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This book helps you understand the most effective ways to use Apple’s Mail app in macOS 11 Big Sur, macOS 10.15 Catalina, or 10.14 Mojave, and iOS 14/iPadOS 14 or iOS 13/iPadOS 13, including customization and troubleshooting. It also helps you manage your incoming and outgoing email efficiently.

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What’s New in Version 5.1

Version 5.1 of this book contains a number of revisions, most notably the following:

• I describe the (fairly minor) functional changes in macOS 11 Big Sur, as described in Mail Changes in Big Sur.

• I also cover the modest changes in iOS 14/iPadOS 14, listed in Mail Changes in iOS 14 & iPadOS 14.

• I’ve replaced a fair number of screenshots with versions that depict Big Sur, where the visual difference was significant enough that it seemed important to highlight. The remaining Mac screenshots, which show Mail in Catalina, are reasonably similar to what appears in Big Sur.

• This version of the book also drops explicit coverage of iOS 12, while continuing to cover iOS 13 and iPadOS 13.

What Was New in the Fifth Edition

Version 5.0 of this book covered the changes to Mail in macOS 10.15 Catalina (see Mail Changes in Catalina) and iOS 13/iPadOS 13 (Mail Changes in iOS 13 & iPadOS 13), while removing details specific to 10.13 High Sierra and iOS 11. The most noteworthy changes were:

• Added a sidebar, Syncing Other Mail Data with iCloud, about various data other than messages themselves that Mail can sync across devices

• Added a warning about a bug that can cause data loss in Catalina; see Filing

• Updated the descriptions of Markup and Continuity Camera to cover changes in Catalina, and added coverage of Continuity Sketch

• Described exactly what’s wrong with Column Layout (Catalina), even though there’s not much you can do but avoid it
• Updated Use Third-Party Plugins and Noteworthy Plugins to eliminate plugins that are incompatible with Catalina, and to provide information on current plugin behavior

• Explained how to Mute Conversations in Catalina

• Described the new unsubscribe feature in Unsubscribe from Mailing Lists

• Added information on blocking senders in Set Mail’s Junk Mail Filter Correctly

• Completely revised Get a Personal Certificate and Set Up S/MIME in iOS & iPadOS to provide instructions for using Actalis to obtain, install, and use a free certificate

• Returned the discussion of Bangs to the troubleshooting chapter

• Reorganized and greatly expanded Use Mail in iOS & iPadOS to cover the many feature and interface changes to Mail in iOS 13 and iPadOS 13
Introduction

If Apple Mail is your email client of choice under macOS 10.14 Mojave or later, or iOS 13/iPadOS 13 or later, this book will help you get more out of it. You’ll understand the app better, learn useful tricks and techniques, and become a more effective correspondent. I hope and expect that, by the time you finish this book, you’ll be a happier Mail user.

And yet, I must be candid: I’m a lot less happy with Mail than I used to be, and getting less happy with each new version.

The reason I wrote *Take Control of Email with Apple Mail* back in 2004 (and eight subsequent editions under various titles) was to help Mail users solve problems and eliminate frustrations. Unfortunately, in recent years, Apple hasn’t merely removed useful features (see Mail’s Disappearing Features), added bugs, and made irritating changes to Mail’s user interface. In revising Mail’s infrastructure, Apple has also made it difficult, and sometimes impossible, to solve problems—and often there’s nothing I can do about it.

I can’t tell you how many times someone has begged me for help with a Mail problem, and all I could do was say, “It’s not you. It’s Apple. This isn’t a problem you can solve. I’m so sorry.” The fact is, when it comes to the bugs, missing features, and inexplicable behavior in recent versions of Mail, I’m struggling as much as you are. I keep hoping for a major revision to Mail that will finally set things right, but year after year, I am disappointed.

