



## **TRIGGER WARNINGS: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQs)**

### **Background**

The information here comes from Kate Manne’s “Why I Use Trigger Warnings,” which was published in *The New York Times* on May 19, 2015. In her article, Manne explains why – as a millennial and as an assistant professor of philosophy at Cornell University – she uses trigger warnings in her classes.

Please continue reading if you are interested in the origins and potential applications of trigger warnings in your personal and/or professional pursuits.

### **How and why did trigger warnings start?**

Manne explains that trigger warnings “originated in Internet communities, primarily for the benefit of people with post-traumatic stress disorder. The idea was to flag content that depicted or discussed common causes of trauma” so that the audience could choose whether to engage with the material and/or prepare themselves to encounter it.

### **Are CCCD employees required to use trigger warnings?**

No. The information here is designed to provide insight into trigger warnings and their possible uses. CCCD employees may choose whether or not to use trigger warnings.

## **How have instructors adapted trigger warnings for use in college classrooms?**

Trigger warnings serve as a disclaimer to audiences, letting them know that the upcoming content will depict or discuss “common causes of trauma, like military combat, child abuse, incest and sexual violence” (Manne).

Instructors who use trigger warnings in their classes often do so through notifications in the syllabus, verbal warnings in class, and/or electronic notes via email or announcements in course shells (like Blackboard and Canvas).

## **What benefits might students receive from trigger warnings?**

When students have advanced notice that a potentially trauma-inducing subject will be part of class discussion, readings, etc., they have the opportunity to prepare themselves to “engage rationally with ideas, arguments and views they find difficult, upsetting, or even repulsive” (Manne). With a warning, students can seek coping advice from medical and/or mental health professionals and engage in stress management techniques.

## **Why are some individuals unable to cope rationally with triggering material?**

Manne notes, “For someone who has experienced major trauma, vivid reminders can serve to induce states of body and mind that are rationally eclipsing in much the same manner. A common symptom of PTSD is panic attacks. Those undergoing these attacks may be flooded with anxiety to the point of struggling to draw breath, and feeling disoriented, dizzy and nauseated. Under conditions such these, it’s impossible to think straight.” An experience like this can “temporarily render people unable to focus, regardless of their desire or determination to do so” (Manne).

## **What should I do if a student wants to be excused from an assignment or the class?**

Some students do not feel comfortable with or capable of encountering certain triggering materials, even when the instructor employs trigger warnings. In some cases, instructors may choose to offer an alternative assignment and/or allow the student to miss the class during which the triggering subject will be discussed or viewed. Of course, *that choice is completely up to the discretion of the individual instructor.*

One way that instructors can address this issue is through open conversations about course coverage on the very first day. Instructors can include a statement on the syllabus, online, or in person about the kinds of topics covered in the course and what the policies are about absences and/or alternative assignments. Manne explains that the point of using trigger warnings in her classes “is not to enable — let alone encourage — students to skip these readings or [their] subsequent class discussion (both of which are mandatory in [her] courses, absent a formal exemption). Rather, it is to allow those who are sensitive to these subjects to prepare themselves for reading about them, and better manage their reactions.” Instructors may decide whether to offer alternatives and exemptions or to consider the trigger warning a courteous reminder preceding required material.

### **What are some sample trigger warnings?**

- “Next week, we will be watching a film in class that includes scenes of military combat.”
- “In week five, we will read a novel that contains graphic depictions of sexual assault. Please make a note so that you are prepared to encounter those sections when you read.”
- “I found an article about the kinds of personal barriers community college students sometimes face. Before you read it, please know that some of the examples cover detailed explanations of child abuse.”

### **Are you looking for additional information?**

Be sure to visit the Inclusion Resources section of the [Coast Colleges Equity, Inclusion, and Compliance](#) site for further information.