RIVALSHOT ACADEMY · COURSE BOOK

Front Desk Safety

Concerning Behavior at Ranges, Stores and Venues: Companion Course Book

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Foreword: How to use this book

This book goes with the six-lesson RivalShot Academy course Front Desk Safety: Concerning Behavior at Ranges, Stores and Venues. It is written for the people who work where the public walks in: desk associates at indoor ranges, clerks at sporting goods and hardware stores, box-office and front-of-house staff at venues, volunteers at visitor centers and open houses, and the owners and managers who schedule and support them.

Each chapter follows one lesson and goes further than the lesson can in a few screens. You will find the core ideas explained in more depth, two short fictional cases under “In practice,” a checklist you can copy onto an index card, a few key terms, three questions to talk through with your team, and a journal prompt. You can read the book alone or with the people you work beside. The “Talk it through” questions are short enough for a ten-minute huddle before a shift.

Here is what this book is: original educational writing about everyday habits that make front desks safer and fairer. Here is what it is not. It is not a security officer course, a self-defense course or a guide to tactics. It contains no weapon handling and no instructions for confronting anyone. It is not legal advice; laws about refusing service, recording, reporting and workplace safety vary by place, so check your employer’s written policy and the official sources for your jurisdiction. It does not teach medical procedures; if someone is hurt, call for help, check that the scene is safe, and follow the emergency call-taker’s instructions while help is on the way. Hands-on first-aid training is valuable prepa-

ration if you want to be able to do more. This is an educational reading course with no saved completion, and it is not a certification or qualification of any kind.

One rule runs through every page: leaving, stepping back and calling for help are always valid choices. Nothing here asks you to confront a person, block a door, follow someone or prove you were right.

A note on difficult topics. Chapter 3 briefly discusses distress and words that may suggest someone could harm themselves. Chapter 6 discusses how people feel after frightening events at work. You can pause or skip any part of this book. If you or someone you know is struggling, in the United States you can call or text 988 at any time to reach the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. If anyone is in immediate danger, call 911 or your local emergency number.

Every example in this book is fictional. The people, venues and conversations were invented for teaching, and the examples and reporting aids are not RivalShot policy or admission rules. Use your actual employer's approved procedures and responsible manager. When you use the journal prompts, write about situations and routines, not about real people, and leave out names, addresses, codes and anything else that should stay private.

Chapter 1. Describe behavior, not people

The pause

Every front desk worker knows the moment. A guest says something that lands wrong, or does something that does not fit, and you feel a small jolt of attention. Often the moment passes. The guest was tired, or confused, or having a hard day, and nothing more comes of it. Once in a while, the moment is the start of something your manager needs to know about.

This chapter is about what you do in that pause. The habit it teaches is simple to say and takes practice to do well: describe what a person does and says, not who you think they are.

Labels and descriptions

A label is a conclusion. “Sketchy.” “Off.” “Trouble.” “Creepy.” “Not our usual crowd.” Labels come fast and feel efficient, which is why everyone uses them. But they carry almost no information. If you tell your manager that a guest seemed sketchy, your manager has to ask you what you mean, and by then the details may be fuzzy. Labels also have a way of sticking to the wrong things. A label can quietly attach to how someone looks, talks or dresses, and once it does, it shapes how you treat them for the rest of their visit.

A description is different. A description is what a camera and a microphone could have recorded. “He asked twice what time the last staff member leaves.” “She tried the staff-only door after I showed her the restroom.” “He said, ‘Somebody’s going to pay for

this,' and slapped the counter." Anyone reading those sentences knows what happened. A manager can act on them. A police officer, if it ever came to that, could act on them. And because they are about actions and words, they are fair to the person being described.

Appearance is not behavior

Federal guidance is clear on this point, and it is worth knowing the exact idea. The Department of Homeland Security's public reporting campaign says that factors such as race, ethnicity, sex, national origin, religion or disability are not suspicious, and it asks people to report behavior and situations rather than someone's appearance. The Department of Labor's workplace violence program, written for its own employees, warns against reacting to a supposed "profile" rather than behavior someone actually observed.

For a front desk, that means a long list of things are never, on their own, a reason for concern: age, skin color, accent, religious dress, tattoos, hairstyle, clothing, a wheelchair or cane, a hearing aid, the way someone walks or talks, whether they make eye contact, whether they seem nervous in a new place. Many guests at a range, a store or a venue are nervous because they are new. That is a reason to welcome them, not to watch them.

What does count is behavior in context: what a person does and says, in this place, at this time.

Context and normal

Behavior only means something against a background. The background is what normal looks like where you work. Normal at an indoor range lobby on league night is loud, crowded and full of peo-

ple who know each other. Normal at a museum gift shop at 4:55 on a weekday is quiet. Normal at a hardware store on a rainy evening includes people waiting out the weather.

What deserves a second look is change from that normal, or behavior that does not fit the place and time. Some examples:

- someone repeatedly trying doors marked staff only after being shown the public route;
- questions about when cash is collected, when staff leave, or where the manager parks, especially more than once;
- a guest saying something that sounds like a threat, even as a joke;
- a sudden shift in a regular guest's behavior, such as hostility from someone who is usually friendly.

Words are behavior. A threat said with a laugh is still a threat to write down and pass on, no matter who says it. You do not have to decide whether it was serious. You only have to describe it and get it to the right person.

The camera test

Here is the technique from the lesson, explained in more detail. When something makes you uneasy, ask yourself: "What would a camera have recorded?" Then write, or say, four short lines.

1. **Saw:** the actions, in plain words.
2. **Heard:** exact words, in quotation marks, as close as you can remember.
3. **Where and when:** the place and time.
4. **Did:** what you did, and who you told.

Now read your lines back and look for any word a camera could not film. “Creepy” cannot be filmed. “Lurking” is halfway there; what was the person actually doing? “Standing near the back door for ten minutes without shopping” can be filmed. “Seemed drunk” is a guess. “Smelled of alcohol and said he had been at a bar” is a description, and even then the next step belongs to your manager and your venue’s policy, not to you.

