

# BLUEPRINT FOR REFORM

THE JAMES G.  
MARTIN  
CENTER  
FOR ACADEMIC  
RENEWAL

## Trigger Warnings

"You have power over your mind - not outside events. Realize this, and you will find strength."

- Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*

### What is a trigger warning?

A trigger warning is an early notification of any subject matter which might be considered traumatizing for the audience. It has been particularly common in university lectures and reading lists, and is either issued verbally prior to lectures or presentations, or is part of the syllabus.

Trigger warnings have been enormously controversial.<sup>1</sup> According to some estimates, around 51% of academics use trigger warnings.<sup>2</sup> Some universities have begun to require that faculty use trigger warnings before they present potentially sensitive material.<sup>3</sup> However, study after study has

found them to be ineffectual.<sup>4</sup> Trigger warnings do not seem to help, but rather increase students' anxieties. They also lead to what many psychologists have warned, to a culture of "safetyism" and coddling of the mind.<sup>5</sup>

In *The Guardian*, Jen Doll writes, "If we warn people with a flashing red light that inside great works of literature they are likely to find pain, we do a disservice to the conversations, and the healing, meant to come through the act of reading itself."<sup>6</sup>

In some cases, trigger warnings have been used to shield students from merely controversial ideas. And such warnings have been placed on many widely-read books and plays including *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe,

1. To read more from the Martin Center about the importance of trigger warnings, visit: <https://www.jamesgmartin.center/tag/trigger-warnings/>

2. Kamenetz, Anya. *NPRED*, Sept 7, 2016, "Half Of Professors In NPR Ed Survey Have Used 'Trigger Warnings'"; NCAC Report: *What's All This About Trigger Warnings*, December 2015.

3. Palmer, T. March 28, 2017, ABCNews, "Monash University trigger warning policy fires up free speech debate."

4. See studies listed on page 3.

5. Greg Lukianoff, Jonathan Haidt (2018). *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*. Penguin Publishing Group.

6. Doll, Jen. "Trigger warnings on classic literature are one small step from book banning," *The Guardian*, May 20, 2014.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, and Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*.<sup>7</sup> Even some of Grimm's Fairy tales—including Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Hansel and Gretel, and Little Red Riding Hood<sup>8</sup>—have been subject to trigger warnings.

Trigger warnings have contributed a culture of safetyism and a significant weakening of resolve, fortitude, and stoicism<sup>9</sup> among today's students. Universities' willingness to apply trigger warnings has emboldened activists to go farther—demanding course and curriculum changes as well as deplatforming of speakers and "canceling" works of literature (such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.)<sup>10</sup>

**In sum**, "Trigger Warning" policies, though well meaning, have failed in study after study, have proven to be largely ineffective and in some cases harmful, and come with a host of negative externalities, such as:

- Posing a significant threat to academic freedom and challenging the rights of professors by compelling speech or restricting 'offensive or triggering' speech;
- Making unacceptable assumptions about the reader and relying on generalizations that these policies hope to avoid;
- Preventing dialogue in the classroom and denying students the opportunity to engage and debate important but difficult topics;

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7. Ibid.

8. Grant, Graham. "Now snowflake students need to be warned about 'violent material' in... FAIRYTALES! Glasgow University gives 'trigger warnings' before lessons covering classic Brothers Grimm tales." *Daily Mail*, October 26, 2019.

9. In Britain, Australia and the United States, there has been a gradual increase in mental health issues, over the past decades, especially among female students. See, "Stress and social media fuel mental health crisis among girls," 23 September 2017, *Guardian*; "Why are so many of Britain's teen girls struggling with mental health problems?," *Telegraph*, March 2017; "Mental health diagnoses rising among U.S. college students," *Reuters*, November 1, 2018.

10. "Trigger Unhappy," 14 April, 2014, *Inside Higher Ed*; "Our identities matter in Core classrooms," April 30, 2015, *Columbia Spectator*; "La Trobe University Student Union Condemns Bettina Arndt on Campus."

- Institutionalizing ineffective policies that do little more than censor the classroom in hopes of "protecting students from words on a screen"; and
- Contributing to a culture of safetyism and coddling on campus.

## Recommendations

**The Martin Center recommends** that universities take steps to limit the use of trigger warnings.

### **Universities should:**

- Strongly discourage the use of trigger warnings but allow instructors to choose whether to include them on their syllabi or in courses.
- Make all syllabi public, preferably months ahead of the course or module.<sup>11</sup> Allow individual students to decide on their own whether they can handle a specific content.
- Never require instructors to use trigger warnings.
- Adopt a statement in support of free expression (e.g. The Chicago Principles).
- Defend instructors who teach controversial topics.

### **Model University Policies:**

The University of Chicago "Letter to Incoming Freshman 2016"

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11. Schalin, Jay. "Opening Up the Classroom: Greater Transparency Through Better, More Accessible Course Information." James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, 2008.

## **Further Reading**

### **News**

[The Coddling of the American Mind](#) - *The Atlantic*

[A Warning Against Trigger Warnings](#) - *The Washington Post*

[Is Safetyism Destroying a Generation?](#) - *Quillette*

[The Latest Study on Trigger Warnings Finally Convinced Me They're Not Worth It](#) - *Slate*

### **Brief**

[Statement On Trigger Warnings](#) - American Association of University Professors

### **Studies**

[Study: Professors Worry About Trigger Warnings](#) - Foundation for Individual Rights in Education

[Are Trigger Warnings Actually Helpful?](#) - *Scientific American*

[Do Trigger Warnings Help or Harm?](#) - *Psychology Today*

[Trigger Warning Skepticism](#) - *Inside Higher Ed*

[Death Knell for Trigger Warnings?](#) - *Inside Higher Ed*

### **Academic Articles**

[Microaggression and Moral Cultures](#) - *Comparative Sociology*

[Trigger warning: Empirical evidence ahead](#) - *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry*

## **For More Information**

For supplemental data or additional research on this topic, please contact the Martin Center by phone or email. You can reach us at 919-828-1400 or [info@jamesgmartin.center](mailto:info@jamesgmartin.center).

To read more from the Martin Center about the importance of trigger warnings, visit: <https://www.jamesgmartin.center/tag/trigger-warnings/>

## **About the Martin Center**

The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal is a private nonprofit institute dedicated to improving higher education policy. Our mission is to renew and fulfill the promise of higher education in North Carolina and across the country.

We advocate responsible governance, viewpoint diversity, academic quality, cost-effective education solutions, and innovative market-based reform. We do that by studying and reporting on critical issues in higher education and recommending policies that can create change—especially at the state and local level.

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