

Guidance on content warnings for course content

General Principles

Material used in teaching may trigger unwelcome and distressing memories or thoughts in students. As a consequence, faculty and staff should:

- consider whether students are likely to encounter potentially distressing material in a lecture, class or other teaching session or in their reading or engagement with other recommended materials.
- if they identify potentially distressing material, they should notify students in advance.

Clearly, individuals respond differently to different materials and we recognise that it is not always possible to anticipate, and alert student to, all potential triggers.

Guidance on trigger warnings and their application can be found below.

What are they?

Trigger warnings are warnings provided to alert students to sensitive content covered in their course. Sensitive content may include but is not limited to: Written text, video or audio recording, or discussion points.

Trigger warnings may be given in a written or verbal form. Trigger warnings are NOT intended to censor teaching material or content. They are there to help students engage with the issue, not avoid them.

Certain content may cause students to relive past experienced trauma. Students who have experienced trauma may have a physical/physiological response when reliving trauma, causing them undue psychological distress.

Why are they important?

Trigger warnings are important as they allow students to be made aware of potentially distressing content that is covered and/or delivered in University teaching. Trigger warnings facilitate informed discussions surrounding potentially difficult issues, removing any element of surprise in coming across the traumatic content allows students to prepare adequately before broaching potentially challenging content. This helps students to engage with the content in an appropriate manner for them.

Who do they help?

While students may have experienced specific trauma, they may be unwilling to disclose this

trauma to faculty. Faculty may not know the past experiences that students have had, so using trigger warnings helps faculty support all students attending teaching or accessing content in a simple way.

How do they help?

Providing trigger warnings helps to prepare students for potentially distressing content and allows students to make informed and conscious decisions about how they choose to access the content. Trigger warnings also help lecturers to consider in advance how their content is framed to students and any reasonable adjustments for students who may find the content to difficult to access. Trigger warnings help faculty to have wider oversight of the nature of their content and consider the impact of their presentation on students who have experienced trauma.

How do I use them?

Trigger warnings could be delivered through (but are not limited to) programme handbooks, module areas of Blackboard, group emails to the students in a module ahead of a lecture, reading lists, personalised emails, verbal warnings, or a lecture slide before discussing the content. If lecturers are aware of topics individual students may find challenging, they should, where possible, engage in open conversations with those students.

If a student makes a disclosure of content they may find challenging - be open to this. Engage, discuss and listen to the student. This may be a scenario where individual advisory emails are most appropriate. It may also be advisable to signpost students to appropriate support such as Student Affairs, health professionals, or the police.

Possible themes that require trigger warnings:

- Sexual Assault
- Abuse
- Child abuse/paedophilia/
- incest
- Animal cruelty or animal death
- Self-harm and suicide
- Eating disorders and body hatred
- Violence
- Pornographic content
- Kidnapping and abduction
- Death or dying
- Pregnancy/Childbirth
- Miscarriages/Abortion
- Blood
- Mental illness
- Racism and racial slurs
- Sexism and misogyny
- Classism

- Hateful language directed at religious groups (e.g., Islamophobia, antisemitism)
- Transphobia and transmisogyny
- Homophobia

This is not an exhaustive list. Care should be given to remain responsive to the needs of students, and to ensure assumptions are not made on behalf of students as to the nature of their individual needs.

Formulations of trigger warnings

Formulations will vary depending on the medium of the trigger warning and the extent to which the warning applies to the overall programme, course, or lecture. Individual faculty might advise students using a formulation such as “This course/lecture includes reference to/consideration of themes of x, y, z/ or images of x, y, z, which might trigger unwelcome and distressing memories or thoughts for some students. Students might wish to discuss any particular concerns with the member of faculty.” At programme level, Schools might include statements in their programme handbook, e.g. “We are an inclusive department that takes the pastoral care of our students seriously, and we understand that some of our students may find particular topics difficult or sensitive. We advise students to discuss any particular concerns about material being taught with their instructor.

Forgetting trigger warnings

It is recognised that not all triggers will be picked up by faculty members all of the time - slips will occur and some student’s triggers may not be identified as triggers by faculty. Should this occur, it is something to learn from - adapt triggers used in future and be aware of individual student’s needs.