Your unease is real, and it is worth respecting. A feeling can be your brain noticing a pattern before you can name it. The camera test does not ask you to ignore a feeling. It asks you to treat the feeling as a reason to look again, and to keep looking until you can describe what you saw.

What this does not mean

Describing behavior does not mean waiting for proof before you tell someone. It does not make you an investigator, and it never requires you to follow, question or confront anyone. You can complete a description from behind the counter.

It also does not mean a description is a prediction. The Department of Labor’s program notes that the presence of warning signs does not necessarily mean a violent act will occur. Many odd moments at a front desk are ordinary. The purpose of a good description is not to predict the future. It is to hand the next person accurate facts about someone who was treated fairly.

In practice

The guest by the window. On a Saturday at an indoor range, a new desk associate tells the shift lead that the man by the window “gives her a bad feeling.” The shift lead asks what he has done. The associate thinks about it: he has been sitting for forty

minutes, checking his phone and looking at the door each time it opens. The shift lead walks over with the same greeting she uses for everyone. The man explains that his teenage son is in the safety orientation class and he is waiting to pick him up. He asks how much longer the class runs. Nothing was wrong. Later, the shift lead tells the associate that asking was exactly right, and that "watching the door while waiting for a kid" is a behavior anyone might show. The associate writes the camera test lines on a sticky note by the register.

The question that came back. At a small outdoor-goods store, a cashier notices that a customer who bought a water bottle on Monday asks what time the store closes and how many people work the late shift. On Wednesday, the same customer asks again, and adds a question about when the cash is picked up. The cashier does not know why. She does not need to. She writes: "Monday about 7 p.m. and Wednesday about 7:30 p.m., register 1. Customer asked closing time and number of staff on late shift (both days). Wednesday also asked, 'When does the money get picked up?' I said I didn't know and offered help finding an item. Told shift lead Wednesday 7:40." Her manager reads the note, adds a second person to the closing shift for the week, and follows the store's policy on contacting police. Nothing in the note describes what the customer looked like, because none of that mattered.

Checklist

- Ask "What would a camera have recorded?" before you describe anyone.
- Write four lines: saw, heard (exact words), where and when, what you did.
- Replace any word a camera could not film.

- Leave out appearance, age, accent, dress, disability and background.
- Treat unease as a reason to look again, not as a conclusion.
- Pass on spoken threats even when they are said as jokes.
- Never follow, question or confront anyone to complete a description.

Key terms

- **Label:** a quick conclusion about a person ("sketchy," "trouble") that a camera could not record.
- **Description:** what a camera and microphone could have recorded: actions, exact words, place and time.
- **Normal (baseline):** what usually happens at your venue at a given time and place.
- **Camera test:** the habit of checking every word in a note to see whether it could be filmed.

Talk it through

1. What labels do people on our team use most often, and what descriptions could replace them?
2. What does normal look like at our desk at opening, at the busiest hour and at closing?
3. Has a first impression of a guest ever turned out to be wrong? What changed it?

Journal prompt

Pick a common situation at your desk that sometimes makes staff uneasy. Without naming or identifying anyone, write it once using labels and once using only what a camera and microphone could record. What could your manager do with each version?

Chapter 2. Welcoming service that also notices

One skill, not two

Some people think safety and hospitality pull in opposite directions: that a safe front desk is guarded and suspicious, and a friendly one is relaxed and unaware. In practice, the opposite is true. The habits that make a guest feel welcome are the same habits that let you notice when something changes.

Think about what a great front desk does. Someone looks up when the door opens. Guests are greeted within a few seconds. Someone asks how they can help. People who need directions get them. People who are confused get a hand. That desk feels warm, and it also feels attended. Everyone who walks in knows they have been seen.

The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), the federal agency that publishes guidance on protecting public places, encourages employees to begin with a friendly greeting, eye contact and an offer of help, to listen actively, and to recognize that simply acknowledging a person can make a difference. That is not a security trick. It is good service.

Your vantage point

Start with where you stand. Your ability to notice depends on what you can see.

Walk to your usual spot behind the counter and look around. Can you see the front door? Are displays, stacks of boxes or a tall register blocking your view? Are the front windows covered with posters? Is a light out near the entrance or in the parking area?

OSHA's recommendations for late-night retail stores, written for employers, suggest several simple ideas worth borrowing anywhere: keeping window signs low or high so people can see in and out, keeping shelving low so staff can see who is coming in, maintaining good lighting inside and outside, and placing mirrors where hallways meet or corners are hidden.

You may not control the floor plan. But you can usually move a sign, clear a stack, or tell your manager about a burned-out bulb. Those small changes make your job easier and the room more comfortable. Many guests appreciate bright, open spaces too.

The same welcome for every guest

The technique from this lesson is a welcome standard: a simple routine you use with everyone who comes through the door. For example:

- look up and make eye contact (or wave, if you are on the phone);
- greet within a few seconds;
- offer help with one open question: "What brings you in today?" or "How can I help?";
- if someone says they are just looking, smile and let them be, then check back once later.

Why does it matter that the welcome is the same for everyone? Because attention is selective. If you greet the guests who look like your regulars and stay quiet with everyone else, two things

happen. You miss real needs from people who did not get your attention. And some guests, often the ones who already feel out of place, notice that they are being treated differently and feel watched. A consistent welcome protects against that. It also means that when you do notice something, you notice it because of what someone did, not because of who they are.

A welcome that works for everyone

A welcome standard should flex for the different ways people arrive. A guest who is Deaf or hard of hearing may not hear your greeting, so eye contact and a wave matter. A guest who uses a wheelchair should not have to talk to the top of a high counter if you can step around to the side. A guest who is still learning English may need slower, simpler words, a written note or a translation app. A guest who avoids eye contact, moves differently, talks to themselves or takes a long time to answer is showing you how they communicate. None of that is a warning sign.

These adjustments are good service, and they keep your attention where it belongs: on behavior that actually matters in the context of your venue.

Noticing while busy

Front desk work often means multitasking. You are completing a waiver, answering the phone, ringing up a sale, or finding a reservation. Noticing has to happen alongside that work, not instead of it.

