

Empty Your Inbox: How to tame your email, boost your productivity, and reclaim your sanity



Introduction

As I write this sentence, my email inbox is empty. In fact, it's almost always empty at the end of the day. This seemingly amazing feat didn't require a great deal of technological sophistication, organizational wizardry, or monk-like discipline. I simply decided an empty inbox was necessary to preserve my sanity, and through trial and error — along with some helpful hints from productivity experts like [Merlin Mann](#) and [David Allen](#) — I eventually settled on a simple system that makes it possible.

Maintaining an empty inbox can make you more productive, result in fewer lost messages and missed opportunities, and reduce stress by letting you focus on your most important email. While it may take some initial effort to get there, changing the way you deal with email doesn't have to be difficult.

In this article, I'll show you the three key steps to getting your email under control, so it can enhance your productivity rather than stifle it.

Part 1: Turn down the volume on your email

If a broken pipe is causing your house to flood, you need to turn off the water before you worry about cleaning up. It's the same with email: before worrying about what's already in your inbox, you should do whatever you can to decrease the volume of incoming messages — particularly spam, advertising, and other nonessential communications.

Zap spam

Start by turning on your email client's junk-mail filter. In Mail, choose Mail > Preferences, and click on Junk Mail. Here you can decide how Mail should treat messages it thinks might be spam. In Outlook, you'll find the relevant settings under Tools > Junk E-mail Protection.

If you continue to receive a lot of spam in your inbox, you may be better served by a third-party application or server-side service. There are a number of options on the market, and Amity can help you choose one that's right for you.

Another option that will definitely cut your spam is to adopt a new email address. It's one more great reason to move to a personal domain (such as me@myname.com). Initially you'll want to forward all your email from your old to your new mail account, but once your friends and contacts have your new address, you can turn off the forwarding and say goodbye to all that unwanted mail directed to your old address.

Protect your email address

The more you offer your email address to companies, competitions and mailing lists, the more spam you're going to attract. Surprisingly, even companies you thought you could trust will sell your address to others in their network for marketing purposes. Before you provide your email address to *any* company, ask yourself – do they *really* need it? More often than not, the answer is simply “no”. Even if the answer is yes, you still have options for protecting your email address.

To everyone but my close friends, I provide an email *alias* rather than my real address. For example, all my bank statements come to banking@mydomain.com (this email still comes to my mailbox, hence it is only an alias, and not a separate account). If one day I start getting spam at this address, I can simply delete it, and replace it with, say, banking2@mydomain.com with a minimum of hassle. Plus, it makes it easy for me to use rules to filter my incoming mail into relevant folders and bypass my inbox entirely (more on this later). I have a dozen more aliases just like that, plus I keep junk@mydomain.com for those miscellaneous sign-ups and one-off online bookings (hotels, car rentals, etc.),

Amity can help you set up a personal domain and email service, add email aliases to your account, and provide any other email help you might need.

Oh, and lastly... on every web form, make sure you uncheck that little box that voluntarily opts you in to future marketing emails!

Separate your quick conversations

In some situations, using Apple's Messages is faster and more efficient than email – and it has the terrific side-effect of reducing the number of messages in your inbox. With Messages you can SMS quickly right from your computer's keyboard, and have all your conversations sync with your iPhone and iPad. This is ideal for conversations involving a lot of back-and-forth but not a lot of detail (such as where and when to meet), or for quick queries. If this is still too much back-and-forth for you, try picking up the phone instead.

Set expectations

Most email systems have an out-of-office feature that can send a canned reply to your incoming messages when you're away on holidays. But these autoreplies can be useful even when you're not basking on the beach. If you're facing an important deadline or simply don't have time to send out replies for a day or two, craft a brief autoreply saying that you've received the message but that your reply may be delayed. Your correspondents will be reassured that you've received their mail, and will be less likely to send follow-up messages that'll just make matters worse.

For iCloud, log into icloud.com and follow [these instructions](#). For a Microsoft Exchange account, log into OWA and follow [these instructions](#), and for Google Apps / gmail, follow [these](#).

Part 2: The fast way to file your email

When you first started using email, your inbox may have seemed like a convenient and hassle-free storage bin for all of your incoming messages. But hundreds or thousands of messages later, you're probably finding the task of managing all of those messages rather unwieldy.

Your inbox should be nothing more than what its name suggests - somewhere for incoming mail to sit until it is dealt with. This section focuses a system for dealing with your incoming mail quickly and easily.

Set up your mailboxes

Your email account comes with some standard folders such as Sent, Junk and Trash, but you can add additional folders (usually called "mailboxes") quite easily. In Mail, go to Mailbox > New mailbox... , and give it a name. (Make sure you create it on your server account, and NOT "On my Mac".) In Outlook 2011, go to File > New > Folder.

Some people use dozens of mailboxes, but with rare exceptions that's more trouble than it's worth. Your software can search thousands of messages in seconds, so you gain little with such fine-grained organization and you create extra filing work for yourself. While some proponents of this system suggest filing everything into one big "filed" folder, most people still like to split their mail into a small number of folders. I suggest broad categories, such as Personal, Committees, Hobbies & Sports, Online shopping, etc. *I recommend using no more than a dozen folders*, so you can easily see them all on your screen at once. (Too many folders and subfolders will slow you down, especially on your iphone!)

