

# 20 Tips to Better Manage Email

May I offer you a menu of recommended email best practices drawn from respected email researchers, productivity experts, and my own experience. Review the list and pick one or two things from the menu that might have the biggest impact on you. All the habit change gurus (Duhigg, Clear, Fogg, Covey, and others) agree that to change a habit, take little steps. So don't try to change everything at once. Once you experiment for at least a week with one menu item, come back and see if there's another to try.

And remember, there's huge individual differences in both our personalities and the role email plays in our lives. Did you know that achievement focused people can feel reenergized by checking email when they're low, but that relationship focused people feel depleted by email? Not every one of these suggestions is right for every person or every organization. Choose the ones that are right for you.

## **Set boundaries on who can access your time, attention, and energy, and when they are allowed to.**

- Turn off email notification alerts. Don't let inbox notifications control you. Control your inboxes.
- Reduce the number of times a day you check email. The goal is to avoid letting your email habits disrupt your focus (remember, it takes a minute to get back on track).
- Create a few, select, longer focus blocks each week so that you can dig deep into the projects that matter most to you. Dialogue with those you interact with most frequently so that they know why you periodically go radio silent, and work out a non-email way for them to interrupt (text? face to face?) when it's really important.
- If you struggle with reducing how often you check email, make it less accessible. Close your email browser when you aren't using it. Or use the settings on your phone to create Screen Time limits, Do Not Disturb periods, and Focus blocks.

## **Use a system to process your email daily.**

- Prevent emails from building up to stress-inducing levels by processing them at least daily<sup>1</sup>. I currently set aside a one hour block per day. As a school leader, I needed three half hour blocks per day. Or maybe you need to process every hour at break times. Find a pattern that's right for you so that emails don't build up.

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<sup>1</sup> My husband currently has 64,876 emails in his inbox, over 10,000 of them unread. I'd be a stress case. For him, it doesn't feel overwhelming, and staying on top of things isn't a problem. If it not broken, don't fix it.



- If you don't already have a system to process emails that works for you, use the same method I recommend for managing your to do list: [the 5Ds](#). Choose one of these actions for every email<sup>2</sup>:
  - DUMP - Delete it, send it to junk mail, or archive it.
  - DELEGATE - If it's not your responsibility, send it to the person it belongs to.
  - DATE - Put it on your calendar.
  - DO - Respond or put it on your to do list.
  - re-DEFINE - Often we use our email inbox like a to do list, calendar, notepad, or external brain. Don't. See if you can use email purposefully for communication only. If it's a to do item, put it onto your to do list. If it's a calendar item, put it on your calendar. If it's an idea, archive it or put it wherever you keep ideas: in a notebook, document, whiteboard, post it note...
- If you're already in overwhelm and completely buried under emails, do not delete them all. Set a DATE with a substantial block of time to regain control, just like setting aside a weekend to clean up the garage. Then stay on top of it after that.
- Use your secret weapon: the "scan". You don't have to process every time. If you can't resist checking but don't have time to fully process new emails right away, just scan – read all the subject lines and only process the urgent ones.

## Manage work email during work hours.

- Receiving work email outside of work can cause stress. Plus, it makes others feel like they are on call and devalues their time, attention, and energy. Try really hard not to send work email outside of work hours.
- If you flex your time and 5 am or 9 pm is your preferred email processing time, then use tools in your email browser<sup>3</sup> to schedule when your email is sent so that arrives during the receiver's work hours.
- Use the vacation responder to let recipients know what to expect when you're away.
- If you're really brave, delete work email from your personal phone. Eek!

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<sup>2</sup> Merlin Mann coined a popular and related system called Inbox Zero. The goal is NOT to have zero emails in your inbox, but to have zero percent of your time and attention caught up in email. Your time and attention should live with the things that are actually important to you.

<sup>3</sup> Apple's Mail program doesn't have this feature, but the free Mac email browser, [Spark](#), does.



## Use email better.

- Avoid confusion. Aim for clear, clean, concise, precise messaging.
  - Clear: For instance, try to have a clear call to action, or else say, “FYI. No need to respond.”
  - Clean: Connect with your recipient if you haven’t interacted in a while, but email isn’t great for chit chat. Small talk belongs elsewhere
  - Concise: Shorter is usually better. Also, use the subject line to offer your recipient a concise summary of what you need.
  - Precise: Decide who really needs your message. Be very cautious of “Reply all.”
- Try to offer a hint of emotion behind the content. Consider the emotional impact of these versions of thank you: Thanks Thanks! Thanks. Thanks :) 🙏
- Select the right communication tool for the job. Consider a phone call if it takes more than 5 sentences to say. If you need an urgent response, don’t rely on email. Reach out a different way.
- Don’t fret about how to archive and file away your emails. It saps precious brain resources to decide which of 100 folders to file away every email when there’s far more important decisions to be made. Use the search bar to find what you need.

## Discuss email protocols with your team.

- Unless your job is customer service, explore whether putting blanket response time expectations on your team (e.g. “Emails should be responded to within 24 hours.”) is necessary. Proclamations such as these add tremendous stress to individuals, and many end up focused on living up to email expectations rather than doing their most important tasks.
- Consider when other communication tools such as team inboxes, case trackers, Slack, text, or face-to-face, should be used instead of email.
- Develop shared expectations around things your team finds stressful or annoying: when to use ‘cc’, how to use the subject line, what are the off hours expectations, and/or how to receive urgent help.
- Create team focus hours. I know one team that has declared that there shall be no meetings and no expectations to read or reply to inbox messages on Tuesday and Thursday mornings so that everyone can focus.