Trigger Warnings: A Practical Guide

What is a trigger warning?
A trigger warning is a heads up. It’s a content warning that warns survivors of trauma before they see some material that could cause flashbacks, panic attacks, anxiety, dissociation, depression, or elicit other psychological responses - in other words, before they encounter content that could be "triggering.” By warning students of triggering content before it is presented, survivors are able to better prepare themselves to engage with challenging material.

Trigger warnings are our opportunity as a community of care to step up and make our classrooms safer for everyone, especially our classmates who are survivors.

Do I need to use trigger warnings?
The vast majority of classes taught at American University encompass content that would never need to have trigger warnings. Before deciding if you need to trigger warn, take a look at the content of your course. This will help you to determine what content, if any, could potentially be triggering to survivors.

Examples of topics that trigger warnings are encouraged include but are not limited to: combat violence, self-harm, sexual violence, suicide, and relationship violence.

How do I use trigger warnings?
If trigger warnings are necessary for the content of your course, there are many ways to issue a trigger warning. Here are some suggestions of ways to issue trigger warnings in the classroom.

1. On the first day of the semester, pass out a notecard or worksheet where students can disclose any triggers they have
2. Issue a verbal warning before beginning conversations about triggering topics
3. Place trigger warnings directly on your syllabi near content that will be triggering
4. Be conscious of the intersections between certain triggers and adapt accordingly

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The American University Student Government represents the needs and collective voice of over 6,000 undergraduates. Our mission is to advocate for policies that will tangibly benefit students, offer top-notch programs and lasting traditions, provide services and resources to students, and work with clubs and student leaders to establish a positive cohesion between our groups.