

# DEAL WITH ONLINE HARASSMENT

## EMAIL HARASSMENT PROCEDURE

- 1. Limit access to the email.** The moment an employee recognizes an email as harassment, they should stop reading. Consider setting up an email folder where you can move harassing emails, storing them while sequestering them from the main inbox. Additionally, have employees forward the email to a manager or owner, save it, and remove it from inboxes checked by employees. (Sometimes authorities need to see the original email, not just a forward.)
- 2. Don't engage.** People mostly do this to be disruptive. If they think they're taking up your time or upsetting you, it will encourage them.
- 3. Document everything.** The manager or owner should keep copies of the email, print multiple copies for the sake of reports. Do not just delete the email.
- 4. Assess the threat.** Some red flags: Does the person identify themselves? Are they local? Do they make explicit or implicit threats of violence or other harmful activity? Is the harassment escalating in volume, intensity, or threat level? Are they making concerning references to details about store personnel or the store itself?
- 5. If you contact authorities, do so mindfully.** Based on the assessed threat level, you may want to contact authorities using your local police department's non-emergency number or the FBI (<https://complaint.ic3.gov/>). **Keep in mind:** Be aware when contacting police that police presence may introduce a perceived or actual threat to your staff members, customers, or community. If you must contact the police, consider going to the department in person to make your report.
- 6. Contact ABA.** We will log the incident and see if it is part of a pattern impacting other stores. We can also talk to you

about managing the incident and use your experience to inform our work creating resources and education. Reach out to [advocacy@bookweb.org](mailto:advocacy@bookweb.org).

## SOCIAL MEDIA HARASSMENT PROCEDURE

- 1. Don't feed the trolls. (Don't engage.)** As opposed to email harassment, social media trolls are not just intimidating the person they're addressing, but performing for a larger audience. Engaging with them will not only encourage them, but help them achieve their goal of eliciting a reaction they find gratifying or amusing. You may be outraged, but expressing it online is self-defeating.
- 2. Block, delete, or report hateful posts and profiles immediately.** Consider where your "red line" is in terms of what constitutes harassment or even hate speech. If you find that a post violates this standard or another standard you set for your own store, immediately block and report the offending profile and delete the offending post (in that order). Write this standard clearly and use it to train staff. You may also want to "pin" a post to the top of your page in support of marginalized communities and stating your blocking policy. **Keep in mind**, though, that trolls sometimes screenshot notifications of blocking or deleted posts and use this to drive more attention to their targets.
- 3. Beware of the "just asking questions" approach and other traps.** One tactic online trolls use is the "just asking questions" model, in which they use bad-faith or rhetorical questions to bait targets into a response. Examples of this approach might include:
  - "Don't you think that it's wrong to put this pornographic material in front of minors?" (Rhetorical question based on a false premise.)

- “Stop pushing Critical Race Theory on children.” (False claim based on popular but baseless political narrative.)
- “Do you carry this book [by a right-wing politician]?” to follow-up, “Why do you carry all these books by liberal/leftist politicians but not by any conservatives?” (Both-sidesism — the idea that every platform should equally represent two sides of an issue regardless of the factual basis of each side. It is every store’s First Amendment right to curate their inventory as they see fit.)
- “Sealioning” is a term for when a large number of trolls swarm an account they want to discredit, repeating “polite” but bad-faith questions, quoting the same (often unreputable) article, or similar. The goal is to overwhelm the target until they get fed up, making them look unreasonable in response to reasonable-seeming questions.

The goal in all of these cases is to elicit an unflattering response that can be reposted or quoted out of context.

**4. Ready a list of stock responses.** If you’re not sure if a question is a trap or if you’re not comfortable not responding to posts that could be sincere, consider having a list of stock responses to copy and paste. These might direct question-askers to relevant sections of your website, an FAQ page, or give responses like “We do not carry pornographic material and have a clearly marked children’s section containing age-appropriate content.” If you are bombarded with the same question over and over again, you can respond with the same response over and over again.

**5. Let your followers do the arguing.** Sometimes a post will not cross any of your red lines for blocking or reporting, but you will still be uncomfortable with it. In that case, give it time, and let your followers respond. Much of the time, someone else will make the argument you yourself would like to make.

**6. Turn off notifications.** If you are being flooded with trolls but don’t want to limit

legitimate social media engagement, you can just turn off notifications. This will limit the ability of trolls to impact your or your customers’ time and mental space. This can make it easier to just ignore trolls and let the flame die out.

**7. Turn off the comments.** If the comments on a post get too heated or you have reason to believe they will on a forthcoming post, you can prevent users from commenting on your post. Type into a search engine “turn comments off on Instagram/Facebook/X” to learn how. **Keep in mind**, though, that trolls will sometimes just leave their comments elsewhere on the site or on other posts.

**8. Protect staff information.** Leave staff’s personal information off of the store’s social media and website. Do not have staff’s last names on staff picks. Leaving staff information vulnerable can lead to doxxing (publishing personal information online) or online harassment for staff.

## REVIEW BOMBING RESPONSE PROCEDURE

**Review bombing** is a tactic in which an organized group swarm an entity or business negative reviews to make it appear undesirable, often without having interacted with it. It most commonly affects forthcoming movies, books, or TV shows, but it can also affect bookstores if someone objects to a store’s political stance or events. Reviews for stores may be logged on Google Maps, Yelp, or similar.

**1. Distinguish review bombing from legitimate negative feedback.** An unprecedented number of low ratings or reviews in a short period of time is likely coordinated across a group of individuals or by one individual with multiple accounts, especially but not exclusively if they are making false claims about your store. Sometimes harassers make multiple accounts specifically to leave more reviews. If you are being attacked by recently made accounts with little to no other account activity, include it in any reports.

**2. See if the site has a procedure in place for handling review bombing.** Some sites let you report review bombing. Google the name of the platform and “review bomb” to see if they have a policy.

**3. Decide whether to respond to negative reviews.** If a negative review makes false claims about your store and there aren't that many of them, you may find it helpful to rebut them briefly (“Our store stocks titles by people of all political backgrounds”; “There is no pornography in the store”; “We proudly support LGBTQ+ authors”; etc.) You can also use responses to boost search results.

**Ross Rojek, co-owner of Capital Books in Sacramento, CA, says, “I use the negative reviews to leave highly detailed and positive replies and include a lot of keywords I want to show up in our description. Plus some sarcasm.”**

**4. Embrace your review bombers.** If you are proud of and believe in the things that you're being criticized for, own it! Consider putting over-the-top or political negative reviews on a chalkboard sign in front of your store, or even on merch. For example: “Zero stars. This store is the wokest place on earth” may be intended as an insult, but some customers may appreciate your perspective and sense of humor. [Here is an example](#) from Capital Books in Sacramento, CA.

**5. Mobilize your customers on social media or in person.** If your store has a social media presence or newsletter, consider making a post explaining the situation and asking supportive customers to flood the comments section with positivity.

Discourage them from engaging the negative reviewers directly. Instead, ask them to say what they like about your store or your approach. You can also make a physical

sign, or a flyer to hand out at the register, requesting the same thing. Most of your followers follow your store because they like what you do, and they may even repost your request.

**6. Contact ABA.** ABA's Advocacy team may be able to help coordinate a response or connect you with nearby bookstores who can amplify your call for help. Contact [advocacy@bookweb.org](mailto:advocacy@bookweb.org).

***Note:** Thanks to the panelists and attendees of the “Action! On Banned Books and Staff Safety” panel at NVNR 2023 for some of these tips and strategies.*