In addition, I need you to create two "special" folders, called "A Action" and "A Later". (The letter A in front ensures these stay at the top of your folder list.)

Now, what you need is a workflow to help you deal with each new message in a brutally efficient way.

Be quick and decisive

From now on, your inbox will be just that: a place where incoming messages stay just long enough for you to decide what to do with them. For the moment, don't worry about the hundreds or thousands of old messages already there—we'll deal with those shortly. Right now your objective is to get every new message out of your inbox as quickly as possible.

When you open your email program, you'll see a slew of new messages arrive. Don't cherry-pick - select the oldest message in the list and scan it quickly. While the content of the message is fresh in your mind, *think about what it requires from you (if anything)*, then do one of the following things:

Delete the message if it doesn't require anything further, and you don't think you'll need to refer back to it again in future. (Remember, be brutal!) Or...

File the message in one of your dozen mailboxes if you think you might need it again. (Be honest: are you *really* ever going to need to come back to this?)

Reply if it is warranted, and you can construct and send a suitable reply within a couple of minutes, then delete or file the original message as per above. It's better to deal with the message quickly while it's fresh in your mind, rather than having to re-read it later before replying. Learn to construct quick, concise replies (more on this in Part 3) - most people won't expect a formal letter or an essay. (Also keep in mind that not every message requires a reply - not even every message that asks a question. Some people are naturally chatty; however, that doesn't mean they'll be offended if you don't respond to every question in every message.)

Action: If a message is going to require a more in-depth or carefully thought-out response, move the message into your A-Action mailbox. The point of this mailbox isn't merely to keep your inbox empty, but to focus your attention on those messages that genuinely require more attention than you can give in a few minutes. We'll come back to this mailbox and deal with these messages as soon as we've sorted through the rest of your new mail.

Create a Task: If an email requires you to *do something* - write an article, look up information, make an appointment, etc. - add the item to your to-do list, then file or delete the message immediately. Your inbox shouldn't serve as a makeshift to-do list, or else you'll guarantee that it's always full of tasks that take days, weeks, or longer to complete. That's what your to-do software is for.

Apple's Reminders App and Microsoft Outlook 2011 both make it easy to keep your tasks and deadlines under control, and sync them to your iPhone and iPad. For something fancier, there are lots of great task managers available on the App Store - one simply called [Things](#) is my favourite.

Forward any message that requires another person's action. If you receive a party invitation and need to find out whether your husband is interested before you reply, forward the message to him and then delete your copy. If you're concerned that the person to whom you've forwarded a message might not get back to you and that you'll forget about it, file the message in your Action mailbox or add a reminder to your to-do list. Just get it out of your inbox. And most importantly - can something be delegated to another member of your team? Whenever possible, forward it on.

Later: If a message is something you want to read, but don't have to read right now, file it in A-Later. For me, these messages include newsletters from clubs and organisations, sale flyers from my favourite stores, and news / what's on emails. You can read these low-priority messages *later* when you have some spare time to browse through them, but for now you need them out of the way so you can deal with more important correspondence.

Work your way through your messages *in order*, deleting or filing, until no new messages remain. It's important to deal with each in order, or else you'll end up jumping to the interesting-looking ones and procrastinating over the ones you don't want to deal with.

Now that all your new messages are gone from your inbox, you can...

Deal with the messages in A-Action: Time to focus on the most important messages, which are sitting in your A-Action mailbox. Don't let these build up – aim to have them all replied to by the end of each day, then delete or file the original messages.

And when you have some spare time or need a break... Have a browse through your A-Later folder, so you can read those newsletters, sale flyers, and jokes from friends. Again, delete or file as you go. I usually suggest creating a “rule” for this folder so that it automatically deletes messages more than a week or two old. If you haven't read them by then you're never likely to, so don't let them pile up and distract you. How to create a rule? In the words of Deane Hutton – I'm glad you asked.

Set up rules

Your email client can reduce the amount of work you have to do when new messages arrive by processing some of them for you. Email programs like Mail and Outlook let you create rules that look for certain characteristics in incoming email and then take an action – such as moving it to a certain mailbox, highlighting it in a specific colour, deleting it, or sending out a canned reply – when a message matches any or all of the criteria you specify in the rule.

Although rules can't deal with *all* your incoming messages, they can go a long way toward keeping your inbox more clean and tidy, and helping you identify especially important messages.

The internet is full of great articles (such as [this one](#)) about using rules to streamline your email, so I suggest you have a google. For instructions on how to set up a new rule in Mail, look [here](#). For Outlook, look [here](#).

Apply your rules to the email backlog

Now that you have a collection of rules that can automatically file and delete your messages, apply them to the backlog in your inbox. In Mail, select your inbox, then go to Edit > Select All to highlight all messages. Now go to Message > Apply rules.