A few small habits help. Let the door chime be your cue to glance up and nod, even if all you can say is “I’ll be right with you.” Keep your body turned so you can see the room, not just the screen. When a guest explains a problem, listen for the need behind the

words and say it back: “So your booking shows the wrong time, and you drove an hour. Let me see what I can do.” People who feel heard tend to calm down, and you learn what they actually need.

This kind of attention also pays off in the moments when things turn. If a conversation shifts, with a voice rising, a hand slapping the counter, or words that sound like a threat, your earlier attention means you already know where the exit is, where your coworker is, and how to reach your manager.

When the line is long

The welcome standard is easiest on a quiet afternoon. It matters most during a rush, when it is hardest. On a busy Saturday at a range desk or the first hour of a holiday sale, you may have six people waiting and a phone ringing. You cannot give everyone a full conversation. You can still give everyone a moment of acknowledgment: eye contact down the line, a nod, “Thanks for waiting, I’ll be with you in a few minutes.” People often wait more patiently when they know they have been seen, and an acknowledged line tends to be calmer than an ignored one.

A rush is also when small changes are easiest to miss. If you have a coworker, agree in advance who watches the door while the other handles the counter. If you are alone, lift your eyes every time you finish a transaction. It takes a second, and it keeps you connected to the room.

Teaching the welcome to a team

A welcome standard is easier to keep when everyone on the team uses it. If you are a lead or owner, say it out loud at a pre-shift huddle, write it on the one-page plan described in Chapter

6, and model it yourself. Ask new staff to shadow a shift and notice how often the door opens. Praise the welcome when you see it. With practice, it can stop feeling like a rule and become simply how your desk works.

What this does not mean

Welcoming and noticing is not interrogating. You never need to ask a guest to justify their presence, decide who "belongs," or follow anyone around the building. A guest who declines help, wants privacy or is simply having a bad day is not suspicious.

Unless security is your actual job, with its own training and authority, you are not working as a security officer. And a greeting never obligates you to stay in a conversation that turns hostile. CISA's guidance is plain: if you feel threatened, leave calmly and call 911. At a front desk, that might mean stepping back toward a coworker or other staff, staying in view, and calling for help.

In practice

The restroom hallway. At a regional visitor center, a retired teacher volunteering at the desk notices a young woman walk past toward the back hallway, return, and walk past again. Rather than wondering about her, the volunteer uses her welcome standard: "Hi there, can I help you find something?" The woman laughs. The restroom sign points to a door that has been locked during renovations. The volunteer walks her to the open restroom, then writes a note asking the manager to fix the sign. Two other guests that afternoon had the same problem and simply left. A greeting turned a small mystery into better service.

The first-time visitor. At an indoor range on a weekday morning, a woman in her fifties comes in, stops just inside the door and looks around for a long moment without approaching the counter. The desk associate, a young man who has worked there a month, waves and says, "Good morning! Come on in. Is this your first visit?" She says yes, her daughter booked her an introductory class for her birthday and she is not sure where to go. He walks her through check-in and points out the classroom and the restrooms. A pause at the door, from someone new, was a reason to welcome her. A welcome standard made that easy.

Checklist

- Stand where you work and check what you can and cannot see.
- Move what blocks your view of the door; report broken lights.
- Use the same welcome for every guest, within a few seconds.
- Offer help with one open question; let people who decline be.
- Adjust the welcome for different ways people communicate and move.
- Glance up at the door chime, even when busy.
- Repeat back what a guest needs before you explain policy.
- If a conversation turns hostile, step back and get help.

Key terms

- **Welcome standard:** a simple greeting routine you use the same way with every guest.
- **Vantage point:** where you stand and what you can see from there.

- **Selective attention:** noticing some people more than others, often without realizing it; a common way bias enters.
- **Active listening:** repeating back what a guest needs so they know they were heard.

Talk it through

1. What is our welcome standard right now, and does every guest get it?
2. What can't we see from the desk, and what could we change this week?
3. How could we adjust our welcome for guests who communicate or move differently?

Journal prompt

Write the exact words of your welcome standard. Then describe one change to your desk's sightlines you could make or request this week, and how it helps both service and awareness.

Chapter 3. Know your reporting paths before you need them

This chapter briefly mentions distress and words that may suggest someone could harm themselves. You can pause or skip it.

Why concerns go unreported

Front desk staff notice things all the time. Many of those things never reach anyone who can act. Often it is not because people do not care. It is because, in the moment, they are unsure: Does this count? Who do I tell? Will I look silly? Will I get someone in trouble for nothing? Will I get in trouble?

The best time to answer those questions is before you need them, while you are calm. That is what reporting paths are: agreed answers to "who do I tell, and how?" for the kinds of things that come up at a front desk.

Federal guidance supports building these paths in the open. OSHA's recommendations for late-night retail suggest a clear policy that every worker knows, encouraging workers to report incidents promptly, keeping records, and making sure no worker who reports or experiences workplace violence faces reprisal. CISA's workplace violence infographic encourages organizations to build a culture where people can report concerns without fear of retaliation and to give timely feedback to the person who reported. If your venue already has paths like these, learn them well. If it does not, this chapter gives you a starting point to ask for them.

Three lanes

A simple way to organize reporting is three lanes, based on how fast someone needs to act. Use them as a discussion aid when learning your venue's actual plan, not as a formal threat assessment, and ask your manager how these examples fit the approved procedure.

The emergency lane is for immediate danger: a threat that seems about to be carried out, someone needing immediate medical help, a fight, or a weapon shown in a threatening way. In the emergency lane, safety comes first. Get yourself and others away from danger if you can. Call 911 or your local emergency number; do not wait for a manager's permission. Then tell your manager. The Department of Labor's program puts it plainly: in an emergency, secure your own safety and call 911.

The urgent lane is for serious concerns that need prompt attention. Urgent means the responsible manager or designated responder hears about it now, in person or by phone, not by a note left for tomorrow. When a guest made a threat and then left, a customer said he would wait outside for a staff member after her shift, or a person said something suggesting they may harm themselves, that alone does not mean the danger has passed; tell responders what you know and what you do not know. They can then decide what happens next under the venue's policy, which may include contacting police.

