



# **OVERVIEW OF VIOLENCE RISK & THREAT ASSESSMENT CONCEPTS**

by Dr. Brian Van Brunt  
and Jeff Solomon



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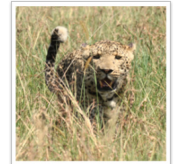


**TRANSIENT THREATS/HOWLERS**

These types of threats do not express lasting intent to harm. They are typically made in reaction to an intense, emotional, and passionate conflict. They are often made to protect reputation or “save face” and rarely a high likelihood of follow up or action. Approximately 70% of threats made in primary and secondary schools are transient.

**SUBSTANTIVE THREATS/HUNTERS**

These threats often conceal a more substantive intent to harm others in a predatory, mission-oriented attack. Substantive threats are more lasting and intentional, reaching beyond the current incident. In comparison to transient threats, substantive threats are 36 times more likely to be carried out.



**ELEMENTS OF THREAT**

- **Lethality.** Threat lethality represents the extent to which a particular threat has a high likelihood of resulting in death. For example, the possession of a firearm and ammunition combined with a threat to shoot up a LGBTQ+ rally on campus has a high likelihood of lethality whereas a transient threat to “make them shut up” by a student without access to a firearm would likely have a lower lethality. Assessments of lethality may require deeper exploration into social media, past behavior, and determination of weapons access.
- **Action and Time Imperative.** Action and time imperative refer to the time and location of an attack. If the threat contains a high degree of detail, this should be considered a heightened risk. If someone posts online, “The day of the rope will be this Friday at 9 p.m.” this is a higher concern than, “One of these days, there will be a reckoning for the Jews and Blacks.”
- **Fixation and Focus.** This relates to a narrowing down on a specific target. Fixations are hardened points of view, bordering on obsession, concerning a certain group being at fault and deserving of punishment. A focus builds off a fixation and further narrows onto a smaller group or a single person. For example, “I’m going to make those Asians pay for the COVID disease they brought to our country” would be a fixation on Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders. The threat, “I’m going to firebomb the corner store and rid our neighborhood of those rice eaters for eating those bats and killing American Patriots” would include both a fixation and focus.

| TYPE OF THREAT                  | EXAMPLE  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Direct                          | “I’m going to blow up the library.”  |
| Indirect/Vague                  | “Something bad is going to happen to the library.”   |
| Direct w/action/time imperative | “I’m going to blow up the library Tuesday at 3.  |
| Conditional ultimatum           | “If you don’t give me a good grade, I’m going to blow up the library.”                     |
| Transient                       | Frustrated about an assignment, a student throws a book and yells, “Burn this down!”       |
| Substantive                     | “I’m going to bring a water bottle of gasoline to spread on these books and light it up.”  |
| Howling                         | “You can’t treat me like this. I’m going to set fire to the world and roast marshmallows!” |
| Hunting                         | “I have what I need. I know what I’m going to do. #fire #library”                          |
| Vague but direct                | “Something bad is happening in the library soon.”  |
| Direct but vague                | “They might want to invest in fire extinguishers around here.”                             |

# Risk/Threat Assessment Guide

Triage\* Assessment  
Threat Assessment  
Violence Risk Assessment  
Individualized Safety/Risk Analysis  
Mental Health Psych Assessment

|               |  |   |  |   |  |
|---------------|--|---|--|---|--|
| When Given:   | At first sign of concern to obtain a baseline                    | When a verbal or written threat occurs                        | To assess risk to self or others with or without a threat          | Required by Title IX regs to emergency remove a respondent in a Title IX matter | To access inpatient care, diagnosis or clarify treatment |
| Given By:     | Counselors, health educators                                     | Counselors, BIT/ Care team, law enforcement, private security | Counselors, BIT/ Care team, law enforcement, private security      | Title IX Coord in consultation with BIT/CARE team                               | Counselors, social workers, LE psychologists             |
| What It Does: | Helps prioritize and direct care to ensure the risk is addressed | Determines likelihood of a threat being carried out           | Determines level of risk in a broad sense with or without a threat | Ensures decision to remove respondent from campus is objective and factual      | Voluntary/ mandated inpatient admission, diagnostics     |
| Examples:     | Pathways, NABITA Risk Rubric, CCAPS                              | DarkFox, SIVRA-35, HCR-20, WAVR-21, ATAP                      | DarkFox, SIVRA-35, HCR-20, WAVR-21, ATAP                           | DarkFox, SIVRA-35, HCR-20, WAVR-21, ATAP  | General diagnostic interview, MMPI-2, WAIS, PAR          |

