

JANUARY 2017

**TRIGGER
WARNINGS**

**ANWAR
ODURO-KWARTENG**



DEBATING MATTERS
TOPIC
GUIDES

www.debatingmatters.com

MOTION:

**“TRIGGER WARNINGS
STIFLE DEBATE”**

ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

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KEY TERMS

[Post Traumatic Stress Disorder \(PTSD\)](#)

[Safe space](#)

[Trigger warning](#)

INTRODUCTION

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In the summer of 2016, The University of Chicago created headlines when it sent a letter to all incoming students [Ref: [Intellectual takeout](#)] stating that, “we expect members of our community to be engaged in rigorous debate, discussion and even disagreement...Our commitment to academic freedom means that we do not support so called ‘trigger warnings.’” [Ref: [Intellectual takeout](#)] For some, this was seen as a welcome intervention in the debate surrounding the nature of trigger warnings, and their increasing prevalence on university campuses in America [Ref: [Guardian](#)], and more recently the UK [Ref: [Independent](#)]. Originally conceived of in online communities “primarily for the benefit of people with post-traumatic stress disorder” [Ref: [New York Times](#)], critics of trigger warnings argue that their use has become more and more symptomatic of an attempt, “driven largely by students, to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense.” [Ref: [Atlantic](#)] For supporters however, trigger warnings are merely a way of preparing students and readers for sensitive content that they may find offensive or upsetting for a variety of reasons [Ref: [New York Times](#)]. Trigger warnings, they insist, are not a means of shutting down and censoring debate about difficult subjects, but rather a more inclusive, sympathetic way of engaging everyone in the themes [Ref: [New Republic](#)]. So how should we judge trigger warnings? Do they set a dangerous precedent by attempting to, “quarantine the uncomfortable and dark dimensions of the human experience” [Ref: [spiked](#)], thus closing down open debate and discussion? Or are they a benign tool which helps, rather than hinders our ability to confront difficult and upsetting subjects, whilst taking into account the breadth of feelings and experiences that people have?



What are trigger warnings?

The notion of triggering is grounded in clinical psychology, and dates back as far as 1918, when psychologists attempted to understand the ‘war neurosis’, later understood as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) [Ref: [Oxford Dictionary](#)] that veterans of the First World War often suffered [Ref: [BuzzFeed](#)]. More recently ‘triggering’ has been used to describe themes, words or subjects which may cause people anxiety, distress or upset, and trigger warnings have slowly become part of contemporary discourse. Simply put: “A trigger warning (or content note) alerts readers or viewers to violent and disturbing content, which could be sexual assault, racist violence, transphobic or homophobic slurs.” [Ref: [Guardian](#)] Controversially, some of the most revered works of the literary canon have come under the spotlight, with books such as *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, and Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* all being put forward as works which should contain trigger warnings due to their content and themes [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Students from Columbia University in America for example, have argued that texts such as Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* can be triggering for students who are victims of sexual violence, and state that: “These texts, wrought with histories and narratives of exclusion and oppression, can be difficult to read and discuss as a survivor, a person of colour, or a student from a low income background.” [Ref: [Columbia Spectator](#)] Unsurprisingly, opinion regarding trigger warnings is polarised, with supporters and critics clashing over whether they help or hinder our ability to fully engage with potentially uncomfortable ideas, themes or imagery.

Coddling young minds, stifling debate?

For some critics, trigger warnings symbolise the gradual and pernicious trend of infantilising students, with sociologist Frank Furedi arguing that: “The premise of the trigger warning crusade is that students cannot be trusted to engage with uncomfortable subjects.” [Ref: [spiked](#)] This is seen as problematic by opponents, because university should be, “a space where the student is challenged and sometimes frustrated, and sometimes deeply upset, a place where a student’s world expands and pushes them to reach the outer edges – not a place that contracts to meet the student exactly where they are.” [Ref: [Guardian](#)] Similarly, whilst having sympathy for potentially vulnerable students, for whom some themes may trigger painful memories, writer Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett worries that the current climate has created a situation where trigger warnings have, “become shorthand for ‘anything I don’t like’”, ultimately epitomising, “an increasingly nanny approach to language that is being used to shut down discourse and to silence.” [Ref: [New Statesman](#)] Another area of concern for critics, is that trigger warnings presume that we are fragile and need protecting from certain words, themes or ideas – playing into the wider discourse regarding our sensitivity about giving offense [Ref: [New Republic](#)]. Likewise, Jennie Jarvie notes that it is wrong to associate certain words or ideas with trauma, violence or harm, as it “promotes a rigid, overly deterministic approach to language”, and notes that, “words can inspire intense reactions, but they have no intrinsic danger.” [Ref: [New Republic](#)] She goes on to conclude that ultimately, trigger warnings stifle debate, because: “Engaging with ideas involves risk, and slapping warnings on them only undermines the principle of intellectual exploration.” [Ref: [New Republic](#)]



