

# Control Your Email

Do you wish you received less email? Sure you do. Do you want to live without the convenience of electronic mail? Of course you don't. The greatest double-edged sword in productivity technology, email both empowers and overwhelms its users. But the most successful professionals know how to control their email instead of letting it run their workday.

On one hand, email enables anyone with an Internet-connected device to send information great distances at the press of a button. On the other, you have 1,762 unread messages sitting in your inbox, and you don't know when you'll have time to get through them all. *Ding!* Another one just arrived.

Before email became ubiquitous, to send a letter, a person had to commit the information to paper, stuff and address the envelope, affix postage, and drop it in the mailbox. Days or weeks later, the message arrived on the recipient's desk. Today, email offers the same type of text-based communication, just faster and easier, complete with a cute little envelope icon. But the same ways you deal with arriving postal mail don't work for electronic mail. Incoming messages are incoming messages. But email's effect on workers is vastly different from paper mail for one fundamental reason: volume. The speed, convenience, and low cost of sending email

has increased the number of transmissions to levels that turn the postal service green with envy: Reports estimate 294 *billion* emails are sent daily. Approximately 80% of that email is spam, but that still leaves roughly 50 billion legitimate emails every day.

This virtually free and instantaneous message transmission is great for the sender but not for the recipient. The cost and inconvenience of sending postal mail acts as a filter: when that envelope appears in the recipient's mailbox, she can trust that the message is important enough to the sender to warrant the investment.

Electronic mail, however, shifts that burden. With the volume of electronic mail sent each day, the onus is on the recipient — not the sender — to sort through the avalanche of received messages. Email overload is such a common malady in the information age that experts estimate it costs companies billions of dollars a year in worker productivity losses.

Some companies and users resort to extreme tactics to combat email overload:

- In 2004, Stanford professor Lawrence Lessig declared “email bankruptcy” when faced with the thousands of unread messages dating back two years that had accumulated in his inbox. Instead of attempting to open them all — a task he said would have been impossible — he sent an automated apology to his contacts and asked that they resend their unanswered message only if it were still important.<sup>1</sup> A web search for the term “email bankruptcy” shows that several others followed suit, publicly announcing their email bankruptcy on their websites.
- Overwhelmed by the effort that writing lengthy responses requires, designer Mike Davidson instituted a personal policy that any message he writes will be fewer than five sentences. Recipients who wonder about the brevity can get more information about the policy, which he includes in his message signature.<sup>2</sup>
- One cellular company designated a weekly email-free day. Employees refrain from sending or checking email (except from customers) every Friday. Workers report that the freedom from the distraction and interruption once a week helps them accomplish a lot more.<sup>3</sup>

Anyone who's spent hours processing a backlog of email can understand why you'd employ such tactics. It's so easy to let email take the reins of your workday. All you have to do is leave your email software open while you work. Each time it notifies you that a new message has arrived, stop

what you're doing, no matter how important it is or how involved you are, and switch to your inbox. Scan the new message. If it's an emergency, deal with it right away. If not, switch back to the task at hand. Try to remember where you were before that message arrived. At the end of the day, wonder how all those read messages accumulated in your inbox, what you're supposed to do about them again, and where the day went.

This is how most people operate. But there is a better way.

You can reduce the amount of time you spend fiddling with email to less than 30 minutes per day. You can empty your inbox and enjoy the feeling that you're completely caught up every workday. You can process your messages in bunches, in between other tasks, when your mind is free and clear. You can hear "Thanks for getting back to me so quickly" from your boss and co-workers more and more often. You can elicit the response you need in shorter exchanges. You can keep your inbox free of a festering pile of unfulfilled obligations. You can become known as responsive — and therefore responsible — engaged, and reliable around the office simply by being on top of your email. Soon, wealth, fame, and fortune will ensue.

You can control your email without declaring bankruptcy or refraining from using it just because it's a certain day of the week. Small changes and better habits practiced every day can get the constant influx of communication working *for* you instead of against you. This chapter provides practical strategies for getting your email under control and keeping it there.

**NOTE** For updates, links, references, and additional tips and tools regarding the hacks in this book, visit <http://lifehackerbook.com/>. (Append the chapter number — <http://lifehackerbook.com/ch1/>, for example — to go directly to a specific chapter's updates.)

## Hack 1: Empty Your Inbox (and Keep It Empty)

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Level . . . . . Easy

Platforms . . . All

Cost. . . . . Free

When you can empty your inbox on a regular basis, you've reached the ultimate level of email control. Emptying the inbox clears away that pile of unidentified pieces of information, keeps it from stacking up higher every day, and frees your mind to worry about more important work.

## Why an Empty Inbox?

Your inbox is a temporary holding pen for unprocessed messages. An unprocessed email is one you haven't made a decision about yet. When you get into the habit of deciding what to do with a new message within a day of its arrival, move it out of your inbox.

Some people enjoy keeping their inbox full so that they can glance at a list of most recent messages to see what's going on — what they should be working on, what their group is discussing, the latest funny YouTube video that's making the rounds. But just as you'd never leave a physical paper inbox full of documents whose only commonality is that they're *incoming*, you don't want to leave your email inbox full of messages. An inbox full of read messages does you no favors: You have no way to prioritize what's most important or to access the message contents in their most useful context. For example, a meeting invitation that comes in via email is much more meaningful on your calendar than in your inbox. A website address you want to visit later would do better in your bookmarks than in your email. A project document belongs in its appropriate folder, not in your email program. Everything should have its own place, and the inbox isn't it.

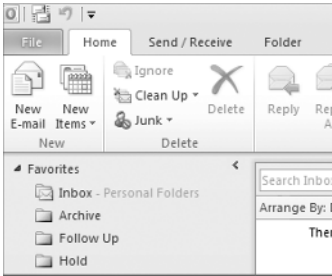
Furthermore, an empty inbox lightens the psychological load of an endless list of messages staring at you every time you check your email. It creates a clear demarcation between what's incoming and what's been resolved or placed into motion.

This hack introduces a simple, three-folder system that keeps your inbox clear and ensures that every message you receive is both findable and actionable without cluttering your inbox.

## Set Up the Trusted Trio of Folders

The three folders you need to keep your inbox empty and your messages in process are `Archive`, `Follow Up`, and `Hold`, as shown in Figure 1-1.

**NOTE** Some email programs — most notably Gmail (<http://gmail.com>) — have a built-in message archive. In that case you don't need to create an `Archive` label or folder. Simply use the program's built-in archived message storage place (which you can get to by clicking **All Mail**.)



**Figure 1-1:** Archive, Follow Up, and Hold folders clear your inbox.

## The Archive Folder

Most email you receive is stuff you don't need right now but may need to look up later. Archive these messages. The `Archive` is your long-term email reference library. It's where you place all the messages that contain information you may want to retrieve at some point in the long-term future, including any completed threads, completed requests, memos you've read, questions you've answered, and completed project email. Basically, any email exchange that's closed but that you may want to refer to at some point in the future belongs in the `Archive`.

The `Archive` is one single folder, with no subfolders. That's a scary concept to those who enjoy organizing information into specifically named folders. However, you're not a librarian, and you don't have time to waste deciding what message should go in what folder. The archive is completely searchable. You can retrieve any message you place there later using the right search operators. For more on plucking messages out of the `Archive` (without a complicated folder scheme), see Hack 6, "Master Message Search."

## The Follow Up Folder

Messages in your `Follow Up` folder represent tasks you must complete, whether that's a response that will take more than a minute to write or whether it's another type of action. Each of these messages maps to a task on your to-do list. A message from a long-lost high school friend whom you haven't spoken to in years and a request from the boss to update the quarterly report would both go into the `Follow Up` folder because you need to follow up with an action. It's not enough to just move this message into the `Follow Up` folder; make sure you also enter the task onto your to-do list so that you'll actually do it.

## ***The Hold Folder***

The `Hold` folder is a temporary holding pen for important messages you'll need quick access to within the next few days. If you're waiting on someone else to get back to you with crucial information, or you're maintaining a thread about a time-sensitive topic, keep it in the `Hold` folder.