\* Triage refers to the initial assessment of threat and violence risk in a broad sense. While triage is also used as a process to determine next steps in a Title IX matter, triage is also a common term in risk/threat, law enforcement, trauma medicine, and psychology.

# Terminology

## Risk Factors

Many researchers have discussed the various risk factors related to targeted violence. These have included the Federal Bureau of Investigations<sup>1</sup>, National Center for Threat Assessment<sup>2</sup>, The U.S. Post Office<sup>3</sup>, National Behavioral Intervention Team Association<sup>4</sup>, and the Association of Threat Assessment Professionals<sup>5</sup>. Some of these are listed here below:

|                    |                        |                        |                                       |
|--------------------|------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Direct threat      | Indirect threat        | Lack mental support    | End of a relationship                 |
| Access to weapons  | Lack of peer support   | Explosive reactions    | Inability to date                     |
| Hardened thoughts  | Lack of family support | Intimidates others     | Hopelessness                          |
| Social isolation   | Loss of job            | Lacks empathy          | Last act behavior                     |
| Victim of bullying | Decline in academics   | Polarized thoughts     | Legacy token                          |
| Substance abuse    | Acquiring weapons      | Glorifies violence     | Feeling persecuted                    |
| Authority conflict | Suicide attempt        | Lacking remorse        | Leaking attack plan                   |
| Fixation on target | Focus on target        | Action plan for attack | Timeframe for attack                  |
| Fantasy rehearsal  | Rejection              | Financial loss         | Catalyst event                        |
| Feeling trapped    | Poor anger outlets     | Fame seeking           | Objectification/<br>Depersonalization |

A key aspect of understanding risk factors is the importance of seeing these in combination, like puzzle pieces coming together to create a larger meaning. As with a puzzle, one piece alone is not particularly useful. It's when these pieces combine that the factors begin to be more useful in understanding risk.

## Protective Factors

When conducting a threat assessment, it is essential to balance risk factors against the protective factors that exist for an individual. These protective factors often “take the temperature down” regarding the concerns<sup>6</sup>. Some of these factors are included below:

|                         |                       |                      |                     |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Social support          | Empathy to others     | School engagement    | Religious supports  |
| Family support          | Perspective taking    | Work engagement      | Non-violent outlets |
| Positive future view    | Intimate relationship | Positive self-esteem | Problem solving     |
| No weapon access        | Sense of identity     | Consequence aware    | Emotional stability |
| Social/political safety | Housing stability     | Resiliency           | Lacks reactivity    |

## Leakage

Leakage is the communication to a third party of intent to do harm<sup>7</sup>. BIT team members have opportunities to detect leakage concerning a potential attack during an initial interview. Team members should be aware that violence is rarely spontaneous. Those who act violently take time to rehearse and fantasize about violent acts. This presents an opportunity for others to overhear or observe potential leakage that could then be used to prevent an attack. The presence of this kind of leakage prior to an attack gives evidence to support the idea that those who plan this kind of mass casualty violence often plan, fantasize, and talk about the event prior to an attack. This offers an opportunity to discover this leakage and thwart the potential assault.<sup>8</sup>

## Silo(ing)

Siloing occurs when departments or individuals hold onto information in isolation, without working collaboratively. These isolated communications occur when each department focuses on their own individual mission, policy, and rules without seeing themselves as part of a larger, more complex system. Communications that focus primarily on a single department to the detriment of seeing threat assessment and behavioral intervention as larger, community-based approaches are said to be operating in a “silo.” Much like the tall grain silos that are spotted throughout the Midwest, they are single structures serving their function, separated from the larger overall system. Researchers further define this danger: “there is always the risk of a ‘silo effect’ — different domains of behavior are never linked together or synthesized to develop a comprehensive picture of the subject of concern, conduct further investigation, identify other warning behaviors, and actively risk-manage the case.”<sup>9</sup>

