

## SHOULD COLLEGES ADOPT TRIGGER WARNINGS?

### BRIANNE RICHSON

Brianne Richson was born in 1992 in Wisconsin and as a teenager moved to New Jersey and attended Summit High School. Richson returned to the Midwest to study English, journalism, and psychology at the University of Iowa, where she also competed on the swim team and wrote a regular opinion column for the *Daily Iowan*. She graduated in 2015 and plans to pursue a PhD in clinical psychology.

### An Obligation to Prevent Trauma on Campus

"An Obligation to Prevent Trauma on Campus" (editors' title) first appeared, in slightly different form, in Richson's column for the *Daily Iowan*, the student newspaper of the University of Iowa. Showing empathy toward classmates who may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Richson urges her readers to support the inclusion of "trigger warnings," or advance notices of potentially upsetting material, in all class syllabi.

In the essay following this one, "Beware the Trigger Warning," fellow University of Iowa student Jon Overton shares Richson's concerns for trauma victims but argues against adopting trigger warnings on campus.

We all have that one memory that we'd prefer people not bring up because we want to block it from our consciousness forever. Hopefully, such memories become more vague as we grow further removed from them with time, but what about a memory that has legitimately traumatized a person? A memory that has even made its holder a victim of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)?<sup>1</sup>

Students at colleges across the country are taking a term originating from the world of blogs, "trigger warning," and calling for its direct use on class syllabi, to alert them to potential adverse reactions to sensitive academic material. This might include anything from sexual assault — a prominent issue on college campuses — to eating disorders, violent graphic content, or topics of race. The list goes on.<sup>2</sup>

One might consider such measures as dramatic and symptomatic of what I have often heard my father refer to as the "every kid gets a trophy" generation: a generation full of coddling and cushioning when things go wrong. It isn't fair, however, to compare modern parents' affinity for sheltering their children from failure with the generation's demand to be protected from reliving that which was traumatic.<sup>3</sup>

Is it too much to ask that a rape survivor be forewarned when a professor is about to cover material on the topic or to ask that a person who was confronted with a racial slur and beaten up be allowed to leave the lecture hall before course material sends her or him into a tizzy of hypervigilance, a hallmark characteristic of PTSD?

A great difficulty that goes along with PTSD is that it can surface at any given time following a traumatic event — in weeks or years. It is one thing to be aware of what sensory elements could trigger an episode for you, but it is another to have the ability to actively avoid these potentially toxic situations.

University of California–Santa Barbara has passed a resolution that professors should indicate in syllabi when emotionally or physically stressful material would be presented in class, prompting a *Los Angeles Times* editorial to stamp the measure as “antithetical to college life.” The same editorial suggests that trigger warnings are a cop-out for students not wishing to engage with a diverse set of subject material or to face traditionally uncomfortable issues head-on.

Victims of PTSD do not have more to learn about the academic subject matter that is traumatic for them; they have lived it. Not everyone has the luxury of dealing with issues upfront and immediately after a trauma. And no one has the right to force you to do so. In Ohio, Oberlin College has gone so far as to suggest that trigger material should not even be included in a course if it is not clear how the students might learn from the material.

Such measures certainly have a potential to be taken too far, but our obligation to prevent a trauma survivor’s class time becoming a living hell outweighs concerns about a stunted learning environment.

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### Journal Writing

As a student yourself, you’ve probably had at least one experience with the sort of uncomfortable course materials Richson describes, whether as the person upset or as a witness to someone else’s negative reaction. Do you agree with Richson that students should be “forewarned” of such materials so they can avoid them, or do you think it’s more beneficial to confront disturbing materials directly? Or are your feelings mixed? In your journal, explore your thoughts on the inclusion of “traumatizing” subject matters in a college education.

### Questions on Meaning

1. What is Richson’s PURPOSE for writing? What problem does she identify, and what solution does she propose?
2. What is a “trigger warning,” as Richson explains it? Where did the practice originate?

2. Do some research on another issue related to free speech on campus. For example: Should schools adopt codes banning speech that might offend any group based on race, gender, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation? Should administrators have control over what students publish in school newspapers? What is the proposed Academic Bill of Rights, and how would its enactment affect the exchange of ideas on campus? Write an essay in which you give background information on the issue and support your own view in a well-reasoned argument.
3. **CRITICAL WRITING** Find the original version of Richson's *Daily Iowan* column online and compare it to the version we present here (titled "Colleges Should Adopt Trigger Warnings," it was first published on May 6, 2014). What REVISION and EDITING strategies did Richson use to improve her essay? What additional changes might you suggest?
4. **CONNECTIONS** In the next essay Jon Overton writes about what he sees as the problem with trigger warnings. Write an essay in which you COMPARE AND CONTRAST the ways Richson and Overton present their cases. Which argument do you find more effective? Why?