For now, however, I’ll help you as much as I can. In this book, I explain how features are supposed to work and describe the best ways to accomplish common email tasks. I also help you to avoid, fix, or work around as many problems as I can. And I tell you what I’ve done to make Mail work better for me (often through the use of third-party plugins).
It’s worth asking here why, if Mail is so annoying, I don’t simply switch to some other email app and recommend that others do the same. My answer to this for quite some time has been that, even with all its flaws, Apple Mail still works better for me than any alternative I’ve tried (and I’ve tried many). Given the ways I’ve customized my settings, and the third-party plugins I’ve added, I haven’t yet found another app that gives me all the capabilities I’ve come to depend on in Mail. I suspect that sooner or later either a better option will emerge or Mail will deteriorate even further, forcing my hand. But as of mid-2020, I still feel that—with appropriate adjustments to its out-of-the-box state—Mail is my best choice, and a solid choice for most macOS users.

Mail under iOS and iPadOS, while less powerful, is remarkably good and—despite a few missteps—getting better. The biggest issue with the mobile version of Mail is that, like most mobile email clients, it still lacks many of the useful features found in the desktop version, which means iOS/iPadOS users will need to develop a strategy that takes those differences into account.

Regardless of which Apple platform(s) you use, this book is about how to do useful things with Mail—how to bend Mail to your will (to the extent possible) and feel as though you are genuinely in control of your email. But this isn’t a comprehensive reference guide: I’ll largely ignore basic tasks that you either know how to do already or can figure out easily by consulting the Help menu. I’m assuming you already know your way around an email client and mainly want guidance with less-than-obvious tasks and features.

Several chapters apply equally to Mail in macOS and iOS/iPadOS, but most of the book focuses on Mail on the Mac, which is only right, since it has far more features (and problems) than the mobile version. The final chapter, Use Mail in iOS & iPadOS, covers the differences between the two platforms as well as the special strengths, weaknesses, and idiosyncrasies in the mobile version of Mail.
You can jump right to any topic of interest, but I suggest starting with the first few chapters to get a solid foundation. Chapters are marked with [macOS] and/or [iOS & iPadOS] to show the platforms they cover.

**Understand what you’re dealing with:**
- Discover Mail’s new features and design changes. Read Learn What’s New in Mail. [macOS/iOS & iPadOS]
- Get a grip on POP, IMAP, SMTP, Exchange, and more as you Learn About Email Protocols. [macOS/iOS & iPadOS]
- Make sure you understand account-setup details and how Mail deals with common tasks. See Master Mail Concepts. [macOS]

**Find the ideal Mail setup for your needs:**
- Tailor Mail to your needs and tastes with settings, shortcuts, plug-ins, and more as you Customize Mail. [macOS]
- Take Mail even further. See Extend and Automate Mail. [macOS]
- Gmail user? You’re in for some weirdness, so there’s a whole chapter just for you: Use Gmail with Mail. [macOS]

**Become a better Mail user:**
- Search like a pro. Read Find Your Messages. [macOS]
- Manage incoming and saved messages as you Take Control of Your Inbox, and then learn the best ways of sending and replying to email in Become a Better Correspondent. [macOS/iOS & iPadOS]

**Handle exceptional tasks:**
- Sign and Encrypt Messages for privacy. [macOS/iOS & iPadOS]
- Perplexed by an error message or other misbehavior in the Mac version of Mail? Read Fix Mail Problems. [macOS]
- Make the most of Mail on your iPhone, iPad, or iPod touch. See Use Mail in iOS & iPadOS. [iOS & iPadOS]

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Learn What’s New in Mail

The versions of Mail in Big Sur, Catalina, Mojave, and iOS 13/iPadOS 13 and later contain new features and design changes compared to earlier versions. Skim over this chapter to see which of these changes may be important to you. But first, please indulge me in a brief rant.

