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## (Dis) Content Warnings

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## **(Dis) Content Warnings**

### **Cover Page Footnote**

Alisha is a writer and an English teacher at Greely High School. She lives in Portland with her one lovely husband and two wonderful children.

## (Dis) Content Warnings

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Informally polling one of my eighth grade English classes on a Tuesday morning, I learned that many of my students watch crime, horror, or supernatural thrillers on Netflix, often binging when they have the time. The creepier and bloodier the better. At the beginning of our argument unit, I usually start with a series of mysteries for them to solve, copied from a book called *Crime and Puzzlement*, and most of the crimes involve murder, cheating spouses, robberies, and other indiscretions of the sort usually featured on those television crime dramas. I pair these short mysteries with a loose version of the argument technique outlined in George Hillock Jr.'s *Teaching Argument Writing*, which requires the students to very clearly list the evidence, explanation of evidence, and conclusions drawn. The goal is to foster logical thinking and bring them around to the idea that a good argument is carefully planned and includes specific and discrete pieces of evidence.

It's important to note that the characters and scenarios in the mysteries are cartoonish, campy, and altogether implausible, and the accompanying drawings (which are often part of the search for clues) are at times deliberately crude or farcical. No one imagines that these are real crimes or real victims. One popular story, *Slip or Trip*, features Queenie Volupides, who, "at five-feet-six and a hundred and ten pounds . . . was a sight to behold and to clasp. When she tore out of the house after a tiff with her husband . . ." a scandal ensued. Commonly, students conclude that she hit her husband over the head with the frying pan, causing his death, only

then to use the pretense of cooking snacks for her arriving guests on the very same pan, in order to burn off the evidence. That it was one AM, and the guests were probably drunk, or at the very least too tired to eat hors d'oeuvres, is beside the point. My students enjoy exploring these cases, proving their points, and they learn something about organizing and presenting an argument.

This year I was an informal mentor to a new English teacher, providing him with lesson ideas and materials on a weekly basis. He is an articulate, earnest, and gentle man, coping with all the challenges of a first-year teacher, and all the freedom (or dare I say baggage) that comes along with growing up in an educational atmosphere that is attuned to the emotional health of students<sup>1</sup>, at least far more than it was when I began my career twenty-five years ago. We met in the parking lot one afternoon, leaving school, and he mentioned his concern about one of the mysteries I'd chosen. It features a ninety-year-old piano maestro who was presumably murdered by his son, and the question at hand was how to prove that it wasn't suicide<sup>2</sup>. The drawing was especially scribbly and indecipherable, but there was a body hanging from a chandelier, roughly sketched. My colleague was deeply troubled about introducing this particular mystery. He had lost a friend to suicide, and he said that he was himself triggered by reading the piece. Following his disclosure, I felt jolted because one of my students had suffered a loss due to suicide last summer, and it hadn't even remotely occurred to me that this

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<sup>1</sup> "There's a lot of ugly things in this world, son. I wish I could keep 'em all away from you. That's never possible." *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee

<sup>2</sup> "The young man had killed himself; but she did not pity him; with the clock striking the hour, one, two, three, she did not pity him, with all this going on . . . The whole house was dark now with this going on, she repeated, and the words came to her, Fear no more the heat of the sun ... She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away. The clock was striking. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun. But she must go back. She must assemble." *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf

mystery was inappropriate. I'd been using it for years, and never had anyone complained or seemed disturbed. I chose to find a different mystery to use this year, and I was grateful and humbled by his intervention.

Even the use of the word *trigger* seems crass at this point, not least because it immediately invokes the image of a firearm. I am sodden with grief and disgust at our country's gun control problem, one that has us literally being trained to run in zigs and zags across our schoolyard because avoiding the bullets is now the only recourse, school shootings now as ordinary as exams and prom season. But my conversation with this new colleague had me questioning my approach to potentially traumatizing material. What does it mean to teach material that might be painful to a student? In the mystery about Queenie, were we trivializing or mocking domestic violence? It is impossible to know what might potentially cause distress. I have a visceral and painful reaction to *Of Mice and Men*, for example, because I envision my own son, who has multiple disabilities, every time I read Lennie's lines of dialogue. One student of color confessed to me that although the only black character in the book is portrayed as genuine and even philosophical, the frequent use of racial slurs and the man's status as a victim made the book painful for him.<sup>3</sup> On another plane entirely, I endured a stillbirth 16 years ago, and for years afterwards felt panicky and/or tearful around pregnant women and babies. But I

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<sup>3</sup> She turned on him in scorn. "Listen, n\*\*\*\*," she said. "You know what I can do to you if you open your trap?" Crooks stared helplessly at her, and then he sat down on his bunk and drew into himself. She closed on him. "You know what I could do?" Crooks seemed to grow smaller, and he pressed himself against the wall. "Yes, ma'am." "Well, you keep your place then, n\*\*\*\*. I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny." Crooks had reduced himself to nothing. There was no personality, no ego--nothing to arouse either like or dislike. He said, "Yes, ma'am," and his voice was toneless.

still had to live in the world, and I couldn't avoid certain encounters unless I completely disengaged from society.

