

Inclusive Teaching: Navigating Triggering Moments and Material

This guide explains what content and trigger warnings are, why they are important to include for inclusive classrooms, and how instructors can implement them. This guide adapts and builds on [material from the University of Michigan's Center for Research on Learning and Teaching](#).

Overview

While there has been [much debate](#) over the implementation of content warnings in the classroom, [including at the University of Chicago](#), providing trigger and content warnings is a straightforward action that instructors can take to cultivate a more [inclusive climate](#) in their courses. Such warnings do not need to be implemented in a way that curtails free expression or limits instructor autonomy. *On the contrary, such warnings prepare learners to implement strategies that will let them engage with the course in a more productive way. They give learners more agency, more space to engage with the material, and more ability to engage in free expression themselves.* While it is always good practice to be responsive to student concerns as they arise, where and how you may use trigger and content warnings are best considered during the course development phase, so that you have ample time to reflect and implement them.

What are Content Warnings and Trigger Warnings?

- [Content warnings](#) precede content to which your learners may be sensitive. They signpost that material so that learners can prepare themselves to engage with it productively—or be ready to disengage with it, if doing so is necessary for their wellbeing.
- [Trigger warnings](#) are a type of content warning that signposts content that may cause your learners *intense* physiological and psychological symptoms. This might apply, for example, to learners with [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder \(PTSD\)](#) and other anxiety disorders.

Why Do They Matter?

When presented with triggering material, a student may 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 that the material triggers for them. In the most extreme case, learners may need to disengage and skip such material, because their mental health and safety are more important than their engagement with it. Under less extreme circumstances, such warnings will let learners prepare themselves to process and learn from the material.

Implementing Trigger and Content Warnings

Communicating content warnings typically includes an explanation of what the pedagogical goals of the material are and forewarning(s) of challenging moments that students will encounter in texts for class, lecture material, videos viewed in class, and/or other topics that the instructor expects will come up. Content warnings can be provided in numerous forms:

- Included on the syllabus;
- spoken verbally in lecture;
- sent out as emails in advance;
- posted on the Canvas site;

Common Content Warnings

These 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, and incest
- Animal cruelty or animal death
- Self-harm and suicide
- Violence and blood
- Kidnapping and abduction
- Death or dying
- War/torture
- Miscarriages, childbirth, and abortion
- Mental illness and ableism
- Racism and racial slurs
- Homophobia, sexism, misogyny, transphobia, and trans misogyny
- Hateful language directed at religious groups (e.g., Islamophobia, antisemitism)

Verbal Content Warning Example

“When we come back from break, we’re going to discuss the scene in which Armstrong is killed and its relationship to the real-life murder of Emmett Till to illuminate the atuhros’ argument. This will include some graphic and disturbing photos of violence and death. I expect our discussion to last until the end of class today.”

How to Help A Triggered Student

If a student shares that they have been triggered by material in your course, the best practice is to apologize sincerely to the student for their experience of harm, and adopt a disposition of student-centeredness and understanding to work with them to achieve the desired learning goal of the triggering material through other means—and to learn from the experience for next time.

How to Create Equivalent Material for Triggered Students Who Decline to Engage

If a student is triggered by course material even after you have implemented a content warning, the best practice would be to work with a student to develop a recourse that is equally challenging and addresses the learning outcome(s) targeted by the assignment or reading material. This recourse should also be shared as an option for the entire class without explicitly naming the student who reported feeling triggered. Please consult with Program Staff and the Teaching and Learning Team to develop this recourse.

In Conclusion

Content warnings and trigger warnings are not intended to stymie free expression or give learners a means to avoid being challenged. On the contrary, they are a means to give learners more agency and the tools they need to learn most productively. Be aware as well that is not uncommon for instructors to miss flagging content that proves to be triggering for a student. 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.