Examples of messages that would go in `Hold` are a FedEx confirmation number for a delivery that's on its way, or a message from a co-worker that says, "I'll get back to you Tuesday re: The Big Project."

Review the `Hold` folder once a week, and clear it out as the messages in it become irrelevant — such as when that FedEx package gets delivered or when your co-worker gets back to you.

## **Process Your Messages**

Now that the three folders are in place, it's time to empty your inbox. Whether you're starting with an overstuffed inbox with months' worth of messages or the two dozen that arrived since you last checked, the method is the same. Beginning with the oldest email in your inbox, open the message and do the following:

- Delete it if you don't need it.
- Respond on the spot to quick questions or requests. Then archive or delete it.
- If it requires action that will take more than one minute to complete, move it to the `Follow Up` folder and add the task to your to-do list.
- If it's an item you're waiting on or may need within the next few days, move it to `Hold`. If it's time-sensitive (your co-worker promised you the document by Friday, for instance), add a note on your calendar to check in about the item you're waiting for.
- If it's an informational message you may want to refer to later, move it to the `Archive`.

Wash, rinse, and repeat for every message in your inbox until it is completely empty.

**NOTE** This exact folder scheme may not work for everyone, but it's a good start on the road to a simple, well-defined processing system. If you tweak and modify this method, just remember: the fewer folders you have, the easier it is to process each individual message.

## Keep It Empty

After you've emptied your inbox, keeping it that way is a matter of repeating the process a few times a day. Schedule regular email sessions, such as once mid-morning, once after lunch, and once in the late afternoon. Train yourself to follow the golden rule:

*Never leave a read email in your inbox.*

Make a decision about the fate of every message you read the first time you read it — no excuses. Be ruthless about this new practice. File information that incoming messages contain in its right place: dates in your calendar; project documents in their folder; website addresses in your bookmarks. Respond on the spot to messages that need a quick “yes” or “no.” Never touch an email in your inbox more than once.

Technologist Mark Hurst wrote, “Consider that an incoming email has the shelf life of Chinese takeout in the refrigerator. It’s best to eat it as soon as it arrives; within a day is OK, but after that it starts to get funky.”<sup>4</sup>

## Your First Time

If you're starting out with an inbox loaded with thousands of messages, emptying it the first time can be an overwhelming task. One way to start with your new good habits *right now* is to move all your existing messages into a separate, special folder (email management expert Merlin Mann calls it the “Email DMZ”<sup>5</sup> — a demilitarized zone).

Resolve to empty your inbox each time you check your email from this moment forward. Then, during each processing session, *after* you empty your inbox, take on a handful of the oldest messages in your “DMZ” folder as well. Slowly but surely, you'll catch up on the backlog *and* hone your new good habits as you go.

## The Catch

Just because you have all unresolved messages filed neatly away in `Follow Up` and `Hold` doesn't mean you're free and clear. The trick to this system is to consistently review `Follow Up` folder messages (which should be on your to-do list) and `Hold` folder messages, and to complete the items stowed away there. To keep from getting lulled into a total sense of completeness, you can mark all the messages in `Hold` and `Follow Up` as unread to easily monitor the number of outstanding items.

**NOTE** Special thanks to Merlin Mann, author of the *Inbox Zero* series (<http://inboxzero.com>) and “The Inbox Makeover,” which appeared in *Macworld Magazine* (available at <http://macworld.com/2005/04/features/tipsinbox/index.php>) and which greatly influenced the methods outlined in this hack.

## Hack 2: Decrease Your Response Time

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Level . . . . . **Easy**

Platform . . . . **All**

Cost . . . . . **Free**

Responding to your email in a timely manner is one of the best things you can do for your career. But no one emerges from the womb with a natural talent for parrying a constant stream of new messages vying for your attention all day long. Email responsiveness is an acquired skill — the one that just may differentiate you from everyone else in the world who’s overwhelmed by an overloaded inbox.

Michael Hyatt, CEO of Thomas Nelson Publishers, agrees. He said, “The truth is, you are building your reputation — your brand — one response at a time. People are shaping their view of you by how you respond to them. If you are slow, they assume you are incompetent and over your head. If you respond quickly, they assume you are competent and on top of your work. Their perception, whether you realize it or not, will determine how fast your career advances and how high you go. You can’t afford to be unresponsive. It is a career-killer.”<sup>6</sup>

Although it’s impossible to instantly respond to the dozens of new email messages you receive every day, you can increase your responsiveness rate without becoming a slave to your inbox. This hack provides strategies for responding to your email in a timely fashion without killing your entire workday.

### Process Messages in Batches

Your inbox dictates the ebb and flow of your work if it interrupts you every time a new message arrives. Don’t let it.

The explosion of email communication and proliferation of email-enabled smart phones has led many Americans to nonstop inbox monitoring. Seventy-two percent of respondents in a 2010 survey said they checked their email outside regular work hours (That includes in the morning



before going to work, vacations, and weekends.) One in five Americans check their work email *from bed*.<sup>7</sup>

The reality is that checking email adds up to a whole lot of time, much of it wasted. The world will not end if an email sits in your inbox for a few hours.

Schedule two or three “meetings” with your inbox each day at predetermined times to process email. If your job requires that you keep your email program running at all times, set it to check for new messages every hour (or two!) instead of every five minutes. (For more on protecting your sanity from the insidiousness of constant email checking, see Hack 41, “Reduce Email Interruptions.”)

## The One-Minute Rule

When you’ve begun an email processing session, start at the oldest message you received and work up. Follow the one-minute rule: If a message takes less than one minute to process and respond to, do it on the spot. One minute doesn’t sound like a lot of time, but in reality a whole lot can happen in 60 seconds. Dash off quick answers to questions, follow up with questions on requests, and knock down any “Sounds good” and “Let’s discuss on the phone; when’s a good time?” and “Received the attachment, thanks” type of messages. If you think that a message needs a lengthy, complicated response, consider taking it offline and making a phone call instead.

Most of your new messages will fall under the “can respond in less than a minute” umbrella, so go ahead and answer them.

## Respond to Task Requests — Before the Task Is Done

If someone asks you to complete a project or task, it’s natural to think, “I don’t have time to deal with this right now, so I’ll just leave it in my inbox to handle later.” There the message atrophies for weeks and a month later, you’ve never gotten back to the sender, and the task still isn’t done. That’s the quickest route to Irresponsibleville.

When asked to do something via email, respond right away with the following:

- Questions you may need answered to start
- A request for the task completion deadline
- How busy you are and when you think you can start
- The next time the requester can expect to hear from you regarding the task

An immediate response that says, “I’m booked solid for the next three months. What’s your deadline? Drop me a note in September if you’re still interested in having me work on this” — which is effectively saying, “No can do” — is much more professional and appreciated than no response at all, or a three-week delay.

## **Don’t Leave It in Your Inbox**

Touch a message once in your inbox and commit yourself to taking it to the next step, whether that’s dashing off a reply or moving it into your queue for a next step. But whatever you do, don’t scan messages in your inbox and just leave them there to scan again later. It’s a waste of time to repeat the same action again (and again).

## **Hack 3: Craft Effective Messages**

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**Level . . . . . Easy**

**Platform . . . . All**

**Cost . . . . . Free**

The old computer-science adage, “Garbage in, garbage out” (GIGO), means that if you give a computer the wrong input, it returns useless output. Humans are much more forgiving than computers, but in many ways GIGO applies to email correspondence as well. The clearer your email messages are, the more likely you’ll get the result you want quicker — whether it’s a response, a completed task, or an informed recipient.

In an ineffective email message, the sender’s expectations aren’t clear, the most important information is hard to find, and the body of the message is too long and difficult to read.

You spend at least a couple of hours a day reading and responding to email. How much of that time could be saved if all the messages you sent and received were to the point and free of any unnecessary information?

This hack covers ways to get the most out of email you send with the least amount of time, energy, and work.

## **Composing a New Message**

Keep in mind the following simple strategies for whittling the messages you send down to their most effective state.

