

Trigger Warnings

November 2020

A trigger warning is a statement made prior to sharing potentially disturbing content. That content might include graphic references to topics such as sexual abuse, self-harm, violence, eating disorders, and so on, and can take the form of an image, video clip, audio clip, or piece of text.

Trigger warnings in an academic context. Certain course content can impact the wellbeing and academic performance of students who have experienced corresponding traumas in their own lives, therefore instructors may opt to use a trigger warning. In an academic context, the instructor delivers these messages in order to allow students to prepare emotionally for the content or to decide to forgo interacting with the content. Proponents of trigger warnings contend that such warnings give students increased autonomy over their learning, and are an affirmation that the instructor cares about their wellbeing.

Trigger warnings and coursework. 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, as with an accommodation necessitated by a learning disability or physical disability.

Instructional strategies for challenging material

- 1** Give your students as much advance notice as possible about potentially disturbing content
- 2** Try to “scaffold” a disturbing topic to students. Whenever possible, allow students to progress through upsetting material at their own pace.
- 3** Allow students to interact with disturbing material outside of class.
- 4** Provide captions when using video materials: some content is easier to watch while reading captions than while listening to the audio.

Instructional strategies for challenging material

- 5** When necessary, provide written descriptions of graphic images as a substitute for the actual visual content.
- 6** When disturbing content is under discussion, check in with your students from time to time. Let them know that you are aware that the material in question is emotionally challenging.
- 7** Advise students to be sensitive to their classmates' vulnerabilities when they are preparing class presentations.
- 8** Help your students understand the difference between emotional trauma and intellectual discomfort.

Examples of Trigger warnings:

Ultimately, the decision on how and when to use trigger warnings is up to the instructor and should always be decided upon the backdrop of supporting our students. Here are three examples of how you might include trigger warnings in your syllabus, prior to a potentially disturbing topic in class, and for potentially distributing written materials:



Version of a trigger warning for a syllabus

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



Version of a trigger warning for an upcoming lecture/class

Next class our discussion will probably touch on the sexual assault that is depicted in the second last chapter of *The White Hotel*. This content is disturbing, so I encourage you to prepare yourself emotionally beforehand. If you believe that 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.



Version of a trigger warning for a written piece of work

The following reading includes a discussion of the harsh treatment experienced by First Nations children in residential schools in the 1950s. This content is disturbing, so I encourage everyone to prepare themselves emotionally before proceeding. If you believe that the reading will be traumatizing for you, then you may choose to forgo it. You will still, however, be responsible for material that you miss, so please arrange to get notes from another student or see me individually.

Adapted from, *Trigger Warnings*. Centre for Teaching Excellence, University of Waterloo. <https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/trigger>