## Catalyst Event

A catalyst event is an event in the subject’s life that involves a sense of stark change. Some examples would include the death of a parent, the loss of a job, chronic illness, losing a position in an academic program, not making the cut for a sports team, suspension or expulsion from school, failing a pledge to a fraternity or sorority, police charges, or loss of an intimate relationship. The danger here is the idea that the catalyst event becomes the match to a pool of gasoline, accelerating the movement towards violence.<sup>10</sup>

## Legacy Token

Legacy tokens are writings or media content prepared by a perpetrator prior to an attack that are typically designed to be found following the attack as a way to share a message. The legacy token is a manifesto, written text, online blog, video project, piece of art, diary, or journal created prior to an attack and left for someone to find after the attack. It clarifies the motives of the attacker or better defines the attacker’s message of infamy. A legacy token merits study by those involved in violence prevention because it can help them be better prepared to engage others who intend to harm.<sup>11</sup>

## Costuming

Costuming is the process of creating a persona or mask that defines or hides the true identity of those planning violence. There are two explanations for the type of clothing and accessories mass shooters choose. First, this is an individual who is dressing tactically to complete a mission. Few retailers sell tactical vests, knee pads, thigh rigs, and harnesses offer colors in red, pink, or yellow. Choices are more typically black, olive drab, and camouflage. Colors and styles are designed to allow wearers to have easy access to their weapons, as well as to blend into surroundings. Shooters choose these items

for similar reasons. The second reason shooters outfit themselves in this style of tactical gear is more psychological in nature. Meloy refers to this as identification warning behavior. "Identification warning behavior is any behavior that indicates a psychological desire to be a 'pseudo-commando' have a 'warrior mentality'<sup>12</sup>, closely associate with weapons or other military or law enforcement paraphernalia, identify with previous attackers or assassins, or identify oneself as an agent to advance a particular cause or belief system."<sup>13</sup>

## Zero-Tolerance Policies

These zero-tolerance policies refer to a straightforward separation based on a single incident of weapons possession or violent threat/rhetoric. Simply separating a subject from school or work under the authority of a zero-tolerance policy creates the potential to take an upset, frustrated individual and escalate them into a rage-filled and potentially vengeful attacker. Careful assessment, intervention, and monitoring are the tools that are most effective in mitigating threats of violence in the community. While separating a subject from campus or work may give an illusion of safety, there are numerous examples where angry, disgruntled, and disempowered individuals came back to campus or the workplace to seek their revenge. O'Toole writes, "In a knee-jerk reaction, communities may resort to inflexible, one-size-fits-all policies on preventing or reacting to violence."<sup>14</sup> The FBI writes, "Do not rely on expulsion, except as a last resort and unless absolutely necessary to ensure campus safety; authorities should avoid the temptation to simply expel students of concern to quickly resolve a risk. Isolated from other contingency and safety planning, this strategy sometimes can worsen matters. The final humiliation of expulsion may serve as a precipitating, or triggering, stressor in the subject's life and propel the marginalized and hostile individual toward violence."<sup>15</sup>

## Hardening the Target

Target hardening is the process of making a target more difficult to attack. This occurs when buildings create a single point of entrance, use closed circuit television cameras (CCTV), build reinforced doors, install automatic locks, create sign in/sign out policies, or have armed School Resources Officers (SROs). Many attackers have shown in their journals that they are specifically considering these factors when carrying out an attack. This was evidenced in James Holmes' journal at the Colorado movie theatre attack and then more recently in the El Paso shooters manifesto, which stated: "Attack low security targets. Even though you might out gun a security guard or police man, they likely beat you in armor, training, and numbers. Do not throw away your life on an unnecessarily dangerous target. If a target seems too hot, live to fight another day."

## Objectification and Depersonalization

Distancing oneself from a target is a common technique used to avoid any lasting emotional connection that might distract from completing the mission at hand. Objectification and depersonalization are risk factors, as they allow the aggressor to dehumanize the intended victims. The seeing of another as separate from oneself is one of the building blocks necessary prior to carrying out a rampage shooting or other extreme violent event.