## Determine Your Purpose

Every email message has a specific purpose. Either you are conveying information or requesting action from the recipient. Before you click that Compose button, know what you expect to get out of the exchange. If you don't know your message's purpose, don't write it.

If you need to flesh out your thoughts by writing, send the email to *yourself*. Then follow up with anything you need to ask or tell others.

## Use an Informative Subject Line

First impressions are important in a world in which two dozen different things are already competing for your email recipient's eyeballs and attention. The first thing your correspondent sees is the subject line of your message. Boil that line down to a few words that convey your message's purpose. Think of yourself as a newspaper headline writer, tasked with telling the whole story in just a few words to grab the reader's attention.

Remember that your recipient will use subject lines to scan and sort her inbox, track conversations, prioritize tasks, and absorb information at a glance, so make your subject lines amenable to that.

Here are some examples of bad subject lines:

**Subject:** Hi!  
**Subject:** Just wanted to tell you...  
**Subject:** Can you do me a favor?  
**Subject:** IMPORTANT!!!

None of those subject lines gets specific about the content of the message. Yes, this message may be *IMPORTANT!!!*, but what is it regarding? A "favor" might range from lending the sender your stapler to donating your kidney. One might want to "just tell you" a lot of things, from "I like your tie" to "I hear you're getting fired tomorrow."

Some examples of good subject lines include the following:

**Subject:** Tomorrow's managerial meeting agenda  
**Subject:** Questions about Monday's presentation  
**Subject:** QUESTION: May I quote you in an article?  
**Subject:** FYI: Out of the office Thursday  
**Subject:** REQUEST: Pls comment on the proposed redesign layout  
**Subject:** IMPORTANT: Must fax contract before 3PM today

Notice the optional use of prefixes (FYI, REQUEST, IMPORTANT) that convey the message type before addressing the content in the rest of the line. You can even shorten them to Q: for Question, REQ: for Request, and IMPT: for Important.

If your message contains several requests for action or info related to different topics entirely, break it down into separate messages. That can help get each point addressed in specific, relevant conversation threads.

### ***Be Succinct***

The purpose of writing an email isn't to hear yourself think; it's to elicit the desired response from the recipient.

The shorter your email, the more likely it is that it will be read and your request filled. No one wants to muddle through a long, wordy missive picking out the questions, task requests, and important points. Respect your recipient's time and expect that your message will be skimmed quickly. Get right to the point and hit Send. Everyone appreciates brevity.

**NOTE** Lots of email-savvy folks send subject-only messages to convey short bits of information. For example, a blank email with the subject line, FYI: Out of the office for the rest of the afternoon [EOM] (where EOM stands for End of Message) says all that it has to. Gmail is even smart enough to understand what EOM means; sending a body-less email with EOM in the subject will skip Gmail's normal "Send this message without body in the text?" prompt.

### ***Put Your Messages on a Diet***

If you send messages to people outside your corporate network, where download speeds and email software may differ from your environment, eliminate unnecessary attachments and HTML elements that may weigh down the message. Here are some tips:

- If you attach photos, be sure to rotate them to the correct orientation and resize them. (See Hack 55, "Batch Resize Photos," for a quick way to make your photos better suited for email.)
- Don't assume that everyone has HTML email enabled; many folks (including myself) disable HTML email to avoid marketing trackers and long message downloads.
- Don't assume that your message looks the same way in your recipient's software as it does in yours; all email applications format messages differently.
- In some email software, a long website address that wraps in the message may be unclickable. Use a service such as TinyURL (<http://tinyurl.com>) or Goo.gl (<http://goo.gl/>), or Bit.ly (<http://bit.ly/>) to shorten that address before you send your message.

## ***Facilitate a Complete Response***

A few line breaks can go a long way in a message that contains a set of questions, important points, or task requests. Use line breaks and bullet points liberally to make your message easy to read and respond to.

For example, the following message intersperses information with questions in one continuous paragraph:

Hi Becky,  
 Got your message about Tuesday, thanks! What's the conference room number? Turns out I'm going to drive instead of take the train. Will I need a parking pass? Also, I have the PowerPoint presentation on my laptop. Is there a projector available I can hook it up to, or should I bring my own?

It would be a lot easier for Becky to see the bits of the message that require a response if it were formatted this way:

Hi Becky,  
 I'm all set for Tuesday's meeting. A few questions for you:  
 \* What is the conference room number?  
 \* If I drive, how should I get a parking pass?  
 \* Is a projector available that will work with my laptop?

The second version clearly delineates what questions the sender needs answered and makes responding in line to the questions much easier for Becky.

## ***Make It Clear Why Everyone Got the Message***

Messages that have several recipients in the To: field can spread accountability too thin across a group of people. If everything thinks, "Someone else will take care of it," nothing will get done. As a sender, include multiple recipients on a message only when you absolutely must — and then make it clear in the body of the message why everyone is receiving it, as in the following example:

**To:** Victor Downs, Lorrie Crenshaw, Kyran Deck  
**Subject:** Staff luncheon confirmed for June 18th

We reserved a room for 40 at Lottie's for 1PM on Tuesday, June 18th.

VD: Will the shuttle be available for transportation that day?  
 Please let Kyran know.

KD: Please send out a staff wide e email invite with directions and shuttle information by the 4th.

LC: FYI, we'll have to cancel our weekly meeting.

## ***Don't Forget the Attachment***

It's too easy to dash off a message saying "the file's attached" and then never actually attach the file. The Forgotten Attachment Detector plugin for Microsoft Outlook (free from [www.officelabs.com/projects/forgottenattachmentdetector/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.officelabs.com/projects/forgottenattachmentdetector/Pages/default.aspx)) notifies you when you try to send a message containing words such as "see attached" or "attachment" in it and no file is attached. Gmail users have it even better — the popular email client notifies you when it thinks you've forgotten an attachment by default.

## **Replying to a Message**

Nothing's worse than sending an email with three questions and getting back the answer to only one. To avoid unnecessary email back-and-forth, answer all the messages that require a response as thoroughly as possible.

## ***Respond to Individual Points Inline***

For email that includes lists of questions or response-worthy points, press the Reply button and include your comments inline — that is, interspersed within the original email — to ensure that you address every point. For example, Becky might reply to the earlier message this way:

Hi Rich,

Rich Jones wrote:

> \* What is the conference room number?

**It's room 316 in Building B.**

> \* If I drive, how should I get a parking pass?

**Park in the west lot and give your name at the booth. The guard will issue you a guest pass there.**

> \* Is there a projector available that will work with my laptop?

**Yes, there is - a member of our tech team will be there to help set you up.**

**See you then,**

Becky

## ***Task Requests***

When you receive a request for action, don't delay your response until you're ready to complete the action. Instead, review the request and respond with any questions you need answered before you can get it done right away.

For example, if you receive the following email:

**Subject:** REQUEST: Please comment on the redesign layout proposal  
Let us know what you think about the new font choice and background color.

you might respond right away:

**Subject:** Re: REQUEST: Please comment on the redesign layout proposal

Tamara Smith wrote:

> Let us know what you think about the new font choice and background color.

**Can you send me a link to the new proposal?**

**Also, when is the deadline for final comments?**

## ***Lead by Example***

You may be a master at writing effective email, but communication is a two-way street. Lead by example when you receive poorly written messages. When you respond, edit an email's unspecific subject line so that further correspondence on the topic is easily identifiable in your inbox. Break up someone's run-on message into chunks and respond inline. If the purpose of the message is unclear to you, respond with the question, "What's my next step regarding this?" If someone sends you a rambling, 2,000-word description, reply briefly: "Sounds good." These strategies train others to not expect long messages from you in real time and to craft better subject lines and task requests.

## ***Don't Respond in Real Time***

Although some folks may live and die by the "Ding! You have new mail!" of their email client, email was never meant to be instant, real-time communication and shouldn't be used as such. If someone needs to engage you at this moment in time, he can call. Otherwise, create the expectation that email to you will not get answered on the spot.

