

# Trigger Warnings in the College Classroom

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## What is a “Trigger Warning?”

Trigger warnings are statements that alert people that what they are about to experience, read, hear, or see might be shocking, disturbing, or offensive. Trigger warnings, for example, call attention to the possibility that certain contents of a documentary film may be distressing or inappropriate for certain audiences. The antithesis of a trigger warning is censorship or the omission of ideas and materials that may be found disturbing and distressing to some people.

## Trigger Warnings and College Courses

The conversation about trigger warnings inevitably references academic freedom, the right to feel safe on campus, freedom of speech, and the proposition that the college classroom should be a “laboratory” in which students and faculty may explore, analyze, and critique even the most controversial and offensive ideas and human behavior.

Some assert that by exploring and thinking critically about disturbing or offensive material, students may improve their ability to approach offensive and difficult ideas and behaviors in a scholarly and objective manner, and also may also improve their resilience to adversity. Other note that by issuing trigger warnings in class, students have the opportunity to deploy anxiety management techniques, so that they can engage in their studies successfully.

## The Purpose of Trigger Warnings

At the core of the trigger warning lies the intention to be empathetic. Trigger warnings tell the student that instructors are aware of the reality that their students may have had various experiences with violence, discrimination, combat trauma, or may have clinically diagnosed conditions that may be barriers to full engagement in the material. The objective of issuing trigger warnings in the college classroom is to ensure that dialogue, critiques, and studies of sensitive matters moves forward. Ideally, by exploring and critiquing unpleasant issues, students may improve understanding of human nature, the human condition, the nature and consequence of ideas, and the obligations individuals have to society relative to self-expression.

## Trigger Warnings and Pedagogical Strategies

**1. Front-Loading the Syllabus.** Institutional policies often require instructors to include in their syllabi statements regarding the overarching purpose or objective for the course. These statements may also contain remarks about potentially disturbing or offensive course materials and discussions. More than alerting students to these elements, the statement may introduce students to the rationale behind such studies, and thus improve students’ understanding of what distinguishes the scholarship of experts from the scholarship of novices in the field. Here is an example from a course on Cold War History:

The purpose of this course is to acquaint students with the causes, major events, and consequences of the Cold War, so that students may better understand current policies, global conflict, and political perspectives. This course will prepare students for advanced studies and careers related to teaching, political science, and service in government agencies.

This course will explore ideas and events that may be shocking, distressing, or offensive to some students. Images and accounts of war atrocities, weapons testing, and violations of human rights are part of this curriculum. In exploring these matters, the instructor aims to foster students' ability to analyze, critique, and synthesize information in thorough and objective ways as do professional historians.

**2. Clarify Expectations and Resources.** The syllabus is also a good place to inform students that they are responsible for communicating their concerns to instructors in a timely fashion. As the classroom is not the appropriate venue for clinical interventions, the syllabi should also post information about where students who need assistance with managing their anxieties can go for help. Contact information for on-site services, (such as a counseling center), or off-site services (such as a Veteran's organization) may be very useful.

**3. Consider Alternatives.** To maintain the academic integrity of college courses, instructors may find it useful to prepare alternative exercises and assignments in the event that students are unable to complete the regular exercises and assignments. It is vital that such alternatives target the learning outcomes of the regular exercises and assignments, and apply the same rigor in scholarship and assessment. A student who is unable to view images of war atrocities in a film documentary, for example, may be offered the opportunity to read a book or set of articles that address the key concepts and competing theses on matters.

There may instances where alternatives are unsuitable, and so a different course of action may be indicated. A student, for example, who objects to reading Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* because it contains a vicious rape scene and cannibalism, presents a challenge to the instructor. If the learning outcomes of reading the play concern Western attitudes towards women, sexuality, violence, and revenge, then reading alternative plays that do not address these things would not be suitable. By front-loading the syllabus, instructors may confront this potential scenario in the first hours of the course, and thus advise those who may be upset by the material that an alternative course may be more manageable for the student.

**4. Frequent Reminders.** Even when the syllabus has articulated the rationale for examining controversial and potentially disturbing material, it is helpful to remind students at the beginning of a new unit or opening of a new topic that certain ideas, images, and events may be upsetting. An art historian teaching a survey of 20<sup>th</sup> century European art, for instance, may find that looking at landscapes painted by Erich Heckel or abstract sketches by Wassily Kandinsky provoke different reactions than post-war paintings by Otto Dix or George Grosz.

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