Book Event Safety Checklist

Are you planning a book event and worried about safety? This checklist contains tips for those organizing book events to consider as part of their safety planning.
Below are steps you can take to:

- Talk about safety early.
- Make a safety plan.
- Promote your event strategically.
- Consider how you organize your physical space.
- Support safe travel.
- Assess threats.
- Navigate potential hecklers.
- Debrief and take care.
- Additional resources.

✅ Talk about safety early.

Authors/Event Speakers: Check out our Book Events Safety Checklist for Authors. Be prepared to share any safety questions or concerns with bookstores, libraries, or other event organizers as early as possible, as well as with your publishing team if you have one.

Bookstores/Event Hosts: Be prepared to share your safety practices and contingency plans with other event organizers, bookstore managers or owners, speakers, and potentially your audience, too. Feel free to contact abfe[at]bookweb.org with questions.

➔ Check in with yourself and your event team (if relevant).
- ◆ Discuss the safety concerns of all those who are involved in organizing an event—safety can include physical, psychological, legal, and digital components.
- ◆ What are the possible risks to your event? How likely are these things to happen?
- ◆ How many people are you comfortable hosting at the event?
- ◆ What is the minimum number of staff needed to keep the event safe and organized?
- ◆ Do you need to bring in additional security or community support?
- ◆ What is your red line for canceling the event?

➔ Gather your support system.
- ◆ Collaborate with local allies (people, groups, organizations) with relevant experience (for eg, navigating risk at events), a de-escalation mindset, and whom you've worked with before.
- ◆ If hiring outside security, make sure you contract someone who is value-aligned and will mesh well with your community. (Best to vet them ahead of time!)

✅ Make a safety plan.

> *Planning doesn't need to be a 60-page document. Planning can be as simple as, 'if someone grabs the mic and starts using slurs, we'll cut it' or 'if someone starts heckling me, there's a room I can step away to' and knowing what your own boundaries are and, if they are crossed, what you can do.* - Yemile Bucay

➔ Brainstorm how to mitigate risks.

- ◆ Based on the risks and concerns you identified above, what can you and your team do to proactively prepare?
- ➔ Choose an event format that is compatible with your safety concerns. For instance, if you anticipate heckling at an event, you may choose a format that limits audience interaction, like removing the audience Q&A from a moderated discussion, or asking for the audience to submit questions via notecards, or opting for a signing line instead of a discussion.
- ➔ Make a clear plan for WHO will do WHAT and WHEN.
  - ◆ Assign roles.
    - ● Be clear about what role each person is playing in event safety. For instance: Who will handle social media, calls, or emails? Who will help to de-escalate the conflict? Who will check in with speakers?
    - ● Have a plan for audience management.
    - ● Consider the identities, strengths, and interests of each person when giving them a role that relates to event safety.
    - ● Find opportunities to practice (for instance: rehearse responding to hecklers, test technology ahead of time). Train and support staff in their roles.
  - ◆ Incorporate contingency plans into your event planning process. For eg, if something happens, who will take action?
  - ◆ Decide if you need to hire additional event staff or security.
    - ● These guides from [Eventbrite](#) and [Belfry](#) discuss how to hire security.
    - ● This website collects community-based [alternatives](#) to police in various cities.
    - ● Don't be afraid to ask publishers for help defraying costs.
  - ◆ Have a clear plan for bomb threats and other threats of violence.
    - ● See the US Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) [Bomb Threat Checklist](#)
    - ● If you're concerned about swatting, check out [this guide from TallPoppy](#).
    - ● Make sure event staff and volunteers know where to find the bomb threat checklist and are familiar with it ahead of time
- ➔ Create clear communication and check-in systems for everyone involved.
  - ◆ Train staff to monitor for potential disruption and establish a protocol for reporting possible disruptions to a decision-maker (like a store or library manager).
- ➔ Do a walk through with event speaker(s) when they arrive at the venue. Let the speaker know where exits are, what the best path is to the private space/green room, and who they can turn to if the event is disrupted. Ask if they have concerns and hear them out.
- ➔ Check out:
  - ◆ American Booksellers Association: Planning a [secure drag](#) storytime event
  - ◆ Democracy Security Project: Safety & security [checklist](#)

✅ Promote your event strategically.