Even if you check your email in real time (and you shouldn't unless you don't want to get anything else done), don't respond to nonemergency messages right away, especially from co-workers. It sets an impossible expectation for the future. Settle on a reasonable maximum response-time goal; for example, commit to responding to email within 4 to 6 hours on business days, or within 24 to 48 hours at most.

## ***Get Outside the Inbox***

Tone-deafness is the biggest pitfall of textual communication — especially quick, off-the-cuff methods such as email. The sender's facial expression or tone of voice doesn't come inside her email messages, and feelings can be hurt, recipients can be offended, and messages can be taken the wrong way. The American Psychological Association published a study that shows emailers overestimate their ability to convey their tone by about 25 percent when they press the Send button, and overestimate their ability to correctly interpret the tone of messages others send to them as well.<sup>8</sup>

Some issues are too complex or sensitive to be communicated via email. Know when it's appropriate to just pick up the phone and call someone or visit in person to convey a message and answer questions on the spot.

## ***Know When Not to Say a Thing***

Even though email correspondence *seems* private, it's not. Copies of every message you've ever sent out were made on servers across the Internet, and business email is saved on your employer's server as well. One study shows that about one-third of large companies in the United States actively monitor their employees' email.<sup>9</sup> This number will only go up as liabilities and privacy issues related to email increase.

Keeping that in mind, never write email when you're upset, emotional, stressed, tired, hungry, drunk, or otherwise impaired. After an email is sent, there's no taking it back, and every email you send is written documentation that can be used in court or to support a case for promotion or firing. Never say something in an email that you wouldn't publish in a company newsletter, say to a newspaper reporter, or announce at a meeting.

If an email upsets you or you're feeling a rant coming on, write it in a text file, save it, and give yourself time to think things over. Later, go back and edit or start over on a more composed note.

**TIP** If you have a bad habit of dashing off ill-advised emails in the middle of the night that you regret the next morning, try Mail Goggles, one of many features in Gmail Labs (<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?shva=1#settings/labs>). Mail Goggles forces you to solve simple math problems before letting you send late night missives. You can schedule it to run during your weak hours, and although you can likely do a little arithmetic no matter what your condition, it may help you wait until morning before you hit Send.



## Hack 4: Highlight Messages Sent Directly to You

Level . . . . . **Easy**

Platform . . . . **All**

Cost . . . . . **Free**

When you're faced with an inbox full of new, unread email, it's nearly impossible to determine which messages need to be dealt with right away and which can be put off until later. You get CCed on memos and included on large mailing lists, or receive company- or department-wide notifications. When you're pressed for time, those types of messages are all good candidates for later reading. But what about those few messages addressed *only* to you?

Email overload expert Itzy Sabo says,<sup>10</sup>

*Such messages are most likely to be more important than the rest of the stuff that fills up my inbox, because:*

*They have not been sent to a bunch of people, but specifically to me.*

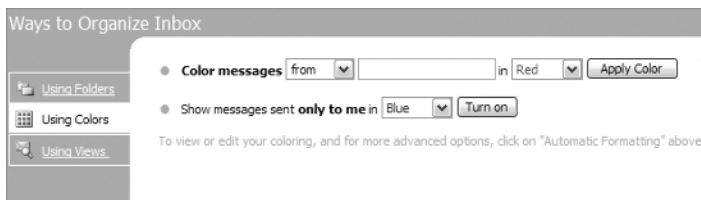
*They are therefore more likely to relate to my area of responsibility.*

*They are also more likely to require action.*

*If I don't answer, nobody else will.*

### Microsoft Outlook: Color Me Blue

In Microsoft Outlook 2007, you can make those important to-me-only messages jump out of your inbox with one simple setting: Choose Tools ⇨ Organize, and in the Using Colors section, click the Turn On button next to Show Messages Sent Only to Me in Blue, as shown in Figure 1-2.

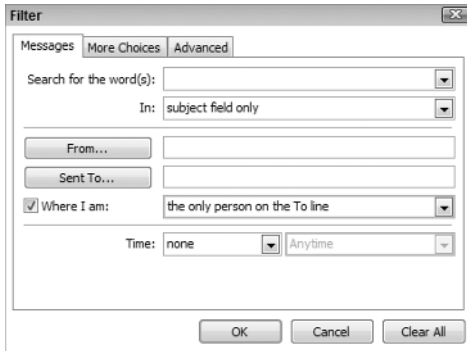


**Figure 1-2:** Organize your inbox by highlighting messages addressed only to you.

Unfortunately in Outlook 2010, you have to set up a conditional formatting rule on your own. Following are a list of steps that will get you started.

1. Click the View tab ⇨ View Settings ⇨ Conditional Formatting.

2. Click Add, name it Messages to Me, and then click Condition.
3. Tick the check box next to “Where I Am,” and select The Only Person on the To Line from the drop-down, as shown in Figure 1-3. Click OK.
4. Now click the Font button, and set Outlook to highlight emails sent only to you using whatever formatting you prefer.



**Figure 1-3:** Highlight messages sent only to you in Outlook 2010.

Now messages sent only to you will be a different color than the others. During your email processing sessions, you’ll do well to deal with the blue messages first. Of course, you can use the color drop-down list to select a different color for your only-to-me emails if you want.

## All Other Email Programs: Create a Not-to-Me Filter

Most modern email applications have a rule or filter feature that matches incoming messages against criteria you define and performs some action. Create a not-to-me filter that de-highlights lower priority messages or even moves them to an Inbox–Low Priority folder. See Hack 10, “Filter Low-Priority Messages,” for more on using email filters to automatically clean out and prioritize your inbox.

**TIP** Gmail can indicate messages sent only to your address with the right-angle quotation mark (which looks like a double greater-than sign, or >>) pointing to the message subject. Messages addressed to you and other people get a single greater-than sign (>). Messages without your address in the To: field – such as distribution lists – have no indicator near them. In Gmail’s Settings area, turn this on under Personal level indicators.

---

## Hack 5: Use Disposable Email Addresses

---

Level . . . . . **Easy**

Platform . . . . **Web**

Cost . . . . . **Free**

Much of the junk email you receive is from spammers who bought or scraped your email address from a website where you registered for membership. Most registration-based websites require that you use a legitimate email address; often, you have to retrieve an email from that address's inbox to complete registration.

If you hate the idea of giving your email address to any website that asks for it and you want to protect your email address from junk mail and spam, use a disposable email address instead.

### Web-Based Public Email Addresses

Several services, such as Mailinator (<http://mailinator.com>) offer free, public, disposable email addresses. Choose any email name at the mailinator.com domain — such as goaheadspammer@mailinator.com or joe@mailinator.com — and use it to register at a website. Then, visit Mailinator.com to check the public inbox, which doesn't require a password.

**CAUTION** Remember, anyone can check the joe@mailinator.com inbox, so make sure nothing too personal winds up there!

Dodgit (<http://dodgit.com>) offers a service similar to Mailinator, with the capability to check all public email accounts at dodgit.com via RSS.

For more on RSS, see Hack 91, "Subscribe to Websites with RSS."

### Multi-Domain Email Addresses

If you host your email at your own web domain (see more on that in Hack 7, "Future-Proof Your Email Address," later in this chapter), you have a limitless supply of email names available to you; really, anything followed by @yourdomain.com. Each time you sign up for a website, use a unique name that you can block or filter later if you start receiving spam.

For example, if your real email address is adam@example.com, you might register at Amazon.com using the amazon.com@example.com email address, which also comes to you. If Amazon sells your address and you start receiving spam at amazon.com@example.com, you can block further email

to that address, and know it was Amazon who sold you out. (This is just an example. In all the years I've been a registered `Amazon.com` user, I've never received spam at the unique address I use there.)

**NOTE** For more on how to avoid signing up for a website at all, see Hack 56, “Bypass Free Site Registration with BugMeNot.”

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## Hack 6: Master Message Search

---

Level . . . . . **Easy**

Platforms . . . **All**

Cost . . . . . **Free**

In an earlier hack, you created an archive of closed messages for later reference, and your `Archive` folder has no subfolders in it. That makes a lot of compulsively organized people who like to have a folder for every sender, project, and day of the week anxious. But in contrast to paper documents, you don't need folders to find where you've stored messages. As long as you know a few key characteristics of the message in question, a well-crafted query can pluck out the email you're looking for immediately — without traversing a six-folder-deep hierarchy.