The pattern lane is for smaller things that matter more together than alone: the same visitor asking about staff schedules several times, a rule broken again and again, a hostile comment left on the venue's social media page. Pattern items go into whatever log or incident notes your venue uses, and to your manager before you leave. If a pattern includes a threat or immediate danger, act

on that now rather than waiting for the end-of-shift log. A single note may mean nothing. Five notes from five different shifts may reveal something no one person could see.

If your manager is the person you are worried about, you need another path. The Department of Labor's program tells employees to go to the next level up. Your venue should name that person or role in advance.

If you are ever unsure which lane something belongs in, choose the higher one. Moving down is easy. Finding out too late that something was urgent is not.

What to say

When you report, lead with the facts and any immediate help you need. For example: "A guest at the counter just said, 'I know when you close and I'll be back.' He left in a blue hatchback about two minutes ago, heading toward the highway. I have not seen anyone hurt, but I do not know where he is now."

CISA suggests organizing a report around who, what, where, when and why. That fits neatly with the camera test from Chapter 1: what you saw, what you heard, where and when, what you did, plus one more piece: why it concerned you. "It concerned me because it was aimed at staff" is a fine reason. You do not need to explain more.

When the concern is about the guest's own safety

Sometimes the concern is not about anyone else. A guest may say something that suggests they are in distress or may harm themselves. At a range, this can come up at check-in, especially with a guest who is alone. Many front desk workers freeze in this moment because they worry about saying the wrong thing.

You do not need special words, and you do not need to work out what the guest meant. Your part is simple: notice the words, stay kind, and get them to the right person quickly. Take the words seriously without deciding whether danger is immediate, and do not treat finishing the paperwork as the next priority. Bring in the manager or owner on duty right away, and let your venue's policy guide what happens next. In the United States, the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline is free, confidential and available 24 hours a day by call, text or chat, and it is open to people who are worried about someone else, including staff who want guidance. If anyone is in immediate danger, call 911.

The three-lane card

The technique from this lesson is a card at the desk. On an index card or the back of the opening checklist, write each lane with three things:

- **who** to contact (by role, such as "manager on duty");
- **how** to reach them (radio channel, desk phone extension, or the venue's emergency number);
- the **first sentence** you will say.

For the emergency lane, include the venue's own street address, so you are not searching for it under stress. OSHA's sample retail checklist asks whether emergency numbers for police, fire and

medical services, and an internal contact, are posted next to the phone. Ask your manager to post the card where every shift can see it, and to add it to new-staff training.

What this does not mean

Reporting is not accusing. You are passing along what you saw and heard so someone with more information and authority can decide what to do. You do not need to be certain. Not every report will lead to action, and that is normal; it does not mean you were wrong to speak up.

Reporting also does not mean posting about a guest online, warning other customers, or gossiping with coworkers. And it never means reporting someone because of their appearance, beliefs or other protected characteristics. CISA's guidance warns against reporting based solely on protected activities or characteristics such as race, religion or gender.

In practice

The parking lot comment. At a bowling center, a counter attendant overhears a customer on his phone say, "I'll just wait in the lot for her after her shift," while looking toward a coworker who is restocking shoes. He leaves a minute later. The attendant goes straight to the manager on duty: "A customer just said on the phone he'd wait in the lot for 'her' after her shift. He was looking at our coworker restocking shoes when he said it. He left about a minute ago through the front, and I don't know where he is now." The manager checks in with the coworker privately, learns that she has been worried about an ex-partner, arranges for her to leave with an escort, and follows the venue's policy about calling

police. CISA's infographic notes that violence from personal relationships can spill over into a workplace. The attendant's quick report gave the team time to act.

The pattern nobody saw. At a community theater box office, three different volunteers, on three different nights, each wrote a short note in the shared log about someone asking which door performers use to leave. None of them thought much of it at the time. When the house manager reviewed the log at the end of the week, the pattern stood out. She did not draw conclusions about who was asking or why. She moved performer exits to a staffed door, told the cast, and followed the theater's policy about informing local police. The pattern lane worked because each volunteer wrote a factual note and the log was actually read.

Checklist

- Know your three lanes: emergency, urgent and pattern.
- Emergency: safety first, call 911 without waiting for permission, then your manager.
- Urgent: tell the manager or owner on duty right away, in person or by phone.
- Pattern: write a factual note and tell your manager before you leave; act now if it includes a threat.
- Know the next level up if your manager is the concern.
- Lead with the facts and any immediate help you need, then why it concerned you.
- Keep a three-lane card posted at the desk.
- When unsure, choose the higher lane.

Key terms

- **Reporting path:** an agreed answer to "who do I tell, and how?"
- **Emergency lane:** immediate danger; call 911 or the local emergency number.
- **Urgent lane:** a serious concern that needs prompt attention; involve the manager on duty or designated responder now.
- **Pattern lane:** smaller concerns that matter together; log them and pass them on.
- **Reprisal (retaliation):** punishment for reporting; good policies forbid it.

Talk it through

1. Who is in each of our three lanes on a normal weekday, a weekend and a holiday?
2. What would make someone on our team hesitate to report, and how can we change that?
3. Where would our three-lane card go so every shift sees it?

Journal prompt

Write your three lanes by role, how you would reach each one right now, and the first sentence you would say in the urgent lane. Note any lane where you do not yet know the answer, and who you will ask.

Chapter 4. Lone work, opening and closing check-ins

The in-between times

Opening and closing are the most in-between moments in a venue's day. Doors are being unlocked or locked. Lights are coming on or going off. Cash is being counted. Deliveries are arriving and trash is going out. Often there is only one person in the building, and the street outside is quieter than it will be at noon.

OSHA lists working alone or in isolated areas, working late at night, and exchanging money with the public among the factors that raise the risk of workplace violence. Its recommendations for late-night retail add solo work, isolated sites and poorly lit stores and parking areas. Those recommendations also ask a question every small venue can borrow: are there procedures in place to keep workers safe when they open and close?