If you're trying to gather storytellers in a specific community and get the word out to people in that community, you're trying to create a safe space, and you don't want that to be something that people can abuse. - Philomena Polefrone

- ➔ Be mindful about which social media platforms you use and their privacy settings.

◆ Be intentional about how public your social media activity is and what information you share about yourself, your speakers/staff, your travel plans, and/or your space.
◆ Consider adding settings to automatically hide certain words from your [comments](#).
➔ Use targeted channels to promote events.
◆ Think about places (either online or in-person) where your target audience congregates in a way that is less visible to those who may want to harass your event.
◆ Consider "insider spaces" like: newsletters, private internet groups or social media pages, book clubs, community centers, local events, local bookstores, or local libraries.
➔ Registration can be a safety tool.
◆ In some cases, it might make sense to ask attendees to register before giving them information about the location, time, or date of an event.
◆ Some event hosts choose to close event registration ahead of time so that organizers can screen the list for known abusers or suspected falsified information (especially if a speaker has a stalker).
➔ Consider using a contact form or an alias email to manage event inquiries and to insulate event staff from harassment.
➔ Take time to [bolster the digital safety](#) of event speakers and hosts.

✅ Consider how you organize your physical space.
➔ Be mindful of space capacity and crowding.
◆ If you are concerned about losing revenue due to hosting a smaller event, consider alternative forms of revenue to offset losses. For example, you could see if the author could sign pre-ordered books.
➔ Know where the exits and bathrooms are.
◆ Stock a first aid kit and water/snacks, especially if it is a hot day.
◆ Identify separate entrance and exit routes for speakers where possible.
◆ Limit entrances to the minimum number needed during the event and monitor those entrances. You can keep additional entry and exit points closed but reserved for evacuation if needed.
➔ Identify a private space for speakers to use before and after the event
◆ If you don't have a separate space that can be used as a green room, consider using pipe and drape to create one.
◆ Determine the best path to remove an author from the stage to the green room.
➔ Use clear signage to designate private spaces for speakers and staff that visitors (including ICE) need permission to enter.
➔ Call on community volunteers if short-staffed. Use a buddy system so that speakers, staff or volunteers have support.
➔ Organize book signing lines to prioritize author/speaker safety, agency, and comfort.
◆ Ask attendees to leave their bags on their chairs or a separate table away from the signers, within eyesight, when they come up to the table to have their book signed.
◆ Have a staff person or volunteer stand next to the signing table with the author.
◆ Create distance between the line and the signing table.

◆ Discuss the author's boundaries ahead of time (for instance: Are they comfortable with signing things that aren't books? Are they comfortable taking photographs, and if so, in what configuration and circumstances?)

➔ If you hire a guard, place the guard adjacent to the stage and in-between the speakers and the audience.

➔ Center accessibility.
  ◆ Guide to Holding Inclusive Events from the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network
  ◆ Accessible Events Guide from the Disability Policy Consortium

➔ Secure online spaces too.
  ◆ Democracy Security Project: Zoom bomb threats guide
  ◆ Right To Be: Zoom safety guide

✅ Support safe travel.

➔ Connect speakers to local networks.
  ◆ If you have speakers or organizers who are traveling for an event and are concerned about safety, connect them to allies who know the area and can meet them (such as a staff member or volunteer).

➔ Consider renting a car or organizing a rideshare for event speakers.

➔ Inform event speakers of any local legislation that may impact them or the event. For instance, is your venue in an open carry state?

➔ Don't be afraid to reach out to see if publishers can help to defray costs.

✅ Assess threats.

➔ If threats have made you fear for your physical safety or the safety of your loved ones, please seriously consider:
  ◆ Engaging local law enforcement;
  ◆ Informing your employer or publisher;
  ◆ Consulting a lawyer;
  ◆ Reaching out to friends and family, and/or
  ◆ Reaching out to a nonprofit organization that supports individuals facing abuse.

➔ If you aren't sure, ask yourself:
  ◆ Has your harasser made an explicit threat that names you specifically and/or includes specific details (eg. time of place)?
  ◆ Does the content of your harasser's messages contain personal details about you or your loved one(s)?
  ◆ Are you seeing "indicia of irrationality"? For eg., is your harasser openly identifying themselves while threatening you?
  ◆ Is your harasser attacking or threatening you repeatedly in a concerted way and/or across platforms? Has the conduct migrated from online to offline (eg. physical mail)?
  ◆ Do you know the person who is harassing you? If so, do you believe them capable of escalating the abuse? Do they have a history of violence?
  ◆ Is the behavior – frequency, violence, and volume – escalating?
  ◆ *If you answered "yes" to one or more of the above questions, please seriously consider engaging with law enforcement and/or other suggestions listed above.*

➔ Communicate with the rest of the team and your support system.
  ◆ Let other event organizers know what kind of threats you are receiving.
  ◆ Reach out for support.