In the physical world, you can't throw years' worth of letters, cards, and memos into a drawer and then pick out the one Tom sent you about that fabulous rental he got in Key West back in 2007 in seconds. However, that is absolutely possible (and simple with a little know-how) in an email folder containing thousands of messages.

### Search Criteria

Most email programs have a built-in message search. Not surprisingly, Google's web-based email product Gmail has the strongest searching capabilities on the market; that said, any decent, modern email client also offers solid searching tools.

Often simple keyword searches are all you need, but you can do even more complex queries with Gmail's advanced search operators. For example, your search for Tom's message might look like Figure 1-4 in Gmail's Search Options area:

Additionally, if you want to search for messages from Tom or Kelly that have the phrase “Key West” or the word “rental,” use the `OR` operator (also

signified with the pipe |). As with a Google web search, enclose phrases in quotation marks when you're looking for exact matches. The entire query can go into one search box and looks like this:

```
From: (Tom | Kelly) ("Key West" OR rental)
```

The screenshot shows the Gmail search interface. At the top left is the Gmail logo. Below it is a 'Search Options' section with a 'Hide search options' link. The interface includes several input fields: 'From:' with 'Tom' entered, 'To:', 'Subject:', and 'Search:' with a dropdown menu set to 'All Mail'. On the right side, there are fields for 'Has the words:' containing '"Key West"', 'Doesn't have:', and 'Date within:' set to '1 day' of a date. There is also a checkbox for 'Has attachment'. At the bottom are 'Search Mail' and 'Cancel' buttons.

**Figure 1-4:** Searching for a message from Tom that contains the phrase “Key West.”

You can exclude terms as well. For instance, if you want to see all the messages from people except for Joe at a specific company (at the `example.com` domain), you could search for

```
From: (*@example.com AND -joe@example.com)
```

A summary of all Gmail's search operators is available at <http://mail.google.com/support/bin/answer.py?answer=7190>. Here's a sampling of some of the most commonly useful operators:

OPERATOR	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
<code>from:</code>	Specifies the sender.	<code>from:Amy</code> Returns messages from Amy.
<code>to:</code>	Specifies the recipient.	<code>to:Jonah</code> Returns messages addressed to Jonah.
<code>Subject:</code>	Searches the subject line.	<code>subject:lunch</code> Returns messages with the word <i>lunch</i> in the subject line.
OR	Searches for messages with either term A or term B. OR must be in all caps. A pipe ( ) works in place of OR.	<code>from:Jonah OR from:Amy</code> Returns messages from Jonah or from Amy.

(continued)

(continued)

OPERATOR	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
-	Excludes a term from the search.	Java -coffee Returns messages containing the word <i>Java</i> but not the word <i>coffee</i> .
has:attachment	Searches for messages with an attachment.	from:david has:attachment Returns messages from David that contain any kind of file attachment.
filename:	Searches for an attachment by name or type.	filename:poem.doc Returns messages with an attachment named poem.doc.  filename:jpg Returns messages with JPEG photo attachments.
" "	Searches for an exact phrase (capitalization isn't considered).	"Nice job" Returns messages that contain the phrase <i>nice job</i> or <i>Nice job</i> .  subject:"dinner and a movie" Returns messages containing the phrase <i>dinner and a movie</i> in the subject.
()	Groups words; used to specify terms that shouldn't be excluded.	from:amy(dinner OR movie) Returns messages from Amy that contain either the word <i>dinner</i> or the word <i>movie</i> . subject:(dinner movie) Returns messages in which the subject contains both the word <i>dinner</i> and the word <i>movie</i> . Note that AND is implied.
after:	Search for messages sent after a certain date. (The date must be in yyyy/mm/dd format.)	after:2010/09/01 Returns messages sent after September 1, 2010.

OPERATOR	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
before:	Search for messages sent before a certain date. (The date must be in yyyy/mm/dd format.)	<p>before:1997/05/17 Returns messages sent before May 17, 1997.</p> <p>after:2007/06/01 AND before:2007/07/01 Returns messages sent after June 1, 2007, but before July 1, 2007 (or messages sent in June, 2007).</p>

When you use these operators, a well-crafted query can turn up messages with specific attributes from your *Archive* folder — or entire email archive — in seconds.

## Saved Search Folders

Another efficient digital filing technique is to save a search as a folder. No more dragging and dropping or labeling messages by hand; you can create a virtual email folder defined by search criteria.

For example, during the writing of this book, I created a search-based *Book* email folder that contained all the correspondence between my publishing company, Wiley, and me.

To do this in Gmail, you need to enable the Quick Links feature inside Gmail Labs (<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?#settings/labs>).

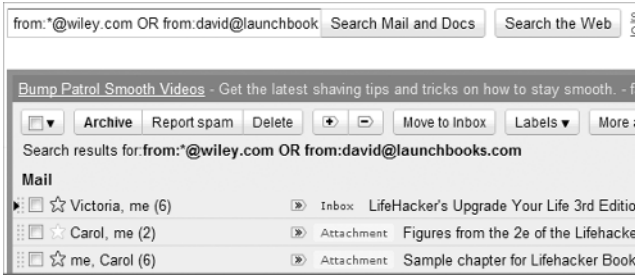
**NOTE** Occasionally Google graduates features from its new-feature testing ground, Gmail Labs. If you can't find Quick Links in Labs, there's a good chance it's become a standard feature, meaning you wouldn't need to enable anything to take advantage of the feature.

After you have enabled this feature, you are ready to create your saved search folder:

1. First, execute a search from the Gmail search box.
2. Then, from the left Gmail sidebar, choose Add Quick Link, and provide a name for the saved search. In Figure 1-5, any message whose sender or recipient contained the phrase **wiley.com** or my agent's

email address should be included in the `Book` folder. The query is defined in Gmail, as shown in Figure 1-5.

3. Finally, the `Book` saved search appears as a link in the Gmail sidebar; when you click the link, Gmail loads all the messages that match the search.



**Figure 1-5:** The saved search criteria that creates my `Book` folder.

Microsoft Outlook and Mozilla Thunderbird also offer saved search folders. In Outlook's Mail Folders bar, right-click Search Folders, and choose New Search Folder to create one. In Thunderbird, select File ⇨ New ⇨ Saved Search; then use the Saved Search dialog to name and create your search.

The advantage of saved search folders is that one email can live in any number of saved searches, as long as it fulfills the criteria. Deleting a saved search folder just removes the query — not the messages. Therefore, after this book is completed, I'll delete that folder — but all the messages will remain in their original locations.

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## **Hack 7: Future-Proof Your Email Address**

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**Level . . . . . Easy**

**Platform . . . . All**

**Cost . . . . . Free**

Over the years, you've probably employed as many email addresses as pairs of socks, but you don't want to change them as often. Switching your primary email address can be a big inconvenience that leads to missed messages and lost relationships. You give your email address to countless friends, relatives, and web services, and publish it on mailing lists, websites, and documents forever cached in search engine indexes. But if



your email address is tied to a former ISP, the company you used to work for, the university you attended, or the embarrassing handle you chose in college, switching to a new address can become a necessity.

### Don'ts

- **Don't use your company's or school's email address for personal use.** Someday you will graduate or leave your current company, and you don't want to leave your email messages behind. Certainly your company or school email address is appropriate to use for company and school correspondence, but as your primary individual address, not so much.
- **Don't use the address your ISP gave you.** Remember how nice it was when you upgraded to broadband and RoadRunner gave you that free `name@yourstate.rr.com` email account? Wrong! Someday you will live in another state and use another ISP, and that address won't work anymore. Pass.