This chapter helps you answer yes, even if your venue is small and you are usually the only person on the shift.

Check-ins that actually work

The core tool is a check-in with a response plan. A check-in is a short message to a named partner at times you agree on in advance. The partner might be a manager, a coworker, the owner, or a monitoring service your venue pays for. The typical times are:

- when you arrive and before you unlock;
- partway through, if you are alone for a long stretch;
- when you have locked up and are safely on your way.

The response plan is the part people skip, and it is the part that makes the check-in work. Your partner needs to know what to do if a check-in does not arrive. That means following the specific timing and response agreed in your venue's approved plan, including who calls, who takes over if that person is unavailable, and when to seek emergency help. There is no universal safe waiting interval. If there is evidence of immediate danger, seek emergency help now rather than waiting through a routine callback sequence.

Without a response plan, "text me when you're done" means very little. If the text never comes, your partner might assume you forgot and go to sleep. A text that nobody is waiting for is just a text.

Keep check-ins plain. A word or two is enough: "opening," "closing," "out." If something feels wrong, say so in plain language and ask your partner to stay on the line. Do not write codes, keys or alarm details in your check-in messages or in your journal.

Look before you lock or unlock

The technique from this lesson is a ten-second look. Before you get out of the car or cross the lot to open, look at the entrance. Is the door closed? Is any glass broken? Is the alarm panel light the color it should be, if you can see it from outside? Is someone waiting by the staff entrance who would not normally be there?

If something seems wrong, do not go in to check. Stay somewhere safe, like your locked car or a lit public place, call your manager, and call police if it looks like a break-in or someone may be inside. It is not your job to find out what happened.

At closing, the same look applies in reverse. Before you step out, look at the sidewalk and the lot. Have your phone in your hand and your bag already packed. Do outdoor tasks, such as trash runs, bringing in signs and checking the back door, before dark or with a second person.

OSHA's late-night retail recommendations include several practices that fit here: keeping doors locked before and after business hours, locking delivery and trash doors when not in use, scheduling deliveries during normal daytime operations, using a buddy system, making sure workers can get to trash and storage areas without added risk, and providing escorts to parking areas in the evening.

Working alone during open hours

Lone work is not only about opening and closing. Many small venues have one person at the desk for long stretches. If that is you, a few habits help:

- know how you would call for help without leaving the counter;
- keep your phone or radio on you, not in a back room;
- know your second way out, not just the front door;
- tell someone if you will be in a back room or outside for more than a few minutes.

OSHA's sample checklist asks whether workers have at least one other person with them throughout their shifts, or other protective measures, when working alone where there is a history of robberies or assaults. If your venue schedules one person at the busiest cash-handling time or at closing, it is fair to raise that with your manager as a safety question, not a complaint about

the work. OSHA notes that frontline workers often know the procedures and environment best, and that their input makes prevention programs better.

Writing it into the routine

Check-ins are easier to keep when they are part of the written opening and closing checklist, not a separate thing to remember. Many venues already have a list: lights, registers, coffee, restrooms, alarm. Add the safety steps to the same list, in the order you would do them. For example, an opening list might begin: "Text 'opening' to the manager on duty. Look at the entrance from the car. If anything looks wrong, do not go in; call." A closing list might end: "Outdoor tasks done before dark or with a second person. Look at the lot before stepping out. Text 'out' from the car with the doors locked."

When the safety steps sit next to the ordinary ones, they stop feeling dramatic. They become part of how the shift starts and ends. New and temporary staff learn them the same way they learn where the light switches are. And when the routine changes, such as new hours, a new partner or a different closing time, the checklist is the one place to update.

What this does not mean

A check-in plan is not a sign that your workplace is dangerous or that you should be afraid of the dark. It is a routine, like counting the drawer or turning off the coffee machine. It does not make you responsible for handling a problem alone; the whole point is that someone else knows and will act. It never means investigat-

ing an alarm, an open door or a strange noise by yourself. And it does not replace adequate staffing or a manager's responsibility to plan.

If your venue has no check-in system, asking for one is a reasonable, professional request. Personal routines outside work, such as commuting and parking, are a related topic of their own.

In practice

The open house close. At a historical society's Sunday open house, a volunteer in his sixties who walks with a cane agrees to close at 5 p.m. Before the event lead leaves, they agree that he will text "closing" at 4:55 and "out and in my car" by 5:20, and that she will call him if the second text has not come by 5:35. At 5:05 a couple knocks and asks for a quick look. He smiles: "We've closed for today, but here's a flyer for next month." At 5:15 he finds a side door propped open with a folding chair. He does not go out to search the yard. He calls the event lead from the lobby. She reaches the caterer, who says the crew left ten minutes earlier and forgot the chair. That explains one possibility, but it does not confirm that the building is safe. He stays in a safe place and follows the venue's procedure with the event lead rather than searching or treating the caterer's call as an all-clear. The agreed times in this fictional example are not a waiting rule for other workplaces.

The opening that waited. At a small outdoor-goods shop, the assistant manager arrives at 8:30 a.m. to open. From her car, she sees that the glass on the side door is cracked and the door is slightly open. She does not get out. She drives to the coffee shop across the street, calls the owner, then calls the police non-emergency line, as the shop's opening plan says to do for a possible break-in with no one visible. Officers check the building and

find no one inside. The owner later thanks her for waiting, and the shop adds the “look before you unlock” step to its written opening checklist.

Checklist

- Agree on check-in times with a named partner before each solo opening or closing.
- Agree on exactly what your partner does if a check-in is missed.
- Look at the entrance for ten seconds before you unlock or step out.
- If something seems wrong, do not go in; stay safe and call.
- Do outdoor tasks before dark or with a second person.
- Keep your phone or radio on you when working alone.
- Know your second way out.
- Keep codes, keys and alarm details out of messages and notes.

Key terms

- **Lone work:** working without another staff member nearby, during open hours or at opening and closing.
- **Check-in:** a short message to a named partner at agreed times.
- **Missed check-in response:** what the partner does, step by step, if a check-in does not arrive.
- **Welfare check:** a request that police or another responder check on someone who cannot be reached.

