

TRIGGER WARNING:

Teachers should be aware of how the content they teach is potentially triggering to students and use trigger warnings accordingly.

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The use of trigger warnings has become increasingly frequent over recent years, especially on social media and TV. They typically precede content with disturbing elements that may affect people with specific mental illnesses or trauma, such as displays of violence and discussion of topics like suicide and eating disorders.

While trigger warnings are often used when it comes to social media posts with thousands of potential viewers, they should also be normalized in the classroom. Trigger warnings would be quite beneficial for classes that require students to consume works that contain racial and sexual violence, among other traumatic themes. Applying trigger warnings needs to be a school-wide precedent that teachers follow when the content they teach could potentially harm a student's well-being.

What exactly constitutes a trigger? In mental health terms, a trigger is a stimulus that reminds a person of a traumatic experience and significantly affects their emotional state. Triggers can be external or internal — an external trigger comes from a person's environment, while internal triggers are memories or feelings within a person.

The West High English Department has "agreed to warn students of any mature content, of any volatile subject matter [and] of any possibly traumatic situations in the material we analyze," according to English Department Chair

Nate Frese. The policy also requires English teachers to provide alternative assignments for students who may be triggered by a piece of content. However, the school should extend similar expectations to departments of other subject areas, because triggering topics can occur in any class. A content advisory before instructors begin teaching the material would be sufficient.

The American Psychology Association reports that memories of trauma are more distressing if they happen without warning. The effects of a trigger include panic attacks, flashbacks of the traumatic event and urges that can lead to relapses in harmful behaviors, such as those related to substance abuse or eating disorders. Even if a course requires every student to consume a piece of content, simply having a trigger warning can reduce the likelihood of these issues, as students who have the trigger can mentally prepare themselves beforehand. The effort of looking out for potentially upsetting words or images and announcing the trigger warnings before sharing content with students is well worth the protection of students' mental well-being.

All teachers should also allow students who wish to avoid such content to step out of the classroom or complete an alternative assignment. In cases where a student's triggers are severe, they may learn best by only reading or watching things that do not induce symptoms of anxiety-related illnesses such as post-traumatic stress disorder.

Some argue that the use of trigger warnings prevents victims of trauma from fully recovering, as treatment for mental health issues includes exposure to thoughts related to trauma. However, the classroom is not the place for this. Teachers are not therapists, and students are not their patients; only trained professionals, who know how to respond to a person being triggered, should perform such treatment.

While not every student reacts to potentially triggering content, a lack of trigger warnings can be detrimental to the learning of all. For example, if a triggered student has a panic attack and requires medical assistance, this would take away from the class time that is meant to be for the lesson. Students should primarily be concerned about learning to the best of their ability. Also, students susceptible to triggers should not have to worry about facing the discomfort of being triggered in front of others.

It is an educator's responsibility to teach a curriculum in a way that respects the mental health needs of students. Additionally, it is an administrator's responsibility to ensure this curriculum is standard. Trigger warnings are crucial to a safe, comfortable learning environment where students are guaranteed the prioritization of their and their peers' health. Implementing trigger warnings is a crucial step to ensure students are not held back by mental health problems on their paths to academic success and school is an equitable space for people of all abilities and experiences.

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