Mail’s Disappearing Features
With each new version of macOS, Apple adds some things to Mail and changes some things. More often than not, Apple also removes useful features—often for no apparent reason. Losing the occasional minor feature is usually no big deal, but the cumulative effect over many years has been to sap Mail of much of its power and flexibility. Just a few of many examples:

✦ In 11.0 Big Sur, some unified mailboxes disappeared from Favorites by default (though you can replace them manually).
✦ In 10.15 Catalina, Mail lost its “classic” view and gained a severely broken Column layout. (This was fixed in macOS 11 Big Sur.)
✦ In 10.14 Mojave, stationery support was dropped.
✦ In 10.11 El Capitan, Apple removed the option to cancel individual tasks in the Activity window, and severely reduced the utility of the Mail Activity pane at the bottom of the sidebar.
✦ In 10.10 Yosemite, Mail stopped allowing you not to cache all messages locally, if that was your preference.
✦ In 10.9 Mavericks, it became impossible to switch between plain text and rich text versions of incoming messages, or to specify plain text as the default with a special command in Terminal.
✦ In 10.8 Mountain Lion, notes were moved from Mail to the new Notes app, while RSS support was removed from both Mail and Safari, with no built-in replacement offered.
✦ In 10.7 Lion, Mail lost built-in support for reminders, as well as a feature that let you manually bounce messages.

Even as Apple removed features that worked, the company added bugs to both new and existing features. I mention some later.
Mail Changes in Big Sur

Although Mail, like most other apps, looks quite a bit different in Big Sur than in Catalina, it’s very close in functionality. Only a few significant changes occurred—mostly for the better:

- Like other apps, Mail adopts a full-height sidebar (see Decoding the Mail Sidebar and Sidebar) and an annoyingly configured toolbar (see Toolbars), both of which feature numerous revised icons.
- The Favorites list, which takes over the duties of the sidebar’s Mailboxes list in Catalina and earlier, behaves a bit differently; see Favorites.
- For some users, the All Trash and/or All Junk unified mailboxes don’t appear, by default, in the sidebar’s Favorites list. You can, however, restore them; see Favorites in the Sidebar.
- Mail made it easier to create and work with multiple tabs within a window; see Tabbed Windows.
- Column layout, which was fatally flawed in Catalina, is back to being fully operational; see Column Layout (Big Sur and Later).
- The method by which Mail shows you, and lets you adjust, which mailboxes are being searched is different; see Adjust Search Scope. You can also more easily save a search as a smart mailbox; see Create a Smart Mailbox.
- Mail in Big Sur stores messages in a series of folders inside ~/Library/Mail/V8 (whereas Catalina used a folder named V7).

Mail Changes in Catalina

According to the list provided on Mail’s Help > What’s New in Mail screen, the major new features were:

- An option to unsubscribe from mailing lists, as was already available in iOS; see Unsubscribe from Mailing Lists.
Learn About Email Protocols

The word “protocol” may sound complicated, but it’s just a way of describing how your email program (in this case, Mail) talks to a mail server. If you know a few basics about email protocols, you’ll have an easier time understanding Mail’s interface and solving problems.

Although you may not be aware of it, most email accounts involve two separate systems—one for receiving and another for sending—and these often use entirely different servers. You probably use the same username and password for each, but behind the scenes, each account may function as two separate accounts:

- Your incoming account fetches email from your mail server and delivers it to you using a mail delivery protocol—such as POP (Post Office Protocol) or IMAP (Internet Message Access Protocol). Just ahead, I explain more about POP and IMAP, I discuss common IMAP and POP Misconceptions, and I offer guidance if you’re still using POP and want to Switch from POP to IMAP (you probably do). I also mention a few important points about iCloud and Gmail accounts, both of which also use IMAP.

- Your outgoing account uses a mail transfer protocol called SMTP (Simple Mail Transfer Protocol) to send email from your machine to your mail server, and then (usually through a number of intermediate steps) to the recipient’s mail server.

Microsoft Exchange accounts are a bit different. They act like IMAP accounts in many ways, but use a single—and an entirely different—protocol for receiving and sending mail, as well as calendar items, contacts, and other information.

Note: In this book I refer to IMAP (including iCloud and Gmail) accounts and Exchange accounts, which manage and work with messages on the mail server, as server-based accounts to distinguish them from POP accounts, which store all retrieved messages locally.
In this chapter I also discuss the concepts Fetch, Push, and IMAP IDLE, which apply to multiple account types and affect how rapidly your email client can find out about new messages.

**POP**

A POP account works like this:

- First, your client (that is, your email program) asks the server for the list of messages in your Inbox.