THE TRIGGER WARNINGS DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

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Furthermore, one University of Chicago professor observes that such an environment is unhealthy for the open exchange of ideas, because, “anybody can claim offense or triggering about anything: liberals about conservative politics, pacifists against violence, women against sexism, minorities against bigotry, Jews against anti-Semitism, Muslims against any mention of Israel, creationists against evolution, religionists against atheism, and so on.” [Ref: [New Republic](#)]

Do we need trigger warnings?

From a practical point of view, supporters maintain that trigger warnings acknowledge the psychological trauma that some have suffered in their lives, and can help alleviate the distress that they may feel if painful memories are triggered by certain themes [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)]. Like a note before a film or television programme warning viewers about the content, trigger warnings do no harm, with advocates pointing out that: “The cost to students who don’t need trigger warnings, is...minimal.” [Ref: [New York Times](#)] Moreover, “It’s hardly anti-intellectual or emotionally damaging to anticipate that other people may react to traumatic material with negative emotions, particularly if they suffer from PTSD”, argues English professor Aaron R. Hanlon - “its human to engage others with empathy.” [Ref: [New Republic](#)] And for supporters, the empathy that trigger warnings exhibit towards potentially vulnerable students, is key in creating the conditions for allowing everyone to participate in difficult discussions. The broader debate is intrinsically linked to the contentious idea of ‘safe spaces’ [Ref: [Oxford Dictionary](#)] – which many argue are meant to make us feel comfortable and at ease, and free to engage in discussion without anxiety or harassment.

As such, advocates reject the assertion made by critics that trigger warnings stifle debate, and instead claim that: “Students, as well as teachers see trigger warnings as a way of opening up discussion, rather than closing it down” [Ref: The [Conversation](#)], because they “allow those who are sensitive to these subjects to prepare themselves for reading about them, and better manage their reactions.” [Ref: [New York Times](#)] Others note that they are key for integrating vulnerable groups that are often marginalised, such as ethnic minorities and women, into wider debates around contentious themes or words that they may find difficult to engage with [Ref: [Columbia Spectator](#)]. In this way: “A trigger warning doesn’t have to be an act of censorship or a straightjacketing of interpretation; it can be a starting point for a [wide] ranging discussion that ultimately challenges students’ points of view.” [Ref: [New Republic](#)] With these arguments in mind; do trigger warnings stifle debate, or do they empower students to engage with difficult subjects?



ESSENTIAL READING

[University of Chicago letter to incoming 2016 students](#)

Intellectual takeout 2016

[Trigger warnings: what do they do?](#)

BBC News 24 February 2014

FOR

[Trigger warnings are educational suicide](#)

Frank Furedi *spiked* 29 June 2015

[Life is triggering. The best literature should be too](#)

Jerry A. Coyne *New Republic* 14 May 2015

[We've gone too far with trigger warnings](#)

Jill Filipovic *Guardian* 5 March 2014

[Trigger happy](#)

Jenny Jarvie *New Republic* 4 March 2014

AGAINST

[A quick lesson on what trigger warnings actually do](#)

Lindsay Holmes *Huffington Post* 26 August 2016

[Why I use trigger warnings](#)

Kate Mann *New York Times* 19 September 2015

[My students need trigger warnings, and professors do too](#)

Aaron R. Hanlon *New Republic* 18 May 2015

[Trigger warnings: what they're really about](#)

Laurie Penny *New Statesman* 21 May 2014

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IN DEPTH

[The trapdoor of trigger words](#)

Katy Waldman *Slate* 5 September 2016

[The big uneasy](#)

Nathan Heller *New Yorker* 30 May 2016

[The coddling of the American mind](#)

Greg Lukianoff & Jonathan Haidt *Atlantic* September 2015



BACKGROUNDERS

[In praise of trigger warnings](#)

Ika Willis *The Conversation* 9 October 2016

[Trigger warnings about war graves do not mollycoddle archaeology students, they are essential](#)

Tony Pollard *The Conversation* 30 September 2016

[Trigger warnings, safe spaces, and free speech, too](#)

Sophie Downes *New York Times* 10 September 2016

[University of Chicago triggers a fresh debate about free speech on campus](#)

Economist 30 August 2016

[How trigger warnings silence religious students](#)

