

10 Ways to Detox your Inbox

Your time is valuable, and you shouldn't be wasting it trying to tame your inbox. Apply these tips to gain control over your email and win back your day.

By Ann Handley

For a few weeks, I've been tracking how much time I spend managing, writing, reading, forwarding, filing, responding to and (sometimes) cursing email.

It turns out I spend about four precious hours a day on email.

According to [Contatta](#), an email software company, most professionals spend more than 637 hours on the tool every year.

That's a lot of hours spent shuffling email, and an enormous drain on business—not to mention your psyche.

Here's what I'm doing to detox my inbox:

1. Batch and tackle

Dedicate certain work hours to reading and responding to email. If you're like me and can't help reading it on your phone, at least try to group your responses. In other words, respond to several inquiries at once instead of answering them as they come in.

"Set up specific time blocks to check your email so you don't get distracted every time a new message pops in," says Alex Moore, CEO of Baydin, the company behind [Boomerang](#). Gini Dietrich, CEO of [Arment Dietrich](#), suggests checking email before and after meetings (but never during) to triage urgent client requests.

Approaching any task with this batch-and-conquer mentality is less taxing, [research finds](#). Even without the research to back it up, it makes sense not to drop everything each time your email notification pings.

2. Don't use auto-responders

Some people regularly use auto-responders to let people know they respond to email only at certain times of day. Doing so recalibrates expectations, but I'm not a fan. With rare exceptions, it's unnecessary. Why clog someone else's inbox in trying to manage your own?

I am a fan of [vacation auto-responders](#), however.

3. Answer email in offline mode

If you batch and tackle your email responses, try doing so in offline mode. That way the emails you send don't prompt an immediate response and distract you more. I chanced on this approach when answering email on an airplane without Wi-fi, and I realized how much easier and less distracting it was.

"When I'm focused on a particular project, I turn my inbox to offline mode so I can still work in there, but not be interrupted by the constant flow," Dietrich says.

4. Hush those bells, dings, chirps, ribbits ...

Turn off email notifications on your computer and phone.

"Every time you hear that ding, it takes your brain over a minute to fully regain concentration," says Alex Moore.

5. Write simple, direct responses

As with any content, brevity and clarity trump length and meandering. A clipped answer may feel rude, but it's not. You're simply respecting your reader's time and your own. Use as many words as you need, but not a keystroke more. A long-winded response is indulgent.

As Don Murray, a longtime writing teacher, [once said](#): "The reader doesn't turn the page because of a hunger to applaud." He wasn't talking about email specifically, but his advice applies.

6. Yes, and...

Avoid an email volley by writing specific responses rather than open-ended ones.

Say you're agreeing to a lunch meeting. Say yes, and then suggest three specific times so the recipient can pick one.

Yes, and ... is a rule of improv, but it's also a good rule for cooperative, efficient communication.

You can also avoid unnecessary email replies by including a No Reply Needed (NRN in Internet-speak).

7. Lose generic subject lines

"An email subject line is similar to a blog post title, a newspaper headline, a movie title, a tweet, the first few words in a Facebook post, the introduction to a book, and so on.... It's the hook," says [DJ Waldow](#), a career coach and co-author of "The Rebel's Guide to Email Marketing."

Waldow says most people treat email subject lines as throwaways. They write generic lines such as "Reconnecting," "Question" or "Introduction," when they should write lines that are specific, unique and actionable.

From a productivity standpoint, specific subject lines will make it easier for you to find archived emails, Waldow says.

Instead of "Question," add what the question is about, like: "Cavalier King Charles Spaniel rescue dog?" Or instead of "Reconnecting," try "Coffee Tuesday?"

(Fun fact: The rescue dog question was a real email that Waldow sent me.)

8. Ditch sub-folders

Finding messages by searching (via keyword) through one inbox is faster than looking through hyper-organized folders, Moore says.

I agree, but this is a contested issue. Some people argue folders and sub-folders bring more clarity and simplicity to an inbox by allowing you to group similar emails together (e.g., newsletter subscriptions, marketing offers or work-related vs. personal).

9. Opt out of unnecessary newsletters and notifications

This includes notifications from social networks like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. They're the email equivalent of chemical additives, making for a bloated and less nourishing inbox. The same goes for newsletters that tend to pile up, unread. You won't get to them, so don't save them for later.

You can use various tools to unsubscribe from mailing lists en masse. Check out [Unlistr](#) or [Unroll.me](#).

Other services allow you to create disposable email addresses—including [MailDrop](#), [Air Mail](#) and [10 Minute Mail](#). They're useful when you don't want to give your actual email address.

10. Use an email manager

There are free and paid tools for managing your inbox, including [Sanebox](#) (\$6/month), [Mailbox](#) (free), [Boomerang](#) and [Mailstorm](#). They vary in performance and features.

[Kerry O'Shea Gorgone](#), an instructional designer with [MarketingProfs](#), likes Sanebox's simplicity and intuitive features.

"It scans my inbox and watches where things end up," she says. "It's like an intuitive and smart inbox that makes my life a little easier."

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