# Affective & Predatory Violence

There are two different primary types of violence that BIT team members will encounter: affective and predatory violence. Meloy writes, "It is generally agreed that violence is either affective or predatory. Affective violence, sometimes referred to as reactive, impulsive, or emotional violence, is preceded by autonomic arousal, caused by a reaction to a perceived threat, and accompanied by intense feelings of anger and/or fear. It is a defensive violence, and its evolutionary basis is self-protection to live another day... Predatory violence, sometimes referred to as instrumental or premeditated violence, is characterized by the absence of autonomic arousal and emotion, the absence of an imminent threat, and planning and preparation beforehand. It is offensive violence, and its evolutionary basis is hunting for food to live another day."<sup>16</sup> The difference is described below.

## Affective Violence

Affective violence is the result of a progressive, biologically driven path towards physical violence. It is poorly planned and a reaction to environmental stressors. Affective violence is based upon the primal instinct of fight or flight, fueled by adrenaline and characterized by someone losing control and ultimately attacking a victim. Howard describes it this way: "A potential aggressor channels his appraisal into some form of coping. The strength of the reaction is a direct function of the validation of the threat and the degree of certainty that the threat will thwart an objective or a goal. It is the emotion of being threatened and the inability to cope with that threat that initiates aggression. The common thread throughout this process is the release of adrenaline."<sup>17</sup>

Grossman and Siddle have conducted landmark studies looking into how aggression can induce adrenaline's (or epinephrine's) influence on the heart rate, body language, behavior, and communication.<sup>18</sup> The adrenaline rushing through a subject's system has also been well studied by Hart<sup>19</sup>. He illustrates that when an individual cannot cope with their anxiety, their mind perceives this anxiety as a threat. As the individual starts to produce adrenaline, this triggers the affective violence response.<sup>20</sup>

## Predatory Violence

Predatory violence, in its extreme form, is described as an intent-driven, planned attack. This aggression occurs when a subject becomes isolated, disconnected, lacks trust, and often feels threatened and frustrated by a perceived attack. They plot and plan their revenge and execute their plans with a militaristic, tactical precision.<sup>21</sup> This violence is a result of a planned, intent-driven action that is more commonly exhibited by a subject engaging in mission-oriented, instrumental violence such as a mass shooting.<sup>22</sup> Predatory violence involves a more strategic, focused attack and a desire to complete a mission.

## The Meloy Model of Predatory Violence

Meloy defines these stages through these approach behaviors. These are: pathway, fixation, identification, novel aggression, energy burst, leakage, last resort, and directly communicated threat.<sup>23</sup>

1. **Pathway warning behavior** – any behavior that is part of research, planning, preparation, or implementation of an attack.
2. **Fixation Warning Behavior** – any behavior that indicates an increasingly pathological preoccupation with a person or a cause. It is measured by:
  - increasing perseveration on the person or cause;
  - increasingly strident opinion;
  - increasingly negative characterization of the object of fixation;
  - impact on the family or other associates of the object of fixation, if present and aware; and/or
  - angry emotional undertone.

It is typically accompanied by social or occupational deterioration.

3. **Identification Warning Behavior** – any behavior that indicates a psychological desire to be a “pseudo-commando,” have a “warrior mentality,” closely associate with weapons or other military or law enforcement paraphernalia, identify with previous attackers or assassins, or identify oneself as an agent to advance a particular cause or belief system.
4. **Novel Aggression Warning Behavior** – an act of violence that appears unrelated to any targeted violence pathway warning behavior committed for the first time. Such behaviors may be used to test the ability of the subject to actually do a violent act, and may be a measure of response tendency, the motivation to act on the environment, or a behavioral tryout.
5. **Energy Burst Warning Behavior** – an increase in the frequency or variety of any noted activities related to the target, even if the activities themselves are relatively innocuous, usually in the days or weeks before the attack.
6. **Leakage Warning Behavior** – the communication to a third party of an intent to do harm to a target through an attack.
7. **Last Resort Warning Behavior** – evidence of a violent “action imperative,” increasing desperation or distress through declaration in word or deed, forcing the individual into a position of last resort. There is no alternative other than violence, and the consequences are justified.
8. **Directly Communicated Threat Warning Behavior** – the communication of a direct threat to the target or law enforcement beforehand. A threat is a written or oral communication that implicitly or explicitly states a wish or intent to damage, injure, or kill the target, or individuals symbolically or actually associated with the target.

