

# Warning, Warning, Don't Read All About It!

A trigger warning is a disclaimer about potentially traumatizing material. Trigger warnings originated on the internet, so that people could be prepared for graphic discussion or images involving sexual assault, military combat, and other topics that tend to induce traumatic response, especially for survivors with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>1</sup>

Recently, many students have started to demand trigger warnings in the classroom as well. For example, students at Columbia recently demanded that classical Greek works such as *Metamorphoses* come with a warning about content involving rape.<sup>2</sup> In some cases, students are also demanding that certain sensitive content not be addressed at all, at least in certain contexts. For example, students at Harvard recently asked that material on rape law not only come with a trigger warning but also not be included on exams. Many students also advise other students not to feel pressure to attend class discussions about material that might be triggering for them.<sup>3</sup>

Critics of trigger warnings claim that they threaten free speech as well as higher education itself.<sup>4</sup> In particular, they claim that part of the role of higher education is to train students to challenge their beliefs and values – a process that can often be uncomfortable – and that trigger warnings conflict with this aim. They also claim that trigger warnings shelter students, making them hypersensitive and unprepared for the real world, which will not protect their feelings at every turn. This is especially true for students training for certain professions, such as law enforcement, medicine, or social work, where an ability to deal with potentially triggering material on a routine basis is often essential for success on the job.

However, supporters of trigger warnings argue that these concerns are exaggerated.<sup>5</sup> They claim that, while part of the role of higher education is to train students to challenge their beliefs and values, another part of the role of higher education is to create a safe, supportive environment in which students can do so as effectively as possible – an aim which trigger warnings help us to achieve. Relatedly, supporters also claim that trigger warnings do not shelter students so much as provide them with a quick “heads up” about potentially triggering material, so that they can prepare themselves to engage with this material in a productive way. Thus, supporters of trigger warnings argue, if anything it would be unfair *not* to provide trigger warnings in higher education, given that many students would experience trauma unnecessarily, and would therefore be set back in their education unnecessarily, without them.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. When, if ever, do teachers have a moral obligation to warn students about potentially triggering material, and why?
2. When, if ever, do teachers have a moral obligation to not include potentially triggering material on exams, and why?
3. Is there a difference between the use of trigger warnings on the internet and the use of trigger warnings in education? Why or why not?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.aaup.org/report/trigger-warnings>

<sup>2</sup> <http://time.com/3860187/columbia-trigger-warning-greek-mythology-metamorphoses/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/trouble-teaching-rape-law>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/20/opinion/sunday/why-i-use-trigger-warnings.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/20/opinion/sunday/why-i-use-trigger-warnings.html?_r=0)