➔ Read our full guide to assessing threats here.

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◆ [Document](#) and [report](#) threats.
➔ Revisit your event safety plan and adjust accordingly.

✅ Navigate potential event disruption.

➔ If a speaker has a harasser or stalker, obtain a photograph and disseminate it to staff so they can flag if the harasser/stalker arrives at the event.
➔ Check in ahead of time if you anticipate heckling.
  ◆ Ask authors/speakers their preferences for dealing with hecklers.
  ◆ Ensure assigned volunteers/staff are aware of authors/speakers' preferences and have a de-escalation mindset or training.
➔ As hard as it may be, stay calm. By grounding yourself, you will be better able to assess a situation and respond.
➔ Find opportunities to pivot and reframe.
  ◆ Event organizers can use language like "We need to leave time for other questions." or "The purpose of this event is XYZ. At this point you are disrupting the event, and if you continue you will be asked to leave."
➔ Consider creating an outlet or method for 'hearing out' the heckler.
  ◆ Share contact information for a "designated responder"
    ● "If you would like to express your concerns, please reach out to this person [hand out business card for our designated responder or store owner.]"
  ◆ Give a comment or feedback form to hecklers
    ● "While we don't have time today to dive into all of your concerns, we would welcome you to share more feedback at this link/on this sheet."
    ● Could be in the form of a worksheet or a QR code to an online form
  ◆ Have trained staff speak with the heckler in a less disruptive setting.
    ● Trained staff or volunteers can calmly invite the heckler to talk outside the space, away from the event.
    ● The staff member can ask questions in a neutral manner and listen empathetically to gradually de-escalate the situation.
➔ Consider posting a code of conduct in the event area or website and refer back to it if an event is disrupted with hate or harassment.
➔ Be clear about when/if you want to cut the mic.
➔ If an event is disrupted with harassment, it may be useful for someone involved in organizing the event to:
  ◆ acknowledge what has happened and its potential impact on the audience/speakers/organizers,
  ◆ invite everyone to take a deep breath, and
  ◆ remind event participants of the intention of the event.
➔ See conflict de-escalation [resources](#) from Right To Be and these [top tips](#) from Crisis Prevention Institute. Consider training staff with [workshops](#) from groups such as the Center for Anti-Violence Education.

✅ Debrief and take care.

Stories connect us to each other, and they are one of the greatest forms of human interrelatedness that we have ever created. I know it can be scary, just understand the importance of your stories and the importance of sharing those stories with each other. - Samira Ahmed

➔ Targeted harassment campaigns can be overwhelming and difficult to manage. Try to create distance between yourself and the harassment in whatever way serves you best—whether it's going on a walk, taking deep breaths, or only checking your email or social media during a designated, intentional time.
   ◆ The Free Mindfulness Project shares free-to-use exercises online.
➔ Turn to your support system, including allies (people, groups, or organizations) that you can ask for help in recuperating.
➔ Revise your safety plan as needed. Set aside time after an event, whether alone or with your team, to reflect on potential safety measures for future events.

✅ Additional resources.

➔ American Booksellers Association: Right to Read Toolkit and Guide to dealing with curation protests
➔ American Library Association: Supporting library workers and patrons guide
   ◆ Tips for libraries facing harassment
➔ Electronic Frontier Foundation: Surveillance Self-Defense guide
➔ Field manual against online harassment
   ◆ What is online abuse?
   ◆ Assessing online threats guide
   ◆ Protecting accounts from hacking
➔ Safety tips for those defending Freedom to Read
➔ Shelf Awareness: Independent booksellers discussing harassment
➔ Trans Journalist Association: Safety guide

This checklist collects guidance that was shared by Samira Ahmed from Authors Against Book Bans, Philomena Polefrone from the American Booksellers Association, and Yemile Bucay from PEN America, in a public panel on May 20, 2025 and was created by PEN America in collaboration with American Booksellers Association.