

Before and After: Statements about Course Content

It has become fairly common practice to include a statement in one's syllabus about possibly offensive material or language in one's course. Below is an annotated look at one example of such a statement and why and how it might be revised.

Before:

Course Content Disclaimer

In this course students may be required to read texts or view material that they may consider offensive. The ideas expressed in any given text do not necessarily reflect the views of the instructor, the department, or the University. Course materials are selected for their historical and/or cultural relevance, or as an example of stylistic and/or rhetorical strategies and techniques. They are meant to be examined in the context of intellectual inquiry of the sort encountered at the university level.

Comment [g1]: The word "disclaimer" shows there is no conversation to be had about the course content or how it may affect students. It also may be perceived as adversarial.

Comment [g2]: This phrase shows no room for assisting students as they encounter the possibly offensive material.

Comment [g3]: This statement makes it clear that some of the content may have been chosen precisely because it is offensive, but does not show that students have any agency in the way they wrestle with that content or its offensiveness.

After:

Statement on Course Content

The texts (books, articles, videos, and images) used in this class will cover a variety of topics from a wide range of viewpoints in order to enhance the process and experience of learning. Course materials are selected for their historical and/or cultural relevance, or as an example of stylistic and/or rhetorical strategies and techniques. They are meant to be examined in the context of open-minded, intellectual inquiry of the sort encountered at the university level.

Comment [g4]: The title is more neutral.

Despite painstaking work to be respectful of all viewpoints in the class, as a result of the broad scope of materials, students may be asked to interact with concepts that make them feel uncomfortable or offend them. This is certainly not my intention, but the impact of what happens in our course is very important to me. When this occurs, we have several ways to alleviate some of the discomfort or hurt you experience:

Comment [g5]: This introduction grounds the discussion of course texts in an educational purpose. The range of content and how students are expected to engage with it are separated from the fact that students might find something offensive.

Comment [g6]: This sentence shows some thoughtfulness behind the process of choosing course texts, with students' viewpoints in mind. It also adds the idea of discomfort which is different than offense, and can much more easily be a place of growth than can the position of offense.

Comment [g7]: Both intent and impact are acknowledged here and shown to be of differing importance.

Comment [g8]: The addition of several ways to address an incidence of discomfort or offense shows the agency the students have in the class. It builds community and shows awareness that not only could these situations arise, but also they are places for everyone to learn, including the instructor.

1. Discuss the situation privately with me. I am always open to listening about your experiences, and want to work with you to find an acceptable way through the issue.
2. Discuss the situation with the class. Chances are, there is at least one other person in the class who had a similar response to the material as you did. Discussion enhances the ability for us all to have a fuller understanding of context and impact of course material.
3. Notify me of the issue through another source such as your academic advisor, a trusted faculty member, or a friend. If for any reason you do not feel comfortable discussing the issue directly with me, I encourage you to seek out another avenue to address the issue to me.