Talk it through

1. Who opens and closes alone at our venue, and what check-in do they use today?
2. What should a partner do, step by step, if a check-in is missed?
3. Which outdoor or after-hours tasks could we move to daylight or pair up?

Journal prompt

Describe the check-in plan you would want for your next opening or closing shift: your partner's role, the times, and what happens if a check-in is missed. Then name one task you would move to daylight or do with a second person.

Chapter 5. Follow policy, escalate early and write it down

Friction is normal

Every front desk deals with friction. A refund cannot be given. A reservation was lost. An ID does not match the booking. A guest arrives after the last check-in time. A rule seems unfair to the person it applies to. Many of these moments end with an apology and a workaround. Some escalate into raised voices, slammed counters or words that sound like threats.

Written policy exists so you do not have to invent the rules in those moments. A good policy says who can make exceptions, when to call a manager, when someone may be asked to leave, and when to call police. OSHA recommends a clear workplace violence policy that every worker knows. Its late-night retail recommendations also say training should steer workers away from stepping into altercations unless enough staff, response teams or security personnel are available.

In plain terms: your job at the front desk is to follow the policy and bring in help early. It is not to win the argument.

The escalation ladder

Think of escalation as a ladder you are always allowed to climb, and never required to climb back down.

1. **Serve and notice.** Many interactions stay here.
2. **State the policy and what you can do.** Plainly and kindly.

3. **Bring in the next person early.** A coworker, the shift lead or the manager, while things are still mild.
4. **Create distance.** Step back from the counter and toward other staff, staying in view and near help. Keep a clear way out for yourself, and do not stand between an upset person and the exit.
5. **Call for emergency help.** If there is immediate danger, call 911 or your local emergency number.

You can jump to a higher step at any time. If a guest makes a direct threat, you do not need to try steps two and three first. CISA's de-escalation guidance puts the order well: recognize the warning signs, assess your safety and the safety of people around you, try to calm the situation only if it is safe to do so, and report it through 911 or your organization's reporting channels.

The word "early" matters. Bringing in a manager when a guest is mildly frustrated feels like overkill to many new staff. It is not. A second calm person often changes the tone of a conversation. Waiting until a guest is shouting makes everything harder.

Policy sentences and handoff sentences

The technique from this lesson is to prepare two sentences for each of your venue's most common friction points.

A **policy sentence** says what you cannot do and what you can, using only options your actual role and policy authorize. These fictional examples are not range rules: "I can't refund this without a receipt, but I can offer store credit or look up the purchase if you paid by card." "I can't add you to the class that has already started, but I can book the next one or give you a full credit."

A **handoff sentence** brings in help without sounding like a threat. “I want to get this right for you, so I’m going to ask my manager to come up.” “Let me get someone who can look at more options.”

Say both in a calm, ordinary voice. Keep sentences short rather than giving long explanations. Do not debate whether the policy is fair; that feedback can go to your manager later. If the guest gets louder, you do not need to get louder or add more detail. Repeat the handoff and make the call.

Write your sentences down and practice them out loud. They will come more easily under pressure if you have said them before.

Writing it down

Writing a note is the last step of every escalation, including the ones that ended calmly. The Department of Labor’s program tells employees and supervisors, again and again, to document the observed behavior. OSHA advises preparing an incident report right after an incident, while details are still fresh, and keeping logs of threats and incidents so a venue can prevent them from happening again.

A good note answers:

- date and time;
- place;
- what you saw;
- exact words, in quotation marks;
- what you did;
- who you told, and when;
- who else was there.

Leave out guesses about mental health, drug or alcohol use, motives, or background. If a fact matters, such as a guest saying "I've had a few drinks," write the words, not your conclusion. If you want to say why something worried you, one plain sentence is enough.

Keep the note in your venue's log or incident system. Not in a group chat, not on a personal phone, and never on social media. A factual record protects guests and staff alike, and it helps your manager see patterns no single shift would reveal.

When the decision is not yours

Some of the hardest moments at a range desk or venue counter are about whether a guest should continue at all. A guest may say they have been drinking, seem unsteady, or say something that suggests they are in distress. Those situations can feel personal and awkward, and front desk staff often worry about embarrassing a guest or getting it wrong.

This is exactly where policy helps. The decision about whether service continues belongs to your venue's written policy and the manager on duty, not to you alone. Your part is the same as always: describe what you saw and heard, without guessing at causes, and bring in the manager early. Remember that unsteadiness, slurred speech or confusion can have many explanations, including disabilities and medical conditions, so describe the behavior and let the person with authority make the call. If the concern is about the guest's own safety, handle it as in Chapter 3: take the words seriously and bring in the manager now, without deciding whether danger is immediate. If there is immediate danger, call 911.

What this does not mean

Following policy does not mean being cold. You can be kind and firm at the same time, and kindness often makes firmness easier to hear.

It does not mean enforcing a rule by yourself against someone who is escalating. It never means blocking a door, physically stopping anyone, or following someone outside to get a license plate. Leaving danger and calling for help are always valid choices.

This chapter also does not tell you what the law allows. Rules about refusing service, recording people, asking someone to leave and reporting incidents vary by place. Check your employer's written policy and the official sources for your jurisdiction. If a policy is unclear, missing or seems unsafe, raise it after the shift. Stepping out of a heated exchange in everyday life is a related topic with more to explore.

In practice

The return counter. On a Friday evening at a sporting goods store, a guest learns that a used item cannot be returned without a receipt. His voice rises. He slaps the counter and says, "You people are going to be sorry. I know what time you close." The associate, who has worked the counter for two years, says her handoff sentence, presses the radio and takes a step back. The manager arrives within a minute, offers store credit, and the guest leaves. On her break, the associate writes: "Fri 7:42 p.m., returns counter. Guest refused return (no receipt, used item). Slapped counter once. Said: 'You people are going to be sorry. I know what time you close.' I gave handoff, radioed manager 7:43, stepped back. Manager offered store credit; guest left 7:46 via front doors. Present: me, manager, one customer in line." The

manager schedules two people to close that night and, following store policy, reports the statement to the police non-emergency line.

