class, material that will be covered in lecture, videos viewed in class, and topics that the instructor expects will come up in class discussion (read the section below on implementing content warnings for more on this). Content warnings and trigger warnings are not intended to censure instructors nor invite students to avoid material that challenges them. On the contrary, warning students of challenging material can help their engagement by giving them the ability to take charge of their own health and learning. When presented with a scene that depicts sexual violence, a student who was assaulted might shut down, disassociate, panic, become angry, or otherwise disengage from the class as they put all their attention into managing the emotional and physical symptoms the triggering material brings up for them. However, if the student is forewarned that the material includes a depiction of sexual violence, they might prepare for it by meditating, seeing their therapist, or simply give themselves more time to work through the material so they can process it under controlled conditions. Or they might still need to disengage and skip the pages that include the depiction or step out of class for a few minutes when the material is being discussed because their mental health and safety are more important than their engagement with the material. While it is impossible to account for all potential triggers, which could include smells or sounds that recall a past trauma, some of the most common triggers include representations of sexual violence, oppressive language, gunshots, and representations of self-harm. If you establish sufficient trust with your students and make clear to them that you will do your best to supply any requested trigger warnings, you can provide personalized notices about any material that may be triggering for them. However, trust can be challenging to build and takes time, so the inclusion of warnings for common triggers can be helpful to students who may not feel comfortable telling an instructor they barely know very personal information about their mental health and past trauma. The inclusion of common triggers on your syllabus can also help establish trust so students who need warnings for less common triggers—such as specific phobias—will recognize that you will take their concerns seriously and without judgment. The motive behind including content warnings in classes is based on the simple recognition that our students are people with lives, histories, and struggles that we are not privy to, and cannot always understand. And those lives, histories, and struggles do not stop existing when class starts. Students carry those things with them into class and cannot be

	expected to turn off their emotions and forget their experiences on a whim, no matter how inconvenient they are to an instructor’s designated learning goals. Including content or trigger warnings is an issue of accessibility, as having panic attacks in class (a common outcome when a trigger is unexpectedly encountered) can prevent a student from learning and adversely impacts their health and wellbeing. The use of content or trigger warnings is not “babying” or “coddling” students as some critics suggest; it’s the recognition that the inclusion of people with mental health disabilities matters and shifting the norms of content presentation to include content warnings to better include them is well worth the small effort it costs the instructor to note potentially distressing material.
How to Implement Content and Trigger Warnings	There are multiple ways to implement content warnings in your class, and some may be more suitable than others depending on your teaching style and course. In certain situations, one may consider giving blanket warnings for class content if the material will regularly feature challenging and potentially activating topics rather than giving a specific content warning for each assigned piece. You can see examples of blanket warnings in the following section. There is no one way to do content warnings, so it is up to you to determine how best to implement them. No matter how you choose to implement content warnings, it is important that students know what to expect and that they are put in a position where they can act in their own best interest without ridicule or scrutiny. Letting students know that they can excuse themselves from class if they need to can make the difference between a student skipping class entirely and stepping out for five minutes to collect themselves. Avoid putting students on the spot if they look distant, distressed, or choose to leave the room. While it is certainly preferable that all students are engaged all the time, recognize that disengagement is sometimes an act of self-care and may be a necessary strategy to calm down in order to reengage later. It is not uncommon for us as instructors to miss flagging content that a student may identify as triggering. Perhaps the student’s trigger seems suitably mild to you, and you believed it did not need to be flagged or it simply seems silly. Perhaps the trigger was a fleeting mention, and you feel frustrated that you were expected to remember such a minor detail. These frustrations could lead to defensiveness, which is normal, but not especially useful to you or your student. Instead, apologize sincerely to the student, assure them that you will try to do better, and ask for any clarification if you need it (for example, if the student takes issue with a mildly violent scene that had no blood, you may want a sense of what their limit is for violent representation, so you can better flag it in the future). Mistakes are likely to happen as you are not necessarily sensitized to the same things your students are. Do the best you can and keep notes of content warnings that should be applied to material if you teach it again in the future. The following are some ways of implementing content warnings that you might consider.
Blanket Warnings	If most of the material in the course is going to include emotionally challenging and potentially triggering content, you can include a warning as part of your course description. You might write:

	<i>The content and discussion in this course will necessarily engage with racism every week. Much of it will be emotionally and intellectually challenging to engage with. I will flag especially graphic or intense content that discusses or represents racism and will do my best to make this classroom a space where we can engage bravely, empathetically, and thoughtfully with difficult content every week.</i> Another example comes from Dr. Laura Yakas, who writes in her syllabus: <i>A note on content warnings: in the service of our collective learning and growth, this course will dig into a variety of challenging and potentially activating topics (such as suicide, sexual violence, racialized police violence, environmental destruction, etc.). It would be prohibitively labor-intensive for me to provide specific content warnings for each assigned piece, but I want to urge you to take care of yourselves however and whenever it becomes necessary.</i>
In-Syllabus Warnings	When specific warnings are needed for material, the simplest way to indicate this is on the syllabus next to the assigned material. This can be achieved by tagging themes and topics a text, video, lecture, or discussion engages with. For example: August 16 – Read: <i>Your Blues Ain't Like Mine</i>, chapters 1-4 Tags: Race, Racism, Racist Slurs, Violence, Socio-Economic Class In this example, the tags serve not only to warn students of potentially triggering material but to highlight some of the aspects of the novel that they need to be thinking about and focusing on as they read. If there are particularly challenging parts of the reading, you may wish to additionally flag those specific pages, and warn students if class discussion or lecture will be heavily focused on those passages. For example: August 18 – Read: <i>Your Blues Ain't Like Mine</i>, chapters 5-9 Tags: Race, Racism, Racist Slurs, Racial Violence (graphic scene pgs. 82-96, will be discussed at length in the discussion section) Again, not only does this information flag what could be potentially triggering or emotionally challenging, it helps students recognize what they should be thinking about the most while reading.
Course Website or Separate Document	If for whatever reason, you would rather not include tags on your syllabus, you can supply a supplemental document, hosted on your course Canvas site or website or attached to an email for students to access or not as they wish. This document will be similar to the examples above, including common triggers for all course content, but will be more overtly available as a trigger warning guide. You can include a note about its availability and where to find it. For example, you might write on the syllabus:

	<i>A content warning guide is available on our course website [provide URL], under the syllabus tab, labeled “Content Warnings Fall 2017.” On this document, potential challenging content such as content dealing with racism, misogyny, and violence, is flagged for any student who wishes to know about it in advance.</i>
Personalized Warnings	In addition to common content warnings, it is appropriate to extend an offer to identify less common triggers, should a student request it. You might include the following note on your syllabus: <i>I have done my best to identify any texts with potentially triggering content. I have included tags for: violence, racism, misogyny, and self-harm. If you have concerns about encountering anything specific in the course material that I have not already tagged and would like me to provide warnings, please come see me or send me an email. I will do my best to flag any requested triggers for you in advance.</i>
Email Warnings and In-Class Warnings	If you plan your lessons as you go and aren’t able to flag lecture or discussion content in advance on the syllabus or course website, you can send out an email in advance of a given class letting students know what to expect. In class, try to provide a break before tackling potentially distressing material, and let students know what will be discussed or viewed after the break. For example, you might announce: <i>“We’re going to take a five-minute break, and when we come back, we’re going to discuss the scene in which Armstrong is killed and its relationship to the real-life murder of Emmett Till. This will include some graphic and disturbing photos of violence and death. I expect our discussion to last until the end of class today.”</i> This kind of warning lets students know exactly what to expect, when to expect it, and for how long it will go on. By sandwiching the discussion between a break and the end of class, you give students the ability to prepare themselves for the difficult material (maybe take some deep breaths, go for a short walk, or move to the back of the room so they can make an easy exit if the material is more than they can handle). And if the material is too traumatic for the student to engage with, they know what they will be missing if they choose to leave class early.
Recommended Readings	Guest, O. (2016, June 14). <i>I use trigger warnings – but I’m not mollycoddling my students</i>. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2016/jun/14/i-use-trigger-warnings-but-im-not-mollycoddling-my-students Hanlon, A. R. (2015, May 17). <i>My Students Need Trigger Warnings – and Professors Do, Too</i>. The New Republic. https://newrepublic.com/article/121820/my-students-need-trigger-warnings-and-professors-do-too Jones, P. J., Bellet, B. W., & McNally, R. J. (2020). Helping or Harming? The Effect of Trigger Warnings on Individuals With Trauma Histories. <i>Clinical Psychological Science</i>, 8(5), 905–917. https://doi.org/10.1177/2167702620921341

	Khalid, A., Snyder, J. A. (2021, September 15). <i>The Data Is In – Trigger Warnings Don’t Work</i>. The Chronicle of Higher Education. https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-data-is-in-trigger-warnings-dont-work Lukianoff, G., Haidt, J. (2015, September). <i>The Coddling Of The American Mind</i>. The Atlantic. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/ Manne, K. (2015, September 19). <i>Why I Use Trigger Warnings</i>. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/20/opinion/sunday/why-i-use-trigger-warnings.html Nelson, L. (2016, September 26). <i>Why trigger warnings are really so controversial, explained</i>. Vox. https://www.vox.com/2015/9/10/9298577/trigger-warnings-college Sanson, M., Strange, D., & Garry, M. (2019). Trigger Warnings Are Trivially Helpful at Reducing Negative Affect, Intrusive Thoughts, and Avoidance. <i>Clinical Psychological Science</i>, 7(4), 778–793. https://doi.org/10.1177/2167702619827018
University of Michigan Student Support Services	Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS): https://caps.umich.edu/ Office of Student Conflict Resolution: https://oscr.umich.edu/ Report a bias incident: https://expectrespect.umich.edu/topic/report-campus-climate-concern Services for Students with Disabilities: https://ssd.umich.edu/ Sexual Assault Prevention and Awareness Center: https://sapac.umich.edu/ The Spectrum Center: https://spectrumcenter.umich.edu/ Wolverine Wellness: https://uhs.umich.edu/wolverine-wellness