- Then, depending on your client’s capabilities and settings, it downloads either all the messages, just the messages you select, or all messages under a specified size, to your local device.

- Finally (and optionally), your client instructs the server to delete the server copy of some or all of the messages.

The server doesn’t keep track of whether a message has been downloaded, read, or deleted; only your client knows this, and the assumption underlying the protocol is that you want to read, organize, and store your mail on a single device, using the server only as a conduit to receive your mail. If you want to store any messages in mailboxes other than your Inbox, when you create those mailboxes in your email client, they’re stored locally (not on the server); the messages you move to these mailboxes are thus also stored locally.

You can usually set your client to leave messages on the server (rather than delete them immediately after retrieving them) and then check your email with a different client (or on a different device), but all those messages will appear to be “new” and unread on every other client or device. This, among other reasons, makes POP a poor option if you work with email on multiple computers and devices.

In addition, although iOS and iPadOS support POP, the mobile version of Mail doesn’t let you create new mailboxes to file messages locally. That means an iOS device doesn’t work well as the *sole* device used with a POP account, and because POP works best when used with a
As I said in the Introduction, this book isn’t about basics, as such. However, as I’ve corresponded with many Mail users over the years, I’ve discovered that there are certain concepts that Apple hasn’t made self-explanatory, and that therefore tend to trip people up. In order to understand and act on much of the rest of this book, you need to grasp a few concepts that are, perhaps, unnecessarily confusing. In this chapter I walk you through the ones I consider most important.

Most of the items in this chapter pertain only to the Mac version of Mail, but if you’re an iOS or iPadOS user, be sure to read Special Mailboxes, much of which is also applicable to iOS/iPadOS.

**Account Setup**

Setting up new accounts in Mail is pretty easy, especially if you’re using one of the major email providers Mail already knows about (iCloud, Exchange, Google/Gmail, Yahoo, and AOL)—almost the entire procedure is automated. However, there are still a few gotchas, especially if you’re using a different provider.

**Pick a Preference Pane**

For starters, there are two places where you can add, edit, or remove accounts: in Mail > Preferences > Accounts (or, just for adding accounts, the shortcut Mail > Add Account) and in System Preferences > Internet Accounts (which you can also reach from within Mail by choosing Mail > Accounts).

Why two places, and when should you use which?

- The reason for the System Preferences > Internet Accounts pane is twofold. First, many account types (including iCloud, Exchange, and Gmail) include more features than just email, and affect more apps than just Mail, so Internet Accounts provides a central location where you can enable or disable individual data types like Mail,
Calendars, Contacts, and Notes for each account. Second, some account types (like Twitter and Facebook) are used by macOS but not by specific, built-in apps, and so it makes sense to provide one central location to set up all these accounts.

- The reason for the Mail > Preferences > Accounts pane is, of course, to make it more convenient to add an email account when you’re already working in Mail—and because you may need to configure any of numerous email account settings that are specific to Mail, and that therefore would be inappropriate for Apple to put in System Preferences.

You can add a new account to Mail in either place, and after you do so, both locations will reflect that account. Beyond that, the System Preferences > Internet Accounts pane gives you less control over the minute details of email account settings than Mail’s Accounts pane does, although there are a couple of things you can do only in Internet Accounts.

Here are the specifics:

- **Mail > Preferences > Accounts**: Visit this pane to edit outgoing (SMTP) servers, add secondary From addresses, change the behavior of Special Mailboxes, and adjust details such as whether to download attachments or use an IMAP path prefix.

- **System Preferences > Internet Accounts**: Use this to enable or disable account features such as Calendars and Contacts, to delete any accounts synced via iCloud, or to set up internet accounts that don’t involve Mail.

**Tip**: Even though Mail should, and usually does, configure all your settings correctly automatically, somethings things go kerflooey. So Apple offers a simple web-based tool that lets you enter your email address and—if your provider is among the most common ones—displays basic settings for your account such as the IMAP and SMTP server names, server ports, and authentication methods.
Customize Mail

Mail isn’t the fanciest or most powerful email client for the Mac, and many people have dismissed it as being too unsophisticated for email power users. I agree with that sentiment to a point—in its default configuration, Mail isn’t a fantastic email program. However, you can customize Mail in many ways, including by adding plugins that both dramatically increase its capabilities and modify standard behaviors to become much more useful. The result is that with a bit of effort, you can turn a so-so email client into a deluxe and highly optimized tool.

