

## University of Sussex Guidance on the use of Content Notes and content advice in teaching

The following guidance is for staff who would like to use content notes as a pedagogical tool to support their teaching and facilitate student engagement with sensitive topics. Subject to those circumstances relating to reasonable adjustments for disabled students, the use of content notes in teaching at Sussex is at the discretion of staff and is not compulsory. The autonomy of academics to make their own curriculum choices, as highly specialised experts in their field, is a fundamental aspect of higher education, and is constitutive of academic freedom.

### What?

It is good pedagogical practice to advise students in advance about course content and to this end we aim to publish relevant learning materials in advance of teaching on the virtual learning environment (currently Canvas). This enables staff to better frame materials and students to prepare for, and make the most of, their teaching and learning experiences.

Some topics will inevitably be more challenging or be experienced with greater intensity than others. In this context, a 'content note' is usually understood as verbal or written information that indicates potentially distressing or sensitive content. Content notes may be helpful if themes or content could have a negative impact on students or cause them to relive previous trauma. They are also sometimes referred to as trigger/content warnings. In the UoS context, 'content note' is the preferred term because it is more neutral and does not predict what may or may not be distressing or sensitive content for each student.

We recognise that there is a wealth of expertise on building supportive learning environments and teaching sensitive topics here at Sussex, and you may already use content notes or a similar method. This guidance is designed to offer basic principles on implementing content notes if you are considering using them in your teaching. It will inevitably be expanded and adapted in relation to specific departmental or course needs.

### Why?

Content advice is intended to facilitate students' engagement with all topics; content notes indicate topics that might be sensitive or difficult. They enable students to take responsibility for their learning and make informed choices about how they prepare for, and encounter, sensitive or difficult material. Content notes enable students who are materially or specifically affected by the issues at hand or have experienced trauma to take the necessary steps to engage with teaching and resources and seek support if necessary. Content notes may also constitute "reasonable adjustments" under the Equality Act 2010 for students with a disability such as a long-term mental health condition, linked to traumatic experiences. The duty to make reasonable adjustments is anticipatory, which means that the University should look to ensure that adjustments to policies, practices and procedures are made in advance to prevent disabled students experiencing substantial disadvantage.

Importantly, content notes are not designed to censor teaching material, avoid challenging students intellectually, or reduce student resilience. Content notes enable students to prepare themselves as needed to discuss difficult issues and facilitate students' engagement with sensitive material, especially those most impacted by the material being taught. The University recognises its legal obligations in relation to the right of all staff, students and visitors to exercise freedom of speech

and to hold opinions and to receive and impart information within the law. It also recognises the right of academic staff to have freedom within the law to (a) question and test received wisdom and (b) put forward new ideas including controversial or unpopular opinions without fear of being sanctioned for doing so. In support of these obligations, the intended purpose of content notes is to facilitate engagement with challenging content, rather than limit or suppress it. Moreover, the use of content notes is at the discretion of all staff and not obligatory.

## When and where?

The most important principle when providing advice about content is that students should have enough time to prepare before encountering the material or participating in discussions.

Where possible, broad advice about content can be incorporated in module teaching guides such as course handbooks and Canvas.

Particularly sensitive content should ideally be mentioned in module descriptions so that students can make informed choices.

Moreover, it is recommended that sensitive themes in particular readings, lectures and seminars or resources should be highlighted with a content note. Please use Canvas for reading list advice as reading lists can be accessed without a Sussex log-in.

In addition, you may wish to email students in advance of teaching sessions with guidance about upcoming content, how to prepare and highlight discussion topics or material with content notes.

## Composing content notes on sensitive topics

Content notes can be an important teaching tool. They can be used to open discussions with students about inclusive learning environments and respectful participation. You may wish to discuss your use of content notes at the beginning of and throughout the course. You could mention:

- a. How and when you will use content notes
- b. How you will expect students to engage in discussions
- c. What a student can do if they feel uncomfortable engaging with some class material  
Staff can direct students to the following support and may wish to include department/school specific resources, too:

[Student Centre : University of Sussex](#)

[Health, support and wellbeing : University of Sussex](#)

[Therapeutic Services \(sussex.ac.uk\)](https://www.sussex.ac.uk/therapeutic-services)

[Report + Support - University of Sussex](#)

The language, format and frequency of content notes will necessarily need to be adjusted to suit the needs and context of each course. Whenever composing content notes, however, you should be specific about the sensitive themes that will be covered, and how and when they will be discussed or presented, to enable students to take any action that they consider appropriate in advance of the teaching. This might include students contacting the tutor in confidence about any concerns, looking at possible alternative readings or texts that meet the same outcomes, alternative assessment methods, or other modes of engagement with the material (e.g., being situated at home as opposed to in person attendance in class, or reading a transcript rather than watching a video).

It is impossible to know for certain, in advance, exactly what any individual might find difficult or distressing; encouraging a teaching and learning culture where these concerns can be discussed is an

important outcome. However, in assessing what may be potentially distressing, there are structural inequalities, social patterns of violence and exposure to trauma that might potentially be anticipated. The (non-exhaustive) list below contains potential themes that might be relevant:

- Sexual assault/abuse
- Abuse (physical and emotional)
- Child abuse, including paedophilia
- Incest
- Racism and racial slurs
- Antisemitism
- Islamophobia
- Sexism and misogyny
- Hate speech towards religious groups (for example, antisemitism, Islamophobia)
- Transphobia
- Homophobia/heterosexism/biphobia
- Animal cruelty/death
- Self-harm
- Death (violence/murder/suicide) and bereavement
- Injustice
- Violence; state violence; police violence
- Eating disorders
- Body image
- Pornographic content
- Kidnapping/abduction
- Pregnancy and childbirth
- Miscarriages
- Abortion
- Mental illness
- Ableism
- Warfare
- Slavery and modern slavery
- Explicit images
- Substance abuse/addiction

### Further guidance

For the avoidance of doubt, nothing in this guidance should be taken to justify sanctioning academic staff for questioning or testing received wisdom or putting forward new ideas including controversial or unpopular opinions within the law, nor should this guidance be taken to justify disproportionate restrictions on freedom of speech. Any person concerned that their rights of [academic freedom or freedom of speech](#) have been unjustifiably restricted may lodge a complaint via the following routes:

- [Report & Support](#)
- [The Dignity & Respect Champions](#)
- [Grievance Procedure \(for staff\)](#)
- [Grievance procedure \(for students\)](#)