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### Brianne Richson on Writing

As a recent graduate, Brianne Richson tells us that she enjoyed having "the privilege of studying creative nonfiction, the punchy world of journalism, and the research-driven writing of clinical psychology" while in school. In this reflection on her own writing process, written especially for *The Bedford Reader*, Richson stresses the importance of having something to say and then saying it clearly, whatever the subject.

I find that my writing is most successful when I have a thorough handle on what it is exactly that I'm trying to get across. One thing most disciplines have in common is that no matter what, it is very important that each sentence drives home your point. This is not to say that I don't include contradictions or sentences in which I play the devil's advocate. However, if I am struggling with a particular piece, I will often write my thesis last, after reading what I have managed to flesh out. It is easy when drafting a thesis to write something that misses the mark of what you're trying to say, and it's a tricky position to write an entire piece feeling obligated to what you thought was your original stance. Saving the thesis sentence for later ensures that it encompasses your true, unencumbered thoughts.

When I write, I try to think about my thesis (or what it might ultimately be) and also about my audience, but I have spent a lot of time caught up in trying to impress readers with fancy words or experimental prose.

3. What is the **THESIS** of Richson's argument? Where is this thesis stated most clearly?
4. Richson mentions, in paragraph 7, that "Oberlin College has gone so far as to suggest that trigger material should not even be included in a course if it is not clear how the students might learn from the material." How does she seem to feel about this suggestion?

### Questions on Writing Strategy

1. "An Obligation to Prevent Trauma on Campus" was directed at a very specific **AUDIENCE**. Who were Richson's intended readers? What **ASSUMPTIONS** does she make about them?
2. Where and how does Richson address opposing points of view? Do her concessions seem adequate to you? Why, or why not?
3. Clearly Richson's argument relies on **EMOTIONAL APPEAL**, but it is nonetheless based on an implied **SYLLOGISM**. Tease out her major claim, minor claim, and conclusion, and express them in your own words. (For help, refer to pp. 485–86 on deductive reasoning.)
4. **OTHER METHODS** Discuss how Richson uses **EXAMPLES** to explain the experiences of people suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. Why do you suppose she highlights just a few potential reactions?

### Questions on Language

1. Find some **COLLOQUIAL EXPRESSIONS** in Richson's essay. What is the effect of such language? Does it strike you as appropriate for an academic argument?
2. Be sure you are familiar with the following words, checking a dictionary if necessary: traumatized (par. 1); adverse (2); coddling (3); forewarned, hypervigilance, hallmark (4); sensory, toxic (5); resolution (6).
3. Examine the language Richson uses to describe people who suffer from PTSD. Is it **OBJECTIVE**? sympathetic? negative?

### Suggestions for Writing

1. **FROM JOURNAL TO ESSAY** Working from your journal entry, write an essay that responds to Richson's argument, putting forth your own position on calls for trigger warnings in college syllabi. Under what circumstances (if any) is it acceptable, or even necessary, to study potentially traumatic subjects? Are some subjects more likely to trigger negative responses than others? Do the benefits of preventing discomfort indeed outweigh the drawbacks? Why do you think so? Like Richson, you may arrange your thoughts into an argument for or against using trigger warnings, or you may prefer to structure your essay as a personal **NARRATIVE** focused on your own experiences.

With experience, I have realized that the most authentic pieces say what they really mean and do not need the excess dressings to do so. I think that oftentimes writers like to fluff up their writing with strange words or unconventional style because saying what they are really trying to say can be scary, particularly in the context of nonfiction or opinion pieces. Nevertheless, it is your duty to your stance and to your readers to say what you mean.

### ***The Bedford Reader on Writing***

Richson's practice of putting off writing a THESIS STATEMENT until she has worked out her ideas is one that many writers find helpful, as we discuss on pages 35–36. For suggestions on how to "say what you mean" as directly as possible, refer to "Clear and Engaging Sentences" (pp. 49–50) and "Focus on Clarity and Conciseness" (pp. 394–95).