In this chapter, I acquaint you with some of the most important ways to customize Mail that don’t require any additional software. I don’t list every single option, nor do I go into tremendous detail, but I want to make sure you’re aware of what so many Mail users aren’t—you don’t have to live with the stock version of Mail, and you can improve your enjoyment of the app a great deal with a bit of grooming.

Note: Later, in Extend and Automate Mail, I discuss third-party plugins, AppleScript, Automator, and other ways of enhancing Mail.

Sidebar

The sidebar is the area on the left of Mail’s main window that contains all your mailboxes. Don’t see it? Choose View > Show Mailbox List. Prefer to keep it hidden? Choose View > Hide Mailbox List. (Apple seems to think Mail is easier to use when the sidebar is hidden, but for most people with multiple accounts or more than a few mailboxes, the sidebar is indispensable.)

You can make the sidebar wider or narrower by dragging the line that divides it from the message list. If the icons in the sidebar (and their associated text labels) are larger or smaller than you prefer, go to System Preferences > General and choose a different size from the
“Sidebar icon size” pop-up menu; but note that this setting affects sidebars all throughout macOS.

You can also rearrange items in the sidebar by dragging them to new locations, with certain limitations:

- Top-level categories (such as Favorites or Mailboxes, where your Special Mailboxes are; Smart Mailboxes; and individual accounts) can be reordered—for example, you might want to show your smart mailboxes at the top of the list and your special mailboxes at the bottom.

- Within the Favorites category in Big Sur or later, items can be re-ordered or hidden; see Favorites in the Sidebar just ahead for details.

- Within the Mailboxes category in Catalina or earlier, the order of (unified) special mailboxes is fixed; for example, Drafts always appears above Sent. However, you can reorder accounts within a unified special mailbox. For example, if your Gmail account is listed before iCloud under Sent, you can drag iCloud above Gmail—and that modified order will be reflected under all your unified special mailboxes.

- You can reorder the mailboxes within any given account.

- You can click the disclosure icon (in Big Sur or later) or Show or Hide (in Catalina or earlier) next to a sidebar category to expand or collapse its contents (see Hidden Interface Elements), but you can’t manually hide the categories themselves. On the other hand, Mail automatically hides the names of accounts that have no sub-mailboxes beneath them.

Mail used to have a Mail Activity pane at the bottom of the sidebar. It’s gone now, but an abbreviated version (Figure 10) appears briefly in the same location when Mail is performing a background task that takes more than a moment.
Extend and Automate Mail

If I had to use the plain, unadorned version of Mail as Apple provides it, my productivity and happiness would decrease significantly—and I’d probably switch to another app in short order. But with the addition of a few third-party plugins and other tools, Mail becomes vastly more versatile and powerful.

In this chapter, I want to introduce you to some of the many ways you can extend Mail’s capabilities. First, I’ll show you a selection of plugins that can add or modify features. For anyone who needs to save and search messages outside Mail, I next turn to apps that can Archive and Search Messages, and then tell you about utilities to Remove Duplicate Messages. I wrap up the chapter with an introduction to the ways you can Use AppleScript and Automator to automate Mail.

There’s a lot of information in this chapter, and I don’t want you to think you need each product I mention. (In fact, some of them would overlap and possibly conflict with each other.) Rather, my intention is to acquaint you with a representative sample of the possibilities.

Joe’s Favorites

If you’re curious which of the tools from this chapter I use myself, here’s my list of personal favorites:

✦ AppleScript
✦ DEVONthink (see Archive and Search Messages)
✦ GPG Mail
✦ MailSuite (in particular, Mail Act-On and MailTags)

Use Third-Party Plugins

Numerous third-party Mail plugins exist. These enable you to change unwanted behaviors, add new features, and enable significant new
customization options. For example, plugins can stop spam, encrypt email messages, offer advanced message filing options, change the way attachments are handled, and much more.