When it comes to history, that feels like a safer area, even if the violence is rampant. I've taught Elie Wiesel's *Night*, his seminal memoir of his hell in a concentration camp, for twenty years. We always begin with at least three weeks of background, covering the stages of genocide, the history of antisemitism, and reminding students that although unique in several crucial ways, the Holocaust was only one of many humanity-shattering genocides in the history of the world. I alert parents beforehand and invite them to read along, and I've never shown graphic images gratuitously, though I do offer clips of the liberation of Auschwitz. Until they see the truth, they can't read Wiesel's words with fidelity. Here, the overt content warning is a necessity, but it feels more protected because the book is a memoir, a historical artifact. This is notwithstanding the fallibility of memory and the acknowledgement that memoir by its nature has fictions threaded throughout, whether or not the author intended to fabricate anything. I haven't had any complaints from students in all the years we've learned together about the Holocaust, but that doesn't mean they weren't traumatized by the lessons. We are all mortified, collectively.<sup>4</sup>

I started reading some studies about the benefits and detriments of content warnings on college campuses and, not surprisingly, it's a mixed bag. Several studies revealed that certain warnings prompted so much curiosity that students were more compelled to choose to read a piece of writing that promised to be provocative or even disturbing. This was compared

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<sup>4</sup> "Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever." *Night*, Elie Wiesel

to the “parental advisory label” on record albums (or, these days, on Spotify and other streaming platforms); the kids, apparently, gravitated to the music not because of the grime beat or the spectacular vocals, but because their parents wouldn’t approve. A Harvard psychology student and his professor discovered that in some cases, the warning itself generated the anxiety. “Among people who said they believe that words can cause harm, those who received trigger warnings reported greater anxiety in response to disturbing literary passages than those who did not” ([What if Trigger Warnings Don’t Work](#), New Yorker). The same article went on to discuss the problem of creating an identity around one’s trauma, or identifying so closely with a past - albeit traumatic - experience that it eclipses all other aspects of the self. Everything I read emphasized that some students have diagnoses of PTSD or other mental health struggles, and for those students, alerting them ahead of time is a given.

Already, educators are often expected to individualize and personalize a classroom experience for each student. Each year, our team of four teachers creates a spreadsheet detailing every accommodation, RTI need, modification, and other relevant information about every one of our eighty-some students. I consult this document regularly, but that doesn’t mean I have it memorized. I can’t commit to remembering every aspect of every student’s journey, even experiences that are significant. When I choose a text to use in the classroom, I can very easily alert my students that it contains language or content that might be disturbing to some. But I’m not convinced that explicitly calling attention to a potential reaction is productive or effective at all. It’s hard not to veer into the absurd when considering all the topics that could elicit strong emotion. A quick Google search yielded [a list from the University of Reading](#), in England, which contains 24 “possible themes that require trigger warnings,”

including, oddly, the theme of “blood.”<sup>5</sup> They add at the bottom of the page: “this is not an exhaustive list.” No kidding.

I’m certainly not looking for excuses to teach overtly upsetting material, but we can’t deny that, because literature aims to capture the human experience, we’re bound to find pain and trauma in much of what we read. Lauren Porosoff and Adam Wolfsdorf have a series of suggestions in their 2021 blog post, [Coping in the Classroom: Reconsidering the Trigger Warning](#). Perhaps we can teach students how to cope with the inevitable, which is to say that we can offer concrete suggestions for how to respond. “As teachers, we can tell our students, early and often, that if they need a break, they have the agency to take one. We can also model taking those breaks: If we experience difficult emotions while reading a passage or discussing an event, we can say something like: *This is a lot for me. I just need a minute.* We might close our eyes, put our heads down, or take a few deep breaths to show our students that it’s normal and healthy to take care of ourselves. We can also lead discussions on strategies for disengaging when we feel overwhelmed.” This feels promising and manageable, and rather than dismiss outright the students’ resilience and tolerance level for discomfort, it humanizes our reactions. How powerful are words on a page that, much like a familiar smell, they can transport us into a remembered experience? And what more power can we give to our students than the permission to acknowledge and manage fear and pain, as central as these are to life and, hence, to literature?

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<sup>5</sup> “As we burst into the room, the Count turned his face, and the hellish look that I had heard described seemed to leap into it. His eyes flamed red with devilish passion; the great nostrils of the white aquiline nose opened wide and quivered at the edge; and the white sharp teeth, behind the full lips of the blood-dripping mouth, champed together like those of a wild beast.” *Dracula*, Bram Stoker.



I'd like to propose another strategy that doesn't require quite as much mind-reading or prognostication, and that credits middle and high school students with the strength and courage to explore difficult topics. What if the very act of writing can be used as a positive intervention? When we ask students to write, we are asking them to combine a physical act (whether tapping on the keyboard or gripping a writing utensil) an academic exercise (do my words even make sense?), and an emotional unburdening (how did I feel, what do I know, what can I learn?). Writing to unpack the impact of an upsetting topic might get to the core goal of content warnings. Those who did not feel emotionally vulnerable can simply report or analyze, but those students who are struggling to process can benefit from the time to sit quietly with their own thoughts and try to sort them out onto the page. Teachers, too, can respond with empathy, share their own reactions, and even refer the students to a counselor if it seems warranted. I haven't quite figured out what form this written "safety net" could take. It could be a five-minute writing check in with a prompt, a simple Google form with questions, or a quick write followed by a classroom conversation. My hope is that instead of expecting students to be fragile and fall apart, we give them the opportunity to keep holding their pieces together. Haruki Murakami's *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* alludes to this throughout his memoir, which brilliantly illuminates the parallels between long-distance running and the writing process. "Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional. Say you're running and you think, 'Man, this hurts, I can't take it anymore. The 'hurt' part is an unavoidable reality, but whether or not you can stand anymore is up to the runner himself."

I'd like to help the students keep standing despite the weight of our world.