## Hunters and Howlers

Calhoun and Weston (2009) wrote a seminal book on threat assessment called *Threat Assessment and Management Strategies: Identifying the Howlers and Hunters*.<sup>24</sup> Their central premise is that those who plan to attack don't always communicate this in advance. They write: "Threat management involves managing two very different types of individuals. One group consists of hunters. They truly intend to use lethal violence to aggrieve some perceived injustice. Hunters develop a reason for committing violence, come up with the idea to do so, research and plan their attack, prepare for it, then breach their target's security and actually attack. Whatever their reason, those who intend to act violently go through the process of intended violence."

Most direct communicated threats do not lead to violence. Calhoun and Weston make this point: "Writing letters is easy; shooting someone or setting him on fire presents a considerably more difficult challenge." While this is accurate, it remains important to explore the contextual risk factors related to the specific case at hand. The challenge is to determine whether a violent or threatening behavior is simply a bad decision on the part of the subject, or if the threat of violence is the proverbial "tip of the iceberg," exposing deeper plans that may lead to a more dangerous event occurring in the future.

Although direct threats often do not lead to violence, there must be a diligence in the assessment process. The FBI explains it this way: "Unlike disruptive and other forms of aggressive behavior, violent or directly communicated threat always requires immediate investigation and evaluation... While most communicated direct threats do not end in violence, this can only be determined after directly questioning and assessing the student in question."<sup>25</sup>

## Selected Predatory Violence Cases

**Parkland Shooting.** On the afternoon of February 14, 2018, a former student, Nikolas Cruz, walked into a building at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. He situated and armed himself with an AR-15 rifle, pulled the fire alarm, and began shooting at students and teachers exiting classrooms. Approximately six minutes later, after navigating three floors of classrooms while killing 17 people and wounding 17 more, he put his weapon down and exited the building among the chaos he had started. There were numerous opportunities to detect the escalation to the attack. On February 5, 2016, a neighbor's son told the sheriff's office that Cruz, pictured with guns on Instagram, "planned to shoot up the school." A deputy responded, discovered that Cruz owned knives and a BB gun, and informed the high school's resource officer, Scot Peterson. On September 28, another student informed Peterson that Cruz may have ingested gasoline a week earlier and was cutting himself. In September 2017, a blogger in Mississippi warned the FBI that someone named "Nikolas Cruz" wrote on his YouTube page: "I'm going to be a professional school shooter." On November 1, 2017, Katherine Blaine told the sheriff's department that her cousin, Nikolas' mother, recently died. She said Cruz had rifles and requested that the agency recover them. A close family friend agreed to take possession of the weapons. On November 30, 2017, a caller told the sheriff's department that Cruz was collecting guns and knives and "could be a school shooter in the making." On January 5, 2018, a person close to Cruz contacted the FBI's tipline to report concerns about him, including his possession of guns.<sup>26</sup>

**Freeman High Shooting.** On September 13, 2017, Caleb Sharpe flipped a coin that came up heads and he entered his school with an AR-15 and a handgun in a duffel-bag. The AR-15 jammed, and he used the handgun to shoot a fellow student, who was trying to stop the shooting. Caleb continued to shoot down the hall and then surrendered to a custodian. He told detectives that he wanted to "teach everyone a lesson about what happens when you bully others." Around the time classes started at the high school, Caleb gave notes to several friends indicating plans to do "something stupid" that might leave him dead or in jail. One of those notes was reportedly passed on to a school counselor. He also bragged to several friends when he figured out the combination to his father's gun safe, and again when he learned to make bombs out of household materials. He acted out violent scenarios on his YouTube channel and spoke openly about his fascination with school shootings and notorious killers like Ted Bundy. He messaged a friend over Facebook, asking if the friend could get him gasoline, tinfoil, and fuses. The friend reported "I said, 'No,' and asked him why. He said, 'For a science experiment.' I said, 'Why are you doing a science experiment?' and he said, 'Nevermind.'"