Deal with the rest of the email backlog

Next, sort your inbox by date, and select everything more than a year old. Move these messages (in small batches, so as not to overwhelm your email program) to an *offline* folder called something like “Inbox overflow”. We need to move these offline, rather than delete them, otherwise you'll just clog up your trash. (If you don't understand the difference between offline folders and those on the server, ask your Amity consultant.) Be patient, your email program may struggle

to keep up. Once these messages are off the server, you can choose to delete or keep them, but at least they're safely out of your inbox.

Next, sort the remaining messages by sender, or "from". Scrolling through, you will see plenty of low-hanging fruit - large batches of messages from a single sender that you can select *en-masse* and delete (or file). Try to clear as much as you can this way, before you finally have to go message-by-message to deal with the rest. When you get to this stage, set yourself a goal: can you clear just 20 old messages each day? 50? 100? It may take a bit of effort to get there, but with a bit of persistence, you will eventually hit your goal of zero. Once you discover the freedom of a completely empty inbox, you'll never look back.

Keep your email database lean and fast

Now your inbox is empty, but you may still have thousands of messages filed away in folders. Though your mail program can handle these, it will always work faster if it has less to digest, and thus less to sync with your mail server. If you've been filing messages in the same folders for years, it's worth doing some spring-cleaning now and then, even just purging or archiving old sent messages and trash. I often find clients complaining that something is wrong with their email program, only to find it is choking on masses of old and unneeded email.

There are lots of ways to thin out your mail, but I usually start by using a *smart mailbox* to automatically filter out email older than a certain date, then move these messages to an offline ("On My Mac") folder, so they're at least off your server. You can leave them here for easy access, or further archive them as .mbox files, and stash them away with your Documents. If this all seems a bit daunting to you, a session with Amity might help you figure out what you should archive, and walk you through the process.

Part 3: Speed up email replies

If you're trying to adopt good email habits and clear out your inbox, creating a system to deal with all of your incoming email is an essential first step. But one of the reasons email often gets stuck in an Inbox is that a reply is needed, but the time and energy required to craft that reply is too daunting. Here are four tricks to help you speed up the process:

1. *Keep it brief*

The longer your replies, the more likely you are to get still more-elaborate responses from your correspondents, leading to an endless cycle of email. Try forcing yourself to keep every email reply to just a few sentences. At first, the effort required to make concise replies may actually take you more time, but once you get the knack of it, you'll find that it goes much faster.

2. *Use text-expansion tools*

Several third-party apps for OS X can watch what you type and automatically turn short abbreviations into useful strings such as your address, the current date, or phrases like "To whom it may concern." My favorite utility in this category is [Typelt4Me](#), though other popular options include [TextExpander](#) and [Typinator](#).

iOS has text expansion built right in, allowing you to fire off quicker replies from your iPhone or iPad on the fly. You can set up your favourite phrases in Settings > Keyboard > Shortcuts.

3. *Use signatures*

Another way to quickly insert commonly used text is by using your email program's built-in signature feature. While your email signature usually just includes your name and contact details, you can configure several different signatures to include anything you like, (such as directions to your house, your bank details, etc.) then simply choose the right one for each message with a single click.

To set up signatures in Mail, go to Mail > Preferences and click on the Signatures tab. Add a new signature by clicking on the plus-sign button. Enter a name for your signature, and type all the text you want it to include in the field on the right. Then, drag the finished signature onto the name of each account where you want it to be available. When composing a message, you can choose from among your signatures using the pop-up Signature menu in the header portion of the window. In Outlook, the process is almost identical - look under Outlook > Preferences and click on the Signatures tab.

4. *Dictate rather than type*

Do your fingers have trouble keeping up with your thoughts? If your typing is holding you back, try dictating messages instead. Your Mac has a built-in microphone, (though you can plug in your iPhone headset if you prefer), and you may not realise that your computer has a built-in dictation feature, too. Turn it on in System Preferences > Dictation & Speech, and you can use your chosen keyboard shortcut to start and stop dictation. Don't forget to 'speak' your

punctuation, such as *comma*, *full stop* and *new paragraph*. For a fancier solution you can purchase something like Dragon Dictation, but most people find the Mac's built-in offering just fine.

On productivity

Finally, (and this may sound very strange to some of you), keep your email software closed for most of your workday. That's right – closed. When you're trying to focus on an important task that demands your full attention, hearing the “bing” of new mail every two minutes will totally kill your productivity. Instead, set aside two or three times each to deal with email, so you can shred through it and get back to work. People will soon discover that the sky doesn't fall in if they don't get a reply from you for a couple of hours, and if they need something urgent they can always call or text. Manage their expectations, so you can minimise your own distractions.

With a fast and efficient system for dealing with your email, you'll discover you can get much more done in less time, and make your email work for you, not the other way around.

Acknowledgements

This document is based on a series of articles by Joe Kissell that appeared in MacWorld in 2008. Though a little dated now, Joe's articles were instrumental in helping me get on top of my own overflowing email, and developing my methodology for helping others with theirs. If you're interested, Joe's original pieces can be found here:

http://www.macworld.com/article/1139510/empty_your_inbox.html