### Do's

- **Use an address accessible from anywhere.** More and more you use multiple computers at home, at work, and in public places. Make sure you can securely access your email from anywhere, and choose an address that enables you to do so. Many popular web-based email services use more secure SSL logins and have easy-to-use dynamic interfaces (such as Google's Gmail), so use an address at one of them or that works with one of them. You can even use email forwarding to, say, send a copy of every email you send and receive to a web-based account for online searchable archives from anywhere.
- **Choose an easy-to-remember name you won't regret down the road.** Remember when `qtGrrl81` was an email handle that made you proud? Well, now that you're a freelancer soliciting business or applying for jobs, you want something more professional. Choose an email address that will be easy to remember and recognize, and one that won't make you cringe when you have to recite it over the phone to your mutual fund company.

## Bottom Line

You want an email address that can stick with you for years to come. The most ideal (and most costly) solution is to register a domain name and set up an email address at a provider (such as `yourname@yourname.com`). Your provider goes away and you can move that domain to a new provider, no address change required.

For those who don't want to plunk down the cash for their own domain and email provider, any of the popular, free, web-based mail services are a great option. Gmail and Yahoo! Mail are two free, take-it-with-you web-based email providers.

The problem with relying on a free web-based service for your email is that you lose some control. If Gmail changes its domain, decides to start charging, has server problems, or goes away (all unlikely but possible scenarios), you're affected without much recourse. In a pay-for situation with your own domain name, you can change providers and only you own your data if something goes wrong.

**TIP** A service called **Google Apps** ([www.google.com/apps/](http://www.google.com/apps/)) enables you to use your custom domain with Google's email service, Gmail, which gives you the best of both worlds. If at some point in the future you want to move away from Gmail, you can simply remap your domain to another service without changing your address.

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## Hack 8: Consolidate Multiple Email Addresses with Gmail

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Level . . . . . **Medium**

Platform . . . . **Web**

Cost . . . . . **Free**

After reading Hack 7, you've decided to move all your email online to Google's web-based service, Gmail. Great! But what about messages still going to your old email address(es)? Are they destined to be lost in the Internet ether?

Fear not! Gmail is not only an email host; it's also an email client that can fetch mail from any number of external services and consolidate it all in your Gmail inbox. You can avoid telling all your contacts to update your email address again, and you don't miss a single message in your transition to Gmail.

### Receive Messages for Other Addresses in Your Gmail Inbox

You have two ways to receive email from other addresses in Gmail: Either use Gmail's Mail Fetcher feature or forward your other addresses' mail to Gmail automatically.

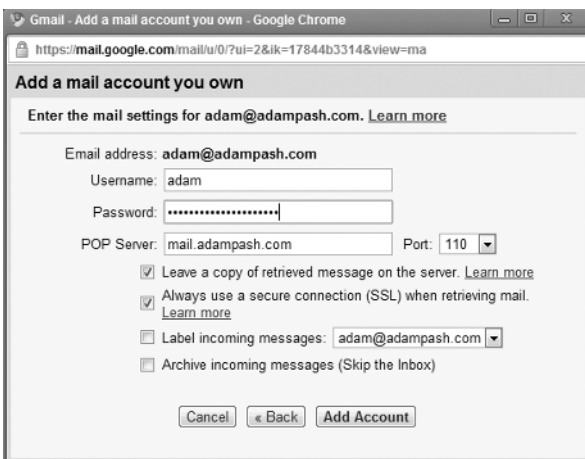
## Option 1: Set Up Gmail's POP Mail Fetcher

Most likely, your former email provider offers Post Office Protocol (POP) access for retrieving messages. Gmail's Mail Fetcher feature can retrieve those messages via POP and display them in your inbox alongside messages that come directly to your Gmail address. You can fetch email from up to five other email addresses via POP in Gmail.

To use Gmail's Mail Fetcher, your old email account must offer POP access. Not all free addresses offer POP, but most do. Check the other account's settings or contact customer support to find out whether POP access is available on your non-Gmail account. You need four settings: the POP server address, the port, your username, and a password. Also, if you haven't already, you need to sign up for a free Gmail account at <http://gmail.com>.

After you log in to your Gmail account, configure Mail Fetcher to retrieve messages from your old account. Here's how:

1. From the top of any page within Gmail, click Settings.
2. Click Accounts and Import.
3. In the Check Mail Using POP3 section, click Add POP3 Email Account.
4. Enter the full email address of the account you want to access, and click Next Step.
5. Gmail fills in the username, POP server, and port fields when possible, based on the email address, as shown in Figure 1-6. Enter your password.



**Figure 1-6:** Retrieving email via POP for a non-Gmail address.

6. If Gmail is the single place you check mail, deselect the Leave a Copy of Retrieved Message on the Server box. If you want to access the other mail from other software (or if you're just using Gmail as a backup), do select this box. You can also set options to use a secure connection (SSL) to retrieve mail. (Some servers support this; others don't.) And you can choose whether to label or archive incoming messages.
7. After your options are set, click Add Account. Gmail issues an error if your username, password, or other settings are incorrect. When Gmail can fetch messages successfully, it gives you the option to set up a custom From: address. (See the section "Write Messages from Non-Gmail Addresses," later in this chapter, for more on that.)

After you set up Mail Fetcher, Google checks your other account(s) on a regular basis, and new mail appears automatically in your Gmail account.

**NOTE** Gmail checks for new messages at different rates, depending on previous mail-fetch attempts. You can't customize the default frequency of mail fetches, but Gmail checks accounts more frequently when they receive more email. If your old account's relatively inactive and Gmail's fetching too slowly, you can increase the frequency with which Gmail fetches email from that account by, for example, signing your old address up for an active mailing list or Google Group and then simply filtering those emails out of your new inbox.

### ***Option 2: Forward Messages to Gmail Automatically***

If your old address doesn't offer POP access — or you have more than five addresses that you'd like to consolidate in Gmail — you can set your former address to automatically forward messages to Gmail instead. The exact way to do this differs depending on your email account, but if your provider offers auto-forwarding, this feature will most likely be listed in your account options area.

### **Write Messages from Non-Gmail Addresses**

Now that you have email addressed to several different accounts arriving in your single Gmail inbox, you may still want to use those various From: addresses when replying to specific messages. For someone who maintains

several different online personas — but accesses them all in Gmail — the option to use various From: addresses when sending mail is crucial. Here's how to set up multiple From: addresses after you log into Gmail:

1. Click Settings along the top of any page, and then select the Accounts and Import tab.
2. Click Send Mail from Another Address in the Send Mail As section.
3. Enter your full name in the Name field, and enter the email address you'd like to send messages from in the Email Address field.
4. Choose to send your mail for this address through either Gmail's servers or through that account's SMTP servers. The former method is easiest and fine for most, but in some clients, such as versions of Microsoft Outlook, messages you send "from" your non-Gmail address will display as From: customaddress@domain.com on behalf of yourusername@gmail.com. To avoid this, you need to send through your other address' servers, which simply require you to supply the proper SMTP server and port along with your username and password.
5. Click Next Step ⇨ and then click Send Verification. Gmail sends a verification message to your other email address to confirm that you'd like to add it to your Gmail account. If you are already receiving this mail in Gmail, it appears in your inbox. Click the link in that message, or enter the confirmation code in the Accounts section of your Gmail account, to complete the process.

You can add several possible From: addresses to your Gmail account, as shown in Figure 1-7.

The screenshot shows the Gmail interface with the 'Settings' menu open to the 'Accounts and Import' tab. Under the 'Send mail as' section, three email addresses are listed:

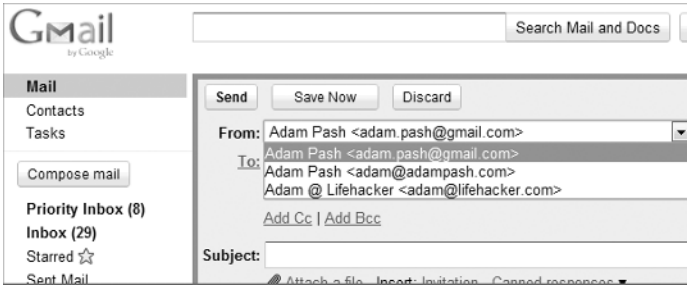
Send mail as:	Name & Email Address	Default	Actions
	Adam Pash <adam.pash@gmail.com>	default	<a href="#">edit info</a>
	Adam Pash <adam@adamash.com>	<a href="#">make default</a>	<a href="#">edit info</a> <a href="#">delete</a>
	Adam @ Lifehacker <adam@lifehacker.com>	<a href="#">make default</a>	<a href="#">edit info</a> <a href="#">delete</a>

Buttons for 'Import mail and contacts' and 'Send mail from another address' are also visible.