Alan Levinovitz *Atlantic* 30 August 2016

[Chicago's anti-safe spaces letter isn't about academic freedom. It's about power](#)

Kevin Gannon *Vox* 26 August 2016

[I use trigger warnings – but I'm not mollycoddling my students](#)

Onni Gust *Guardian* 14 June 2016

[Stephen Fry pointed out something important: trigger warnings are oppressive too](#)

Hannah Fearn *Independent* 13 April 2016

[The trigger warning myth](#)

Aaron R. Hanlon *New Republic* 14 August 2015

[Our identities matter in core classrooms](#)

Kai Johnson, Tanika Lynch, Elizabeth Monroe & Tracey Wang
Columbia Spectator 30 April 2015

[Trigger warnings: more harm than good?](#)

Florence Waters *Telegraph* 4 October 2014

[Trigger warnings: a gun to the head of literature](#)

Tiffany Jenkins *spiked* 22 May 2014

[What's really important about trigger warnings](#)

Soraya Chemaly *Huffington Post* 20 May 2014

[How the trigger warning took over the internet](#)

Ali Vingiano *BuzzFeed* 5 May 2014

[Trigger warnings needed in classroom](#)

Philip Wythe *Daily Targum* 18 February 2014

[Why I don't agree with trigger warnings](#)

Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett *New Statesman* 29 January 2013

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AUDIO/VISUAL

[Victim Culture](#)

Moral Maze *BBC Radio 4* 20 June 2015



IN THE NEWS

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[Crucifixion may be too distressing, theology students warned](#)

Telegraph 5 January 2017

[Bible students are warned...you may find the crucifixion too upsetting](#)

Daily Mail 4 January 2017

[UK universities issue trigger warnings to warn students of potentially upsetting material](#)

Independent 9 October 2016

[University of Chicago rejects safe spaces and trigger warnings in letter to students](#)

Telegraph 26 August 2016

[University of Chicago tells freshmen it does support trigger warnings or safe spaces](#)

Chicago Tribune 25 August 2016

[Oxford University law students being issued with trigger warnings before lectures](#)

Independent 10 May 2016

[Duke University students refuse to read Fun Home over gay themes and nudity](#)

Huffington Post 25 August 2015

[US students request trigger warnings on literature](#)

Guardian 19 May 2014

[Warning: the literary canon could make students squirm](#)

New York Times 17 May 2014



TRIGGER WARNINGS:
"Trigger warnings stifle debate"



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DEBATING MATTERS
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ADVICE FOR DEBATING MATTERS



FOR STUDENTS

READ EVERYTHING

In the Topic Guide and in the news - not just your side of the argument either.

STATISTICS ARE GOOD BUT.....

Your opponents will have their own too. They'll support your points but they aren't a substitute for them.

BE BOLD

Get straight to the point but don't rush into things: make sure you aren't falling back on earlier assertions because interpreting a debate too narrowly might show a lack of understanding or confidence.

DON'T BACK DOWN

Try to take your case to its logical conclusion before trying to seem 'balanced' - your ability to challenge fundamental principles will be rewarded - even if you personally disagree with your arguments.

DON'T PANIC

Never assume you've lost because every question is an opportunity to explain what you know. Don't try to answer every question but don't avoid the tough ones either.

FOR TEACHERS

Hoping to start a debating club? Looking for ways to give your debaters more experience? Debating Matters have a wide range of resources to help develop a culture of debate in your school and many more Topic Guides like this one to bring out the best in your students. For these and details of how to enter a team for the Debating Matters Competition visit our website, www.debatingmatters.com

FOR JUDGES

Judges are asked to consider whether students have been brave enough to address the difficult questions asked of them. Clever semantics might demonstrate an acrobatic mind but are also likely to hinder a serious discussion by changing the terms and parameters of the debate itself.

Whilst a team might demonstrate considerable knowledge and familiarity with the topic, evading difficult issues and failing to address the main substance of the debate misses the point of the competition. Judges are therefore encouraged to consider how far students have gone in defending their side of the motion, to what extent students have taken up the more challenging parts of the debate and how far the teams were able to respond to and challenge their opponents.

As one judge remarked *'These are not debates won simply by the rather technical rules of schools competitive debating. The challenge is to dig in to the real issues.'* This assessment seems to grasp the point and is worth bearing in mind when sitting on a judging panel.



**“A COMPLEX
WORLD REQUIRES
THE CAPACITY
TO MARSHALL
CHALLENGING IDEAS
AND ARGUMENTS”**

**LORD BOATENG, FORMER BRITISH HIGH
COMMISSIONER TO SOUTH AFRICA**