**Columbine Shooting.** On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold shot and killed 12 students and a teacher, and injured 21 other students and a teacher at Columbine High School. Both had several pipe bombs, napalm, knives, and other homemade explosives. Two bombs were set in the school cafeteria. They recorded hours of video, calling others to follow in their footsteps. The video begins with a reference to another shooting: "Do not think we're trying to copy anyone," it tells some future, unseen audience. "We had the idea before the first one ever happened. Our plan is better, not like those fucks in Kentucky with camouflage and .22s. Those kids were only trying to be accepted by others." There was a shooting, the Johnson and Golden shooting in Arkansas in 1988, that seems to match the description, or perhaps the Michael Carneal shooting in Kentucky, which involved a .22.

## Selected Articles & Resources

### Government Articles

DOJ/FBI. (2017). Making Prevention a Reality: Identifying, Assessing, and Managing the Threat of Targeted Attacks. Behavioral Analysis Unit: National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime.

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Jarvis, John & Scherer, J. Amber. (2015) Mass Victimization: Promising Avenues for Prevention. Washington D.C: Federal Bureau of Investigation.

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U.S. Department of Education (2019). Indicators of School Crime and Safety.

<https://nces.ed.gov/programs/crimeindicators/>

### Research Articles

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[http://forensiseuropa.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/2011\\_theroleofwarningbehaviorsinthreat.pdf](http://forensiseuropa.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/2011_theroleofwarningbehaviorsinthreat.pdf)

Pescara-Kovach & Raleigh. (2017). The Contagion Effect as it Relates to Public Mass Shootings and Suicides

[https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/b64c59\\_ff3081963db049ab81cf8e5034f1374b.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/b64c59_ff3081963db049ab81cf8e5034f1374b.pdf)

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## Threat Assessment Books

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Jed Foundations. (2012). A Guide for Campus Teams. [www.jedfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/campus-teams-balancing-safety-support-campus-jed-guide.pdf](http://www.jedfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/campus-teams-balancing-safety-support-campus-jed-guide.pdf)

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## Threat and Violence Risk Assessment Measures

RAGE-V (ATAP): <http://atapworldwide.org/associations/8976/files/documents/RAGE-V.pdf>

MOSAIC (Gavin de Becker): <https://www.mosaicmethod.com>

WAVR-21 (White & Meloy): <http://wavr21.com>

HCR-20 (Hart): [http://proactive-resolutions.com/old-site/bookletsmanuals/hcr-20-ver2\\_eu.html](http://proactive-resolutions.com/old-site/bookletsmanuals/hcr-20-ver2_eu.html)

FAVT (Firestone): [www4.parinc.com/Products/Product.aspx?ProductID=FAVT](http://www4.parinc.com/Products/Product.aspx?ProductID=FAVT)

SIVRA-35 (Van Brunt): [www.nabita.org/resources/assessment-tools/sivra-35/](http://www.nabita.org/resources/assessment-tools/sivra-35/)

HARE Psychopathy Checklist (Hare): [www.hare.org/scales/pclr.html](http://www.hare.org/scales/pclr.html)

## End Notes

- 1 [www.fbi.gov/file-repository/stats-services-publications-school-shooter-school-shooter/view](http://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/stats-services-publications-school-shooter-school-shooter/view)
- 2 [www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/18\\_0711\\_USSS\\_NTAC-Enhancing-School-Safety-Guide.pdf](http://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/18_0711_USSS_NTAC-Enhancing-School-Safety-Guide.pdf)
- 3 [www.nalc.org/workplace-issues/resources/manuals/pub108.pdf](http://www.nalc.org/workplace-issues/resources/manuals/pub108.pdf)
- 4 [www.nabita.org](http://www.nabita.org)
- 5 [www.atapworldwide.org](http://www.atapworldwide.org)
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