**Figure 1-7:** List several From: addresses for a given Gmail account.

Set one of your addresses as your default for receiving new messages. You can also set the From: name and a different reply-to address if you'd like (by clicking the Edit Info link).

After you verify that you want to add the address to your account, you can start sending messages using your custom From: address. When you click Compose, you can choose the From: address to use from the drop-down list, as shown in Figure 1-8.



**Figure 1-8:** Choose the desired From: address from the drop-down list.

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## Hack 9: Script and Automate Repetitive Replies

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Level . . . . . **Medium**

Platform . . . . **Windows, Mac OS X, Unix (Thunderbird)**

Cost . . . . . **Free**

Is there an echo in your Sent email folder? Do you consistently receive messages that ask the same questions or require the same type of information in response? To knock down repetitive email quickly, build a set of scripted email responses that you can drop into emails quickly, personalize if necessary, and send off without spending the time composing the same information every time. With a set of trusty scripted templates, you can whip through tedious, recurring email like an expert air-traffic controller in the busy airport of your inbox.

The Quicktext Thunderbird extension saves collections of reusable text snippets that help you compose personalized replies to those tiresome email messages with a few keystrokes.

**NOTE** If Thunderbird isn't your preferred email client, you still have several automated-reply options. Die-hard Gmail users should check out the Canned Responses feature in Gmail Labs, which is similar to (but slightly less powerful than) Quicktext. Or for more on using text substitution to speed up all your repetitive typing, email-related or not, see Hacks 52 and 53, "Reduce Repetitive Typing with Texter for Windows" and "Reduce Repetitive Typing with TextExpander for Mac."

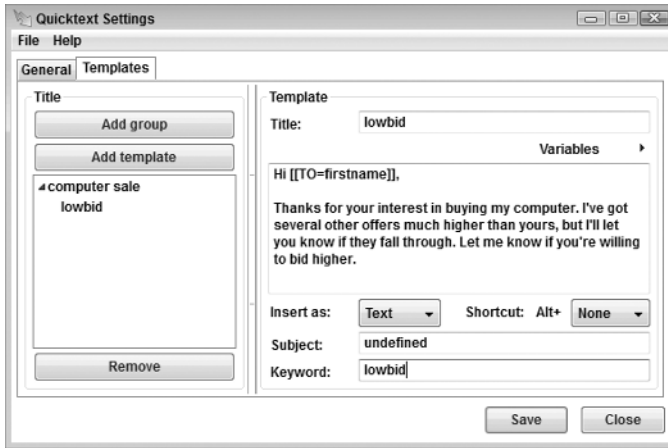
## Make Quick Work of Common Replies

In contrast to other text saver utilities, Quicktext is specific to email because it recognizes variables that reference message details — such as the recipient's first or last name, the subject line, or attachment filenames. Quicktext replaces these variables with the right info for speedy yet personalized responses. Easily reply to Lucy Wood's message with a "Dear Ms. Wood" or to Robin Cullen's email with "Hi, Robin" using one keyword or click. No name-typing required.

Here's an example: You have a computer for sale and you post an ad on a message board or in the local newspaper. Within a day, you have an inbox full of messages inquiring about it. You can dash through those messages with Quicktext. Just follow these steps:

1. Download Quicktext from <http://extensions.hesslow.se/quicktext>. Save the .xpi file to your computer.
2. From the Thunderbird Tools menu, choose Add-ons. Click the Install button and browse to the .xpi file you saved. Click Install Now. When installation is complete, restart Thunderbird.
3. Click the Write button to start a new email message, and then click Tools ⇨ Quicktext.
4. Click the Add Group button and enter a name for your group — say, **computer sale**.
5. Select your new group; then click Add Template. In the Title input, name this template **lowbid**, and in the text area below the title, enter your snippet (see Step 6). Also set the keyword to **lowbid**, as shown in Figure 1-9.
6. Set the text to the following:

```
Hi [[TO=firstname]],
Thanks for your interest in buying my computer. I've got several
other offers much higher than yours, but I'll let you know if
they fall through. Let me know if you're willing to bid higher.
```



**Figure 1-9:** Create the lowbid script in Quicktext.

7. Create any more Quicktexts that might apply to computer-inquiry responses. For example, create one called **more info** with the keyword **moreinfo** that reads as follows:

```
Hi [[TO=firstname]],
Thanks for your interest in buying my laptop. It has a 2.4GHz
Intel Core 2 Duo processor with 4GB of RAM and a 128GB hard
drive. Let me know if you need any more information.
```

8. After you set up your scripts, open a message about your for-sale computer. When you press the Reply button, you see a drop-down list of the Quicktext groups you set up. The computer sale and greetings Quicktexts are shown in Figure 1-10.
9. Insert the appropriate reply either by selecting it from the drop-down list or by typing the keyword — `lowbid`, in this example — and pressing the Tab key. Your response, complete with the recipient's first name, is automatically inserted into the message body.

Quicktext can also reference snippets within other snippets. For example, you could set up a group called **greetings** that contains two snippets:

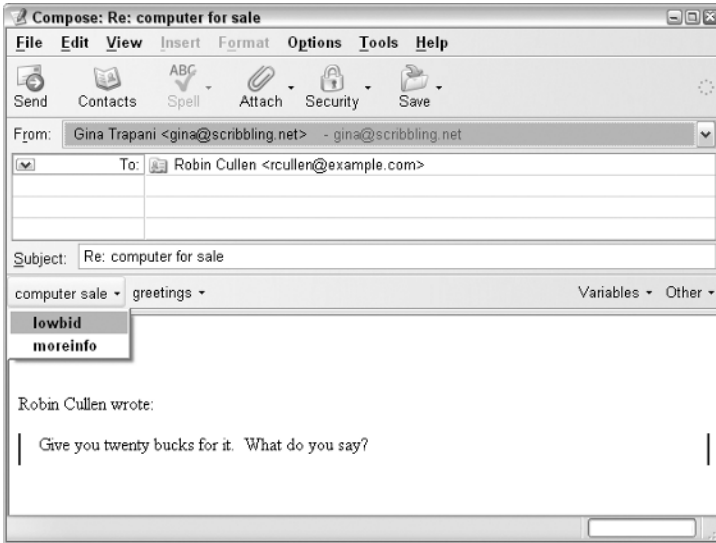
- **personal**, which is set to

```
Hi [[TO=firstname]],
```

- **business**, which is set to

```
Dear [[To=firstname]] [[To=lastname]]:
```





**Figure 1-10:** Composing a message using a Quicktext script.

Then, in other snippets, you can reference one greeting by using the `[[TEXT=greetings|personal]]` variable. See the Quicktext homepage (<http://extensions.hesslow.se/text/3/All+Tags/>) for the full list of Quicktext variables.

## Hack 10: Filter Low-Priority Messages

Level..... **Easy**

Platform.... **All**

Cost..... **Free**

You're head-down at work on that important presentation that's due in two hours. Ding! An unopened envelope appears in your system tray.

"You have 1 unread message."

Maybe it's your co-worker with game-changing information about the presentation. Maybe it's your boss asking to see you right away. You switch and take a look at your inbox. Oh. Aunt Eunice forwarded you a picture of a kitten in a tutu. Again.

Millions of email messages course over the Internet per second, and a bunch of them land in your inbox. Your spam filter helps shuttle junk mail out of sight, but what about messages from CC-happy co-workers, Aunt

Eunice's forwarded emails, Facebook friend notifications, Google Alerts, and mailing-list messages that clutter your inbox with low-priority noise? A group of web users coined the term "bacn" to refer to this "middle class of email" that's "better than spam but not as good as a personal email."<sup>11</sup> In other words, they're messages you want to read eventually, just not right now. Instead of giving your bacn the same priority as your actually important email, put a system in place that clears away the bacn automatically so that you can drill down quickly to what's important.

