

## What are Content Warnings?

Content warnings (sometimes also referred to as content notes, or CNs) are verbal or written notices that precede potentially sensitive content. They indicate in advance any topics which people may find triggering or distressing and they give people the necessary information to decide whether they feel able to proceed in engaging with that content.

## When are Content Warnings used?

Content warnings play an important role in ensuring people feel safe and have the autonomy to protect themselves from discussion or portrayal of potentially harmful topics.


It's helpful to post content warnings alongside any material shared about a production – audition information, production team vacancies, poster designs, trailer drops, event descriptions etc. Anything that draws people's attention to your production/event should also draw their attention in advance to the topics that may be triggering or distressing to them.

It's important to be aware that content warnings are not intended to cordon off certain productions as “unwatchable” or to discourage engagement with them – they are a tool to allow everyone to engage with said production on an equal footing, should they choose to do so. By indicating that potentially distressing topics will arise in a production, people are enabled to take any necessary steps to ensure they are prepared to engage with the material safely and in a way that minimises psychological distress, either as part of the audience or as a member of the cast/production team.

## What makes Content Warnings different from Trigger Warnings?

Most dictionaries don't differentiate explicitly between content warnings and trigger warnings – in fact many dictionaries don't even have an entry for both terms, but it's good to understand why the two terms exist separately, even if they are often used interchangeably.

The key thing to pick up on is that, where the phrase ‘trigger warning’ is defined, it often includes specific reference to a traumatic psychological response to the topics presented. The concept of trigger warnings initially arose out of trauma triggers – psychological stimuli that prompt recall of a previous traumatic experience, particularly pertinent to those suffering from PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder).



The easiest way to interpret the two terms is perhaps to understand trigger warnings as a specific subset of content warnings, which aim to identify in advance content which may cause intense physiological and psychological symptoms for people with PTSD and other anxiety disorders.

That said, so as to avoid policing what ‘should’ and ‘should not’ be triggering for individuals, it can be preferable to group everything under one umbrella term and simply provide more detail where pertinent – this can be done by specifying how the topics that you are content warning are included in your production, e.g. depictions of [X], discussion about [X], brief reference to [X]. The more detail you are able to give in advance, the better equipped your audience can be to deal with potentially distressing topics.

### **What topics need Content Warnings?**

It’s important to have a clear idea of how the content of your media or production can affect others, so what kind of topics need content warnings is something which requires careful consideration. As a general rule of thumb, you should content warn anything mentioned within your production that you think could be potentially distressing to readers or audience members.

If you are ever in doubt about supplying a content warning, it is advisable to give one rather than not – at worst you are putting in a bit more time and effort to consider the content of your production, and at best you will be giving someone the autonomy to decide whether or not to engage with it.

The ADC provides a list of content warnings on the general information form for shows to flag up at the start of their production process, as well as on the initial application form for anyone applying with a show.

If your show includes any content warnings on either of these forms, you should include the same warnings on any social media posts relating to the show.



**Topics which require content warnings include but are not limited to:**

- sexual assault
- abuse (physical, mental, verbal, sexual)
- child abuse and/or paedophilia
- animal cruelty and/or death
- self-harm and/or other intentional self-injury
- suicide
- excessive or gratuitous violence
- needles
- depiction of pornography
- incest
- kidnapping (forceful deprivation of/disregard for personal autonomy)
- stalking
- death and/or dying
- pregnancy and/or childbirth
- miscarriages and/or abortion
- blood
- torture
- jump scare
- mental illness
- flashing images (i.e. a seizure warning)
- eating disorders, including depiction of disordered eating behaviour (e.g. vomiting) and diet culture
- any kind of discrimination and/or bigotry (racism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, ableism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia)
- drugs/alcohol/substance abuse
- police brutality
- white supremacy
- war

## How do I present content warnings?

When it comes to formatting content warnings, it is essential that they are as clear and as accessible as possible. Depending on where you look on the internet, there are a few variations on a basic theme for a standard content warning format, particularly when posting on social media:

1. Start with "Content Warning" or the abbreviation CW (content warning)
2. Follow this with a clear description of the topics you want to give content warnings for. This should be as clear and as specific as possible (e.g. if it's a type of discrimination, specify what sort) – there is a sweet spot between being detailed enough to give sufficient warning and being so descriptive that your CWs trigger a reaction by themselves.
3. As previously mentioned, it can also be useful to give an idea of how big a role the sensitive issue plays within your production or social media post. For example, 'brief mention', 'reference to', 'depictions of' etc.
4. All of this should come at the very beginning of the content you are providing the warning for – e.g. under your title, but before the main body of writing. It can be useful to put your warning in bold and enclose it in square brackets to make it stand out more.
5. You should indicate if the potentially triggering content is within an attachment to whatever you're posting (e.g. an audition pack or script extracts). If you do have a separate attachment, this should carry the same warnings as your original post, even if it has to be actively accessed through a distinct link.
6. Below your warning, a gap should be inserted within your post before the main body of writing, to enable people to scroll past your content if they would feel safer not engaging<sup>2</sup>. On a platform like Instagram, which relies on immediate visual content, content warnings should be posted to the first 'slide', so that viewers can choose not to scroll further if they would prefer not to engage.

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<sup>2</sup> On your website, have content warnings accessible through a separate link, so patrons are always able to choose to see them before they book tickets for the production.



For example:

[CW // brief mention of eating disorders, references to suicide]

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*This is where you would put your main body of text containing the topics you've referenced above.*

Please be aware that content warning is a hugely subjective practice – different things make different people feel unsafe. If someone reaches out with suggestions of additional warnings or asks you to include CWs where you previously had left them out, please be respectful of their suggestions amend your post appropriately.

**This guide was originally developed by the ADC Theatre in Cambridge, England (UK)**

## Sources and Further Reading

Some sources referenced in this guide and further reading on the topic of content warnings for anyone interested in learning more.

1. <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching/an-introduction-to-content-warnings-and-trigger-warnings/>
2. <https://medium.com/@UntoNuggan/trigger-warnings-101-a-beginners-guide-e9fc90c6ba0a>
3. <https://trigger-warning-guide.tumblr.com/>
4. [https://www.reddit.com/r/AskFeminists/comments/3qh5bl/why\\_trigger\\_warning\\_and\\_not\\_content\\_warning/cwf4exh/?sort=top](https://www.reddit.com/r/AskFeminists/comments/3qh5bl/why_trigger_warning_and_not_content_warning/cwf4exh/?sort=top)
5. <https://www.disabled.cusu.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Content-Notes-Guidance-for-Faculties-and-Departments.pdf>
6. <https://howlround.com/responsible-theatremaking#:~:text=Content%20warnings%20orient%20audiences%20to,possibly%20diminishing%20someone's%20theatrical%20experience.>
7. <https://www.flavorwire.com/520346/teaching-trigger-warnings-what-pundits-dont-understand-about-the-years-most-controversial-higher-ed-debate>
8. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-ouch-26295437>