

Trigger Warnings

What are **TRIGGER WARNINGS?**

Trigger warnings are when instructors alert students to potentially troubling class material before the material is presented. Originally, warnings about sexual violence or war were given in consideration of assault victims and military veterans. It was feared that viewing footage or reading material about such incidents would “trigger” a traumatic response associated with PTSD.

What Have Trigger Warnings Become?

What started as a way to show compassion for a small effected population stretched into students requesting more warnings in order to avoid any hint of troubling content such as the instructor’s word choice or including discussion of controversial issues. This devolved further into students mistaking discomfort for trauma, requesting to not participate in class activities that are counter to their political, religious, and other ideological perspectives (or worse, demanding the content be excluded or alternative assignment).

FROM ACCOMODATION TO PREFERENCE

**TRIGGER
WARNINGS
for trauma
survivors**

word choice
controversy
discomfort
ideological disruption

Issues of Academic Freedom, Authentic Learning and Empathy

The wide swing from trauma to discomfort has received wide criticism for instructors who fear that this impedes their academic freedom to discuss challenging ideas. Such disruptive ideological experiences are important to learning in higher education, and some institutions are recognizing this and taking an official stance on “trigger warnings.” Some instructors do what they can to be mindful of students’ experiences and take no issue preparing students for troubling content as long as that preparation allows them to engage in the content thoughtfully.

Some instructors may choose to not address or consider the issue of trigger warnings. If faculty had to chase after every accommodation for a way a student would like to learn, the faculty would be exhausted and they could be undermining their learning outcomes. Instead of ignoring or dreading the issue, reframe it as an opportunity to prepare students for discussing and thriving in difficult situations.

Some instructors may find the “trigger warning” issue an opportunity to show empathy and invite students to be agents in their learning. Planning ahead for the issue of “trigger warnings” does not mean you condone the idea of coddling students, but could serve as an opportunity to show students consideration and to prevent class discontent.

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WHAT FACULTY CAN DO

- **Frame troubling content as “triggers” for growth rather than avoidance.** Remind students that learning should be challenging and uncomfortable, and invite them to analyze the root of their discomfort.
- **What about students with genuine trauma issues?** Some of our students will have PTSD. That being said, it is not up to individual instructors to diagnose and determine accommodations in such cases, just as it is not up to them to determine accommodations for physical or learning disabilities. Some psychologists claim that the best way to counteract negative associations with trauma is through “exposure therapy.” If a student presents an authentic concern that calls for a significant accommodation, direct them to Office of Disability Support Services or the OU Counseling Center so that they can communicate an appropriate solution through official documentation.
- **Define your stance on “trigger warnings.”** Even if you have never encountered this issue, play through a few scenarios: How will you respond if a student asks for a warning or accommodation? What will you do if students express discomfort during class? How will you explain the connection between disturbing content and learning outcomes?
- **Identify troubling course material.** Does your course regularly involve material that students will find disturbing? Do unplanned difficult conversations tend to come up? An instructor could reflect on the material they include and why they include it. Doing so might make an instructor realize they can achieve the same outcomes with less controversial content or have their reason for including it ready when a student or department chair asks.

References

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