

Good Practice Guide

CONTENT WARNINGS



**CURTIN
STUDENT
GUILD**

Introduction



This guide explains what content warnings are, why they are important, and examples of how to use them. While there has been much debate over the implementation of content warnings in the classroom, the debate stems primarily from a misunderstanding regarding what content warnings are, how their use can make a classroom more inclusive for students with a diverse range of lived experiences, and how they do or don't impact quality of teaching.

Contact Information

If you need more support or have questions about content warnings please contact:

**Learning Innovation and Teaching
Excellence Centre**

LITEC@curtin.edu.au

CHALLENGES

Until you develop a sensitisation for common sensitive topics, it is easy to forget that they occur and where they occur in your course material.

Some people may feel resistant to include content warnings, feeling as though they put restrictions on instructors and coddles students. However, the inclusion of content warnings is neither restrictive (it does not label anything as off-limits to teach) nor coddling (it does not assume that students cannot handle the material), on the contrary, it treats students as adults who can and should attend to their wellbeing with all available information.

CONTENT WARNINGS

Content warnings are **verbal or written notices that precede potentially sensitive content**. These notices flag the contents of the material that follows, so readers, listeners, or viewers can prepare themselves to adequately engage or, if necessary, disengage for their own wellbeing.

While content warnings flag content that is potentially sensitive for anyone, trigger warnings are a specific variant of content warnings that flag content that may cause intense distress for an individual based on lived experience and/or associated conditions such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The inclusion of warnings for commonly sensitive content can be helpful to students who may not feel comfortable telling teaching staff they barely know very personal information about their mental health and/or past trauma. When it comes to students with specific, and potentially less common triggers, direct them to [AccessAbility services](#) for a CAP.

At a university level, course content deals with topics that can impact the wellbeing and academic success of students who have lived experience of those topics. Some people may be at a point where they choose to avoid such topics in an academic context so that they can more effectively interact with it at a later date, while others may be at a point where they are ready to confront such topics but still benefit from a forewarning to prepare themselves before participating in a classroom discussion around it.

Content warnings are not intended to censure instructors nor invite students to avoid material that challenges them. On the contrary, warning students of potentially sensitive material can aid their engagement by **giving students autonomy to take charge of their health and learning.**

For example, when presented with a scene that includes racist language towards south-east Asian people, a student with that cultural background might shut down, disassociate, panic, become angry, or otherwise disengage from the class as they put all their attention into managing the emotional and physical symptoms the material brings up for them. However, if the student is forewarned that the material includes the use of racist language, they might prepare for it by meditating, seeing their therapist, or simply give themselves more time to work through the material so they can process it under controlled conditions.

The student may still need to disengage and, for example, skip pages in reading material or step out of class for a few minutes when the material is being discussed —this may not seem ideal, but **it is important for your students to be able to prioritise their mental health and safety in order to continue to engage with course materials and content long-term.**

The motive behind including content warnings in classes is based on the simple idea of creating safe spaces for students to effectively learn.

UNINTENTIONAL EXCLUSIONS

It is not uncommon to miss including content warnings on topics that students may find confronting. Mistakes are likely to happen as you are not always sensitised to the same things your students are, especially if you have been working with the content for a long time.

The best action to take if you are made aware of a mistake is to:

- **Acknowledge the student(s) concern and inform them that you will take it into consideration when reviewing the course.** Ensure that the student does not feel ignored when providing feedback.
- **Seek clarification if required – preferably from a colleague first before asking the student(s) themselves.** Students may be uncomfortable having these discussions with their teaching staff.
- **Keep notes of where you should include content warnings in future and pass that information onto other relevant teaching staff.** By keeping note of where content warnings have been included historically, it will be quicker and easier to include them going forward.

COMMON TOPICS REQUIRING CONTENT WARNINGS INCLUDE:

Images/voices of deceased Indigenous people	Sexual assault	Abuse (e.g. physical/emotional/financial)
Child abuse/paedophilia/incest	Animal cruelty/animal death	Self-harm/suicide
Eating disorders/body hatred/fat phobia	Violence (e.g. physical, verbal, domestic)	Genocide
Pornographic content	Kidnapping/abduction	Death/ dying
Pregnancy/childbirth	Miscarriages/abortion	Blood
<u>Ableism</u>	Racism/ racial slurs	Sexism/ <u>misogyny</u>
<u>Poverty</u> /Classism	Hateful language directed at religious groups	<u>Transphobia</u> /trans misogyny/ Homophobia/ heterosexism

HOW TO IMPLEMENT CONTENT WARNINGS

Implementing content warnings can vary based on your teaching material and the frequency of sensitive content in your courses. It is recommended to use a combination of blanket warnings and specific tags. Ensure warnings are included in key student touchpoints such as unit outlines, Blackboard, lecture slides, and verbal announcements.

BLANKET WARNINGS

- Include a warning in the syllabus if most material will be emotionally challenging or potentially sensitive. This can also be used if there are content warnings elsewhere in the unit outline.
- Restate this blanket warning during the first class when discussing the unit's structure.
- Use blanket warnings for entire weeks or topics focused on potentially sensitive content.
- Inform students about available support services (e.g., Wellbeing, Counselling) when issuing blanket warnings.

USE OF 'TAGS'

- 'Tagging' can be used to create content warnings for themes and topics in more specific readings, lectures, videos, or discussions.
- With particularly challenging content in readings, try to flag specific pages.
- Warn students if class discussions or lectures will heavily focus on flagged passages.