In years past, there were scores of Mail plugins, but given Apple’s increasingly onerous requirements for plugin developers in recent years and tightening restrictions on what plugins can do, a number of plugins I previously described here are no longer being developed. That’s a sad situation, because it means Mail is becoming progressively less flexible and capable. Even so, a fair number of highly useful plugins still exist, and are still being actively developed. The ones I’ve selected for this book include those I use myself, ones recommended by friends and colleagues, and others that seemed especially useful or interesting (even if I have no need for them myself).

But before we discuss particular plugins (see Noteworthy Plugins), I must say a few words about how you install and enable plugins in general, because in Mojave, Apple changed both the mechanism for enabling or disabling Mail plugins and added confusing hoops the developer (and you) must jump through to make them work.

**Grant Full Disk Access as Needed**

First of all, most Mail plugins now require an external helper app (typically, one that runs in the background—either all the time, or just when Mail is open) to do the heavy lifting. That app, in turn, could require access to all your Mail files (which, of course, may contain sensitive information), and although the app can display an alert informing you of this fact, you’ll have to grant permission manually.

If a plugin (or any other app or utility) needs access to your files, it will generally notify you in some way. There’s no single system-wide alert for this purpose, but when installing a plugin, you may see a dialog such as the one in Figure 23.
Use Gmail with Mail

If you have a Gmail account and want to use it in Mail under macOS, this chapter is for you. I cover the ways Gmail in Mail differs from Gmail on the web, the ways Gmail differs from other IMAP providers, how best to configure Mail to use a Gmail account, and how to avoid common problems. All of this, I hope, will help make your experience of using Gmail in Mail as good as it can be.

**Note:** Everything in this chapter applies equally to standard Gmail accounts and to Google Apps accounts with a custom domain name.

If you don’t use Gmail (or don’t want to use Mail to access Gmail), there’s nothing to see here. Move right ahead to Find Your Messages.

Understand How Mail Works (or Not) with Gmail

If you’re accustomed to Gmail’s web interface, you may expect it to work similarly in Mail. On the other hand, if you’re used to using Mail with other IMAP accounts, you may expect Gmail accounts to behave the same way. In both cases, the reality will differ quite a bit from your expectation, and you’ll have an easier time using the combination of Mail and Gmail if you know more up front about how the two systems try (and sometimes fail) to work together. I’ll start by reviewing the basics of how Mail interacts with Gmail, then discuss Gmail on the Web vs. Gmail in Mail, and finally turn to Gmail vs. Other IMAP Providers.

**Note:** Although Mail can also access Gmail via POP, I recommend against it and don’t cover it in this book. Among other issues, with POP, Mail can’t see archived Gmail messages or messages you’ve sent from your Gmail account using the web interface.

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Years ago, I used Gmail as my main email provider, and after quite a bit of experimentation, I figured out a rather involved way to make Mail behave the way I wanted it to with my Gmail account. Then, with Mac OS X 10.9 Mavericks, Apple made a bunch of changes to the way Mail worked with Gmail that were supposed to solve problems (and prevent the need for the complex procedures I’d worked out) but actually made the situation much worse. After some drama, Apple eventually set things right, and now—to the extent that these two quite different ways of approaching email can be reconciled—Mail usually works pretty well with Gmail accounts.

**Note:** Although I still have a Gmail account, I almost never use it, and it’s certainly not my main account. At the time I stopped using Gmail as my main provider, I described my decision in *Why (and how) I’m saying goodbye to Gmail*. Nowadays, I have additional reasons to avoid Gmail, including a fundamental dislike of Google’s business model. But that’s me.

In general, you’ll get the best results if you have Mail and Gmail configured in the way they expect (see *Set Up Mail to Use Gmail*). But since your options for configuring the way Mail works with Gmail are more limited than in years past, if you follow the instructions in this chapter and still can’t get the results you want, I’m afraid my only advice is to ditch either Gmail (in favor of a conventional IMAP or Exchange provider) or Mail (in favor of Gmail’s web interface or a client designed expressly for