The lost reservation. At an indoor range, a guest learns that his online reservation did not go through and every lane is booked for the next hour. He is frustrated and says so. The desk associate repeats back the problem, then uses her policy sentence: "I can't move someone else's booking, but I can put you first on the wait-list and give you a credit for today's trouble." He sighs and says that's fine. No escalation, no manager, no note needed beyond the usual booking record. The associate mentions the booking glitch to her manager anyway, because three guests had the same problem that week. Not every friction point is a safety issue. Good policy sentences help keep many of them that way.

Checklist

- Learn your venue's written policy on who can make exceptions and when to call for help.
- Climb the ladder: serve, state policy, hand off early, make distance, call 911.
- Prepare a policy sentence and a handoff sentence for your top three friction points.
- Keep your voice calm and your sentences short; do not debate the policy.
- Never block a door, physically stop anyone or follow someone outside.
- Write a factual note after every escalation: time, place, exact words, actions, who you told.
- Keep notes in the venue's log, not in chats or on social media.

Key terms

- **Escalation ladder:** steps from ordinary service to emergency help that you can always climb.
- **Policy sentence:** what you cannot do, followed by what you can.
- **Handoff sentence:** a calm sentence that brings in a coworker or manager.
- **Incident note:** a factual record of what happened, written as soon as possible.
- **De-escalation:** trying to calm a situation, only when it is safe to do so.

Talk it through

1. What are our three most common friction points, and what are our policy sentences for each?
2. When should a desk associate bring in a manager, and does everyone feel comfortable doing it early?
3. Where do our incident notes go, and who reads them?

Journal prompt

Choose your venue's most common friction point. Write a policy sentence and a handoff sentence for it. Then describe what you would see or hear that tells you it is time to move up the ladder.

Chapter 6. After an incident: support, review and a one-page plan

This chapter discusses how people feel after frightening events at work. You can pause or skip it.

First, safety and help

When something serious happens at work, whether a threat, an assault or a frightening confrontation, the first steps are safety and help. Make sure people are away from danger. Call 911 or your local emergency number if anyone needs it. Tell your manager. If someone is hurt, call for help, make sure the scene is safe, and follow the emergency call-taker's instructions while help is on the way. This book does not teach medical procedures; hands-on first-aid training is valuable preparation.

Once the immediate moment is over, a second part of the response begins. It is the part many venues skip: taking care of people and learning from what happened.

How people react

People react to frightening events in many different ways, and often not right away. OSHA's guidance for retail employers lists effects that workers may experience after workplace violence: short- and long-term psychological trauma, fear of returning to work, changes in relationships with coworkers and family, feelings of incompetence, guilt or powerlessness, and fear of criticism by supervisors or managers.

That last one is worth pausing on. Many people who were at the desk during an incident spend the next days wondering whether they did something wrong. If the first thing they hear from a manager is a question about their mistakes, that fear grows. If the first thing they hear is "How are you doing?", it shrinks.

None of these reactions mean someone is weak or unsuited to the job. They are normal responses to an abnormal event.

What support looks like

Helpful support is practical and specific. For example:

- a quiet place to sit right after the incident;
- the chance to call someone at home;
- a ride, if they are shaken;
- not being left alone at the desk for the rest of the shift;
- a check-in the next day, and again the next week;
- the option of working the next few shifts with a second person.

OSHA describes options employers can offer, such as trauma crisis counseling, critical incident stress debriefing, employee assistance programs and peer support groups. The Department of Labor describes its own employee assistance program as offering short-term counseling and referral. CISA's workplace violence infographic encourages organizations to make sure employees know how to reach the support resources available to them.

If your venue has an employee assistance program, everyone should know how to reach it before they need it. Put the contact information on the one-page plan described below. Coworker

support matters, and it is not therapy. Its job is to make sure people feel cared for and to connect them with professionals when they need more.

Documentation and review

Documentation after an incident serves two purposes. It creates an accurate record for anyone who needs it, and it gives the team something to learn from.

Start by gathering the notes staff wrote at the time and the manager's incident report. Keep them confidential and stored in the venue's system. OSHA recommends that when program reviews are shared, worker privacy is protected by presenting only overall numbers or removing personal details.

Then hold a short, blame-free review, ideally within a week. Four questions are enough:

1. What happened, in facts?
2. What helped?
3. What got in the way?
4. What is one change we will make?

OSHA calls post-incident response and evaluation essential to an effective prevention program, and it recommends involving front-line workers, who often know the procedures and the environment best. The review is about the system: the layout, the staffing, the policy, the training. It is not about finding fault with the person who happened to be at the desk.

One change is enough. A review that produces a long list of improvements nobody has time for is less useful than one that produces a single change that actually happens: a second person at closing, a posted three-lane card, a new policy sentence, a fixed light.

Your one-page venue safety plan

The technique from this lesson brings the whole course together. A one-page venue safety plan is short enough to read at the start of a shift and specific enough to use. It includes:

1. **Our welcome standard.** What every guest sees and hears in the first few seconds.
2. **Behaviors we always report.** Written as actions and words, never appearance.
3. **Emergency lane.** Who calls, what number, and where it is posted.
4. **Urgent lane.** The role on duty to tell right away and how to reach them now.
5. **Pattern lane.** Where notes go and who reads them.
6. **Opening, closing and lone-work check-ins.** Partner role, times and the missed check-in response, with no codes, keys or home addresses.
7. **Policy and handoff sentences.** For the top three friction points.
8. **After-incident support.** Contacts, and who checks in the next day and the next week.
9. **Review date.** When the plan will next be updated, and by whom.

OSHA notes that in smaller establishments a program can be effective without extensive written documentation, that a small business may assign the job to a single worker or consultant, that new, reassigned and temporary workers should receive the same training as permanent staff, and that programs should be reviewed regularly. A one-page plan fits that spirit. Review it at least once a year and after any serious incident, and walk every new or temporary staff member through it on their first shift.