**NOTE** Bacn (pronounced "bacon") is an Internet slang term cooked up by a group of web users at PodCamp Pittsburgh 2. It means email that you want to read, but not right away.

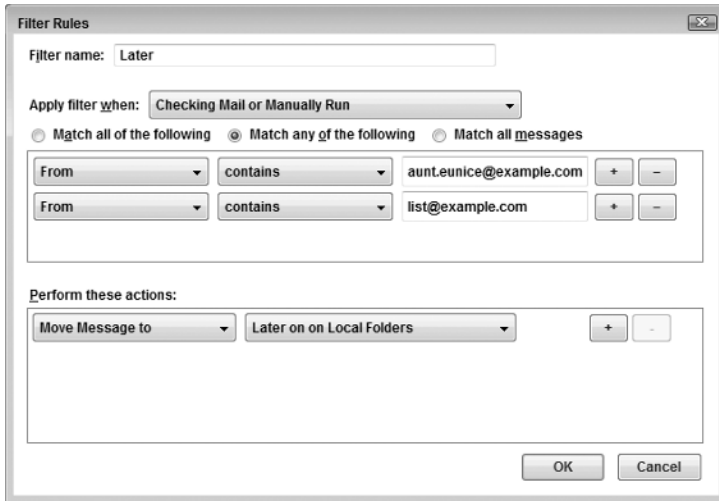
## Filter Bacn

Set up rules — also called email filters — to make low-priority messages skip your inbox and file themselves away someplace less urgent. An email filter is a list of conditions you define that trigger an action on an incoming email message that matches your filter. Filter actions can be as simple as, "Delete any message from `annoying.person@example.com`" or much more complex, such as, "Any message that doesn't contain any one of my five email addresses in the To: field and does not have the word URGENT in the subject line should be moved to the Not Important folder."

The steps for creating a mail filter or rule vary depending on your email client. The following examples use the excellent, free, cross-platform email program Thunderbird, available at <http://mozilla.org/products/thunderbird>.

**TIP** Apart from Thunderbird, Google's popular email client, Gmail, is particularly adept at filtering incoming messages. Click the Create a Filter link next to Gmail's search box, employ some of the advanced Gmail search tricks you learned in Hack 6, "Master Message Search," and apply the same filters discussed here to your Gmail inbox.

To configure your email filters in Thunderbird, choose Tools ⇨ Message Filters and click the New button. Figure 1-11 displays a rule that files Aunt Eunice's forwarded messages and any messages from a mailing list to a folder called Later.



**Figure 1-11:** A mail filter that moves low-priority incoming messages to a folder called Later in Mozilla Thunderbird.

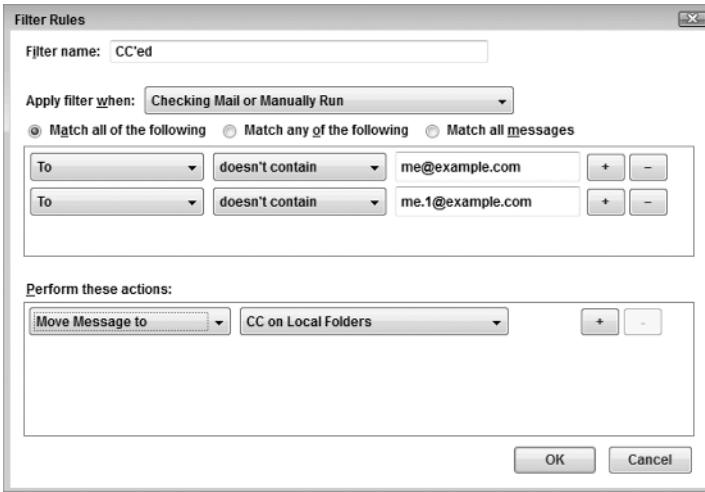
## Filter CCed Messages

One of the most common misuses of email — especially in an office situation — is carbon copying anyone and everyone even tangentially related to the topic of a message. It’s safe to assume that messages not directed to you (that is, your email address is not in the To: line) are less urgent and more informative; CCed messages most likely don’t require a response or action on your part. On a day when you’re firewalling your attention and care about only the most important disruptors, set up a rule that shuttles email you’ve been CCed on out of your inbox and into a separate folder for searching and browsing later.

To do so, first create a cc folder in your email program. Then set up a rule (filter) to say, “If my email address does not appear in the To: field, file this message” as shown in Figure 1-12.

**NOTE** Hack 6, “Master Message Search,” provides tips for digging up messages based on specific criteria.

When the filter is enabled, all new messages that arrive without your email address in the To: field are automatically filed in the cc folder.



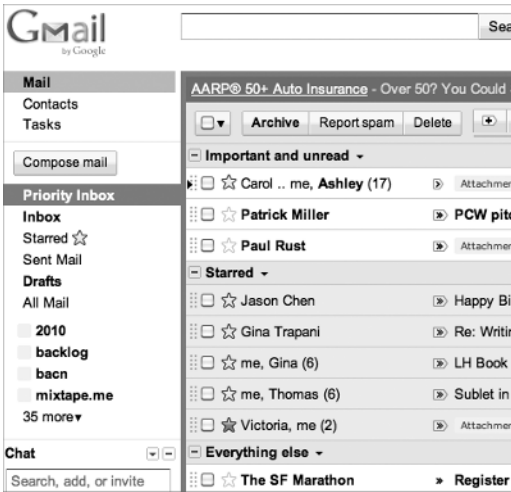
**Figure 1-12:** An email rule that moves messages not directed to either of two email addresses to a folder called CC.

## Gmail's Priority Inbox

If setting up and managing filters for every piece of bacon that makes its way to your inbox sounds like more effort than it's worth, Gmail's Priority Inbox feature may be a better fit for your workflow. Priority Inbox analyzes your email behavior — like which messages you open and reply to — to automatically identify the email that's most important to you. It assigns those messages to your Priority Inbox, which, if Priority Inbox is doing its job, is a bacon-free zone.

To enable Priority Inbox, click the Settings link at the top of any Gmail view, click the Priority Inbox tab, select Show Priority Inbox, and then save your changes. Gmail reloads with Priority Inbox running, and you see a new Priority Inbox link right below your Inbox in Gmail's navigation sidebar. Click it.

By default, Priority Inbox separates your email into three panes, as pictured in Figure 1-13: Important and Unread, Starred, and Everything Else, each signifying just what it sounds like. Important and Unread contains those emails that Gmail believes are a priority to you and which you haven't yet read; Starred contains all messages that you've starred; and Everything Else contains — you guessed it! — everything else.

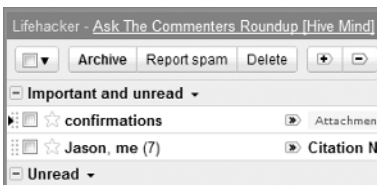


**Figure 1-13:** The default Priority Inbox view in Gmail.

**TIP** The default three inboxes Gmail displays when Priority Inbox is enabled may not be the right fit for you. You can adjust what inbox sections Gmail uses by navigating to Settings ⇨ Priority Inbox and adjusting Priority Inbox Sections to better fit your needs.

If you don't feel like Gmail's getting it right — that is, if you see a few less-than-important messages labeled as important, or a few important messages that aren't tagged as important — you can manually add or remove priority to a message. Doing so can also help train Gmail to better identify what's important to you, so the more feedback you give it, the better Priority Inbox will get.

To mark a message as important, simply click the Mark as Important button (it's a yellow label with a plus sign, as shown to the right of the delete button in Figure 1-14) when you're viewing a message or when you've ticked the check box next to a message; to mark a message as unimportant, click the Mark as Not Important button instead.



**Figure 1-14:** The marker with the plus sign indicates an important message.

**SHORTCUT**

**Keyboard junkies, you can promote a message's importance from your keyboard by selecting a message and typing + or =. Mark a message as unimportant by typing -.**

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