For example:

Wk 3 readings: Chapter 1-4

Content Warning: Racism, Racist Slurs, Violence (graphic scene pgs. 32-46)

In this example, the 'tags' serve not only to warn students of potentially sensitive material but also to highlight some of the aspects of the novel that they need to be thinking about and focusing on as they read.

UNIT OUTLINE WARNINGS

- Indicate specific warnings on the unit outline next to the assigned material.
- Tag themes and topics for text, video, lecture, or discussion.
- For readings, add tags alongside the information about the text.
- Include tags for weekly topics with potentially sensitive content in the Program Calendar.

BLACKBOARD WARNINGS

- Post content warnings in the announcements channel on Blackboard prior to the class to flag what is being presented

and/or

- Post a blanket warning if it is more suitable, and pin it to the top of the channel.

and/or

- Include the content warning in the weekly topic folder

IN-CLASS WARNINGS

In class, try to provide a break before tackling potentially distressing material, and let students know what will be discussed or viewed after the break.

For example, you might announce:

“We’re going to take a five-minute break, and when we come back, we’re going to discuss the scene in which Armstrong is killed and its relationship to the real-life murder of Emmett Till. This will include some graphic and disturbing photos of violence and death. I expect our discussion to last until the end of class today.”

- This kind of warning lets students know exactly what to expect, when to expect it, and for how long it will go on.
- By sandwiching the discussion between a break and the end of class, you give students the ability to prepare themselves for the difficult material (maybe take some deep breaths, go for a short walk, or move to the back of the room so they can make an easy exit if the material is more than they can handle).
- If the material is too traumatic for the student to engage with, they know what they will be missing if they choose to leave class early.

TEMPLATES

This sample text can be used as a blanket warning within the syllabus:

The content and discussion in this unit includes potentially sensitive topics that can be emotionally and intellectually challenging to engage with. For specific content warnings please see the unit outline and unit BlackBoard.

This sample text can be used as a template for warnings on Blackboard/email/slides:

This [material/case/video/set of images/class session] contains [description/depiction/live discussion] of [violence/death/abuse/self-harming behavior/hate speech/discrimination/other]. I'm including this content in order to [rationale for why the material is used]. People who have experienced themes discussed may find some of this content difficult. Similarly, those who have not been exposed to this content before, may find the information confronting and challenging.

or

*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this [material/case/set of images/class section] contains images, voices and names of deceased persons.**

EXAMPLE PRESENTATION SLIDE

ENSURE THE CONTENT WARNING IS NOT ON THE SAME SLIDE AS THE CONTENT ITSELF

Content Warning

This [Lecture/Tutorial/Seminar/Workshop] contains [description/depiction/live discussion] of [violence/death/abuse/self-harming behavior/hate speech/discrimination/other].

I'm including this content in order to [rationale for why the material is used].

People who have experienced themes discussed may find some of this content difficult. Similarly, those who have not been exposed to this content before, may find the information confronting and challenging.

*Content warnings for potentially sensitive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content is for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students. This should be made clear in its use. It is important that non-Indigenous students are challenged with potentially sensitive content in this context

STRATEGIES THAT YOU CAN IMPLEMENT ALONGSIDE CONTENT WARNINGS:

- **Give your students as much advance notice as possible** about potentially sensitive content. A day's notice might not be enough for a student to prepare emotionally, but two weeks could be. A good point to aim for is at least 7 days where possible.
- **Allow students to interact with potentially sensitive material outside of class.** A student might feel more vulnerable watching a documentary about racism towards south-east Asian people while in a classroom than in the security of their home.
- Try to **“scaffold” a potentially sensitive topic to students.** For example, if you are beginning a history unit on the Holocaust, don't start with graphic photographs from Auschwitz. Instead, begin by explaining the historical context, then verbally describe the conditions within the concentration camps, and then introduce the photographic record as needed. Whenever possible, allow students to progress through upsetting material at their own pace. Aim to end on a positive and/or lighter note.
- When necessary, provide **written descriptions of graphic images** as a substitute for the actual visual content. For example, if you are showing the suffering of a group of people, try and use written descriptions or art depicting the scene instead of a photograph where possible.
- When potentially sensitive content is under discussion, **check in with your students** from time to time: ask them how they are doing, whether they need a break, etc. Let them know that you are aware that the material in question is emotionally challenging.
- Advise students to be aware of potentially sensitive content when they are preparing **class presentations.**
- **Avoid putting students on the spot** if they look distant, distressed, or choose to leave the room.
- **Help your students understand the difference between emotional trauma and intellectual discomfort:** the former is harmful, a classroom is not an appropriate place to elicit trauma; the latter is fundamental to a university education – it means our ideas are being challenged as we struggle to resolve cognitive dissonance.

WELLBEING SUPPORTS FOR STUDENTS

When potentially sensitive content is used, it is best practice to give students an opportunity to debrief and check in with your students from time to time; during class, at the end of class and in subsequent lessons.

If at any point you cover any potentially sensitive topics, you need to ensure that students are aware of the support services available to them:

- **Psychological and Counselling Services**
- **Student Wellbeing**
- **Student Assist**

A comprehensive list of support services can be found **here**.

You can alert students to delayed reactions by saying:

'Being distressed by this content can be an understandable reaction. If you continue finding the content confronting for some time after the event (days even) it is critical that you seek help with a support service.'

Link these services for your students wherever relevant (in lecture slides, emails, Blackboard announcements, etc.)

WELLBEING SUPPORTS FOR STAFF

If you cover any potentially sensitive topics, there is as potential that students might choose to disclose their own experiences to you.

If you need support because of this or any content covered please reach out to:

- **Employee Wellbeing Team**
- **Assure Employee Assist Programs**

A comprehensive list of support services can be found **here**.