

Workshop on Trigger Warnings
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How would you answer the following questions? How would you revise your answers after reading the provocations below?

1. What is a trigger warning?

2. What is the purpose of trigger warnings?

3. Do you give trigger warnings? Why or why not?

SOME PROVOCATIONS

Trigger warnings are part of a campus culture that is increasingly overprotective and hypersensitive in its efforts to ensure that no student is ever offended or made to feel uncomfortable.

Professors, uncertain of what might be considered too sexual, too warlike or so forth, might issue warnings so broad that they're meaningless, or feel pressured to bleach the syllabus to a pallid version of a real college course.

As psychologists point out, a post-traumatic response is just as likely to be triggered by something that has nothing to do with subject matter: a glimpse of the same blue-colored clothing that was visible during a traumatic event, or a certain scent that was in the air that day. Colleges cannot bubble-wrap students against everything that might be frightening or offensive to them.

-The Times Editorial Board, "Warning: College Students, This Editorial May Upset You," *The LA Times*

Students who call for trigger warnings may be correct that some of their peers are harboring memories of trauma that could be reactivated by course readings. But they are wrong to try to prevent such reactivations. Students with PTSD should of course get treatment, but they should not try to avoid normal life, with its many opportunities for habituation. Classroom discussions are safe places to be exposed to incidental reminders of trauma (such as the word *violate*). A discussion of violence is unlikely to be followed by actual violence, so it is a good way to help students change the associations that are causing them discomfort. And they'd better get their habituation done in college, because the world beyond college will be far less willing to accommodate requests for trigger warnings and opt-outs.

-Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, "The Coddling of the American Mind," *The Atlantic*

If we continue to walk on eggshells to avoid offending these hypersensitive young adults, we are empowering their victimhood status. If we continue to indulge their irrational demands, we are robbing them of the opportunity to learn how to function independently in the real world. If we continue to overparent our kids, we are in danger of raising further generations of adolescents that are missing three key virtues of character: self-reliance, self-confidence, and resilience.

-Abilash Gopal, "Helicopter Parenting Has Given Birth to A Generation of Entitled Victims," *The Huffington Post*

This isn't about sheltering people from uncomfortable truths. The people who most need trigger warnings for emotional impact are those who already have the most intimate and direct knowledge of the phenomenon being discussed...So why do people get so hostile to the idea of wrapping a message in context and preceding it with a signal about the nature of the content to be delivered? It's what humans have always done. If you think otherwise, you're oblivious to human nature, history, and the principles of good communication.

-Free Thought Blog

But what happens when we frame trigger warnings as a disability issue, and their usage as a form of accommodation and/or an accessibility tool? How might that protect both students and educators? What other problems does it bring up?

-Megan Milks, "On Trigger Warnings: A Roundtable," *Entropy Magazine*

From a Duke student who finds it immoral to view sexually explicit material:

I don't believe my position will limit my exposure to essential lessons in history, philosophy or literature. I assume that having to view graphic images of sex for a class will be rare. If it does happen, I will avoid any titillating content and encourage like-minded students to do the same. **And I believe professors should warn me about such material, not because I might consider them offensive or discomforting, but because I consider it immoral.**

-Brian Grasso, "I'm a Duke Freshman. Here's Why I Refused to Read *Fun Home*," *The Washington Post*

Sample Course Content Disclaimers/ Blanket “Trigger Warnings”

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I will not give trigger warnings for individual readings and assignments, as it is hard to know what will trigger whom. But I want to say something about triggering for the overall course. Course content will address multiple forms of violence, including rape, child abuse, physical assault and murder, genocide, as well as systemic violence derived from racism, ethnocentrism, ablism, homophobia/heterosexism, transphobia. Be aware of that, take care of yourself, support each other. This material will push us emotionally, intellectually, and psychically. I want you to understand the difference between feeling bad about something and recognizing your emotional response vs. being triggered, experiencing symptoms of PTSD, flashbacks, or reliving past trauma. If you feel yourself being triggered, you may leave the room without explanation, excuse yourself from a conversation, or contact me about alternative assignments.

Because this is a course in which we will be working with materials in sexuality studies, gender studies, race and ethnicity studies, and disability studies, the assigned readings and film/video viewings may include mature language, racially charged content, sexually explicit materials, visual representations of bodies in various states of dress and/or sexual acts, and descriptions of sexual activity. If you have any personal concerns about viewing or reading such materials, please talk to me individually. Modified or alternative readings can be arranged on an individual basis if necessary. We should all work together to foster a respectful atmosphere for discussion (“safe space, brave space”). If for any reason you do not wish to be present during a particular discussion, you may excuse yourself without need for explanation. I recognize that the theme of this course can bring sensitive topics to the fore, and I hope that you will communicate with me by email or during office hours to work together to address any concerns you might have.