What this does not mean

A one-page plan is not a legal compliance program, a security assessment or a certification, and finishing this course does not qualify anyone as a security professional. OSHA notes that there is currently no specific federal OSHA standard for workplace violence, and some states have their own rules. Check the official sources for your jurisdiction, and consider asking your insurer or local police whether they offer free advice for businesses.

This course also does not cover what to do during an attack. For that, use official resources such as CISA's. What this course can do is make sure your venue's ordinary habits are written down and practiced: welcome, notice, report, check in, follow policy, and look after each other.

In practice

The follow-up call. After a guest shouted threats at the desk of a small indoor range and was asked to leave by the owner, the weekend associate, a young man three months into the job, finished his shift and said he was fine. The next morning, the owner called him. Not to review what he did wrong, but to ask how he had slept. He admitted he had replayed it all night and was

dreading Saturday. They agreed he would work his next two shifts with a second person, and the owner shared how to reach the employee assistance program. A week later, the owner asked again. The associate later said the follow-up call mattered more to him than anything else that weekend.

One change. At a community recreation center, a review after a tense evening at the front desk asked the four questions. What happened: a visitor who had been asked to leave the gym for breaking a rule came back to the desk, shouted and threw a clipboard. What helped: the desk volunteer stepped back and the building supervisor arrived quickly by radio. What got in the way: the volunteer did not know the supervisor's radio channel and had to look it up. One change: the channel and the three lanes went onto a laminated card at the desk that afternoon. The supervisor also added a five-minute walk-through of the card to every volunteer's first shift.

Checklist

- Safety and help first: call 911 if needed, then tell your manager.
- Ask "How are you doing?" before any review of what happened.
- Offer practical support: a quiet place, a ride, not being alone, next-day and next-week check-ins.
- Make sure everyone knows how to reach the employee assistance program, if there is one.
- Keep incident notes and reports confidential.
- Hold a short, blame-free review that ends with one change.
- Keep a one-page venue safety plan at the desk and review it at least yearly.
- Walk every new or temporary staff member through the plan.

Key terms

- **Post-incident support:** practical and professional help for people affected by an incident.
- **Employee assistance program (EAP):** a workplace benefit that offers confidential short-term counseling and referral.
- **Blame-free review:** a short discussion focused on improving the system, not on finding fault.
- **One-page venue safety plan:** a short written summary of a venue's welcome, reporting, check-in, policy and support routines.

Talk it through

1. After a hard day at our desk, who checks in with the people involved, and when?
2. What would our four review questions sound like after a recent tense moment?
3. What is the first line of each section of our one-page plan, and who will help write it?

Journal prompt

Sketch the first draft of your one-page venue safety plan, one line per section. Then name who should review it with you, how new or temporary staff will learn it, and when you will next update it.

Glossary

- **Active listening:** repeating back what someone needs so they know they were heard.
- **Blame-free review:** a short discussion after an incident focused on improving the system, not on finding fault.
- **Camera test:** checking that every word in a description could have been filmed or recorded.
- **Check-in:** a short message to a named partner at agreed times during lone work, opening or closing.
- **De-escalation:** trying to calm a tense situation, only when it is safe to do so.
- **Description:** what a camera and microphone could have recorded: actions, exact words, place and time.
- **Emergency lane:** immediate danger; call 911 or the local emergency number.
- **Employee assistance program (EAP):** a workplace benefit offering confidential short-term counseling and referral.
- **Escalation ladder:** steps from ordinary service to emergency help that you can always climb and never have to climb back down.
- **Handoff sentence:** a calm sentence that brings in a coworker or manager.
- **Incident note:** a factual record written as soon as possible after something concerning happens.
- **Label:** a quick conclusion about a person that a camera could not record.
- **Lone work:** working without another staff member nearby.

- **Missed check-in response:** the agreed steps a partner takes if a check-in does not arrive.
- **Normal (baseline):** what usually happens at your venue at a given place and time.
- **One-page venue safety plan:** a short written summary of a venue's welcome, reporting, check-in, policy and support routines.
- **Pattern lane:** smaller concerns that matter together; logged and passed to a manager.
- **Policy sentence:** a sentence that says what you cannot do, followed by what you can.
- **Reprisal (retaliation):** punishment for reporting a concern; good policies forbid it.
- **Urgent lane:** a serious concern that needs prompt attention; involve the manager on duty or designated responder right away.
- **Welcome standard:** a greeting routine used the same way with every guest.
- **Welfare check:** a request that police or another responder check on someone who cannot be reached.

Where to go next

Hands-on training. This book and course teach habits and planning, not skills that need practice with a qualified instructor. If you want more, look for in-person training from qualified providers in workplace violence prevention, conflict de-escalation, and first aid. Ask any provider who designed the course, what qualifications the instructors hold, whether it includes practice and feedback, and whether it fits your type of venue. Your employer, insurer, trade association or local police department may be able to recommend options; some local police departments offer free advice to businesses about reducing risk. Be cautious of any course that promises to make you an expert quickly, focuses on confronting people, or teaches people to judge others by how they look.

Official resources worth reading.

- OSHA's workplace violence page, for the federal overview of risk factors and prevention programs.
- OSHA's Recommendations for Workplace Violence Prevention Programs in Late-Night Retail Establishments (OSHA 3153), including its sample checklists, which many small venues can adapt.
- The U.S. Department of Labor's Workplace Violence Program, as an example of how one large employer describes roles, reporting and support.
- CISA's conflict prevention and de-escalation resources, and its workplace violence prevention infographic.

- The Department of Homeland Security's "If You See Something, Say Something" pages on what suspicious activity is and how to report it to local law enforcement.
- The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, for anyone in distress or worried about someone else.
- Your state's occupational safety and health agency, if your state runs its own plan, for any state-specific rules.

Related topics. Everyday awareness skills, stepping out of heated exchanges, offering help to someone in difficulty, personal routines outside work, and saying no clearly and kindly are all related topics worth exploring. For what to do in an emergency, start with the official resources above.

Sources

All sources below were re-read on the date shown. They support specific factual statements in this book; the teaching narrative, examples, techniques and structure are original.

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