



Content warnings

Best practice guidelines

Definitions

Content warnings (also called **trigger warnings** or **content notes**) are short labels placed or announced at the beginning of your media or event which explains what sort of potentially triggering or distressing stuff is explored within.

Content warnings aren't designed to make us avoid everything, and they're not designed to alleviate us from our responsibility of engaging with the world. They allow people to choose the actions they wish to take when engaging with media and events, after being informed of what lies ahead.

There are some mixed views on the effectiveness of content warnings. A recent study by Sanson (et al 2020) stated that content warnings have 'trivial' impact for people with and without a history of trauma, meaning their data suggested content warnings are neither meaningfully helpful or harmful across the sample group. However, the experience of individuals indicates that content warnings can help people make meaningful judgments about whether or not they feel comfortable or safe engaging with content.

Studies on content warnings are still in their preliminary stages. While more thorough research studies are conducted, we recommend listening to the lived experiences of these individuals and including content warnings where applicable.

Importance

It is important to use content warnings so people are aware of what sort of potentially distressing things may be explored within your content. This allows people to make informed choices about how, when, and where they approach your content.

If they need to do so, content warnings allow a person to disengage from content which may be triggering or distressing to them, in a respectful, safe, and dignified way.



Triggers

A **trigger** is something that a person's body reacts to as a traumatic threat, causing them to remember, re-experience, or relive a traumatic, distressing, or painful situation from their lives. Triggers can be symptoms of mental illnesses, like PTSD and C-PTSD. Triggers are more significant than feeling uncomfortable or repulsed by a topic, although content warnings can help people with those reactions too.

The term 'triggered' has become part of common parlance, particularly on the internet. It is often used as a descriptor for when somebody is upset or offended by content (i.e. 'are you triggered?') and is positioned as a joke, as if the bothered person is weak. This use of the term 'triggered' dilutes its meaning in a psychological and diagnostic sense, and should therefore be avoided.

A person's triggers may not be obvious to you, and may appear to be neutral or even pleasant to most people. For example, a certain sound, smell, song, or taste, could be a trigger for someone, as that sensation was closely linked to a place, experience, or person connected to their traumatic experience.

When to use

You should include a content warning whenever you will be speaking or writing about content which could potentially be a trigger for someone, or which may make them uncomfortable, distressed, or feel unsafe.

It is recommended that you use content warnings for common triggers, as well as for any less common triggers that you know specifically apply to your audience.

Below is a non-exclusive list of common topics which usually need content warnings:

- suicide
- self-harm
- rape
- sexual assault
- child abuse
- domestic violence
- child sexual abuse
- vehicular accidents
- sexism
- assault
- transphobia
- homophobia
- biphobia
- ableism
- racism
- images of war
- death
- blood
- food
- menstruation
- harassment
- bullying
- burnout
- images of deceased persons



If your piece of media references or speaks about a particular event which caused a substantial amount of hurt, harm, or abuse to a person or a group of people, you may need to include a content warning for the mentions or references to that event. Similarly, if you are speaking about a particular person who has caused a substantial amount of hurt, harm, or abuse.

How to write

Some examples of how to write content warnings include:

- Content warning: discussion of sexual assault
- CW: discussion of sexual assault
- Trigger warning: discussion of sexual assault
- TW: discussion of sexual assault
- Content note: discussion of sexual assault
- CN: discussion of sexual assault

Sometimes, people simply disclose at the beginning of their content what the nature of the content will be, without explicitly using the words 'content warning', 'trigger warning', or 'content note'. For example:

- This game contains discussions of sexual assault.

Ensure you give more information than just the words 'Content warning'. Your audience cannot make an informed decision about whether they can safely engage with your media if it does not provide enough detail about the included content. This would be similar to receiving a 'weather warning' but with no additional information about whether you need to be prepared for a drought, a cyclone, or a hailstorm.

Use key, broad words and descriptors, and clear topics. You don't need to be super specific with your warning and you definitely don't need to describe the content in detail; that nullifies your warning altogether.

Safe spaces

Providing content warnings is only useful if people are able to disengage from a potentially triggering situation safely and without judgement. This means it is important to establish a safe environment for people in addition to using content warnings correctly.



Firstly, you must ensure your content warnings are appropriately communicated to your audience **as early as possible**. People then have as much time as possible to make an informed decision about whether to engage.

This may look like a content warning:

- at the start of a game, film, or podcast
- in the first line of an article or first page of a book
- prominently advertised on an event invitation
- as one of the first things you announce at an in-person event

Once a content warning has been shared, it is also important to provide individuals with **accessible pathways to exit** the space. This includes physical, social, financial, and cognitive accessibility.

Physical

- Ensure exit pathways are physically clear of obstacles (and remember to think about how someone in a wheelchair or using a mobility aid will move through the space)
- Ensure pause buttons and menus can be accessed without excessive menu navigating
- Consider how a person will leave quickly and safely if the room is full of people
- Ensure people are given enough time to leave between the announcement of a content warning and the inclusion of relevant content

Social

- Remind your audience that leaving is okay
- Reinforce that people may need to leave to use the bathroom, or take a phone call, so that someone leaving to avoid a trigger does not need to out themselves
- Do not question why a person is leaving
- Have contingency plans set up to allow someone who leaves to still meaningfully engage with the situation (such as still learn relevant information if they are in a classroom setting)

Financial

- Allow refunds for people who leave your event or media because they are triggered

Cognitive

- Use clear language and signposting to show where the exits are
 - Use accurate language in your content warnings
 - Explain what a person should do if they are needing to disengage
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It is also important to include **safety measures and support services** for individuals.

For an event in a physical space, this may incorporate:

- a separate, private space
- designated, clearly identifiable, and appropriately trained support people
- clearly displayed information about helplines, crisis lines, and other places to get help

For a piece of media existing in a digital space, this may look like:

- a set of phone numbers for helplines and crisis lines
- links to information and forums about where to get help

If a person does leave a situation in response to a content warning, it's important to let this occur **without judgement or questioning**. Do not draw attention to people who need to disengage from content, as this can lead to further discomfort for a person who is already distressed.

If you do decide to speak to a person who disengaged from content due to a trigger warning, first reflect on what you are trying to achieve from the interaction and whether you are the best and most appropriate person to do this. If you are asking to genuinely see if they are okay, do so privately, afterwards, and allow them the option not to engage.

Avoiding asking somebody why they left, judging them, or punishing them for excusing themselves. Respect that this individual is engaging as best they can, and that they are doing what they need to do.

There are some instances where additional support might be necessary. For example, if you are teaching a class and the individual is missing key accessible components of that class due to triggering content. If this is the case, we recommend seeking the advice of support services available at the institution or workplace to ensure the best outcomes for the individual.

Resources

The Arbiter: Content warnings help students deal with triggering content

<https://arbiteronline.com/2020/11/12/opinion-content-warnings-help-students-deal-with-triggering-content/>

Personal experience of the usefulness of content warnings.



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Drizzle and Hurricane Books: Trigger warnings in books and why they matter to me

<https://drizzleandhurricanebooks.com/2020/07/08/trigger-warnings-content-warnings-in-books-and-why-they-matter/>

Personal experience of the usefulness of content warnings.

References

Sanson, M, Strange, D, and Garry, M. 2019. 'Trigger warnings are trivially helpful at reducing negative affect, intrusive thoughts, and avoidance'. *Clinical Psychological Science*. DOI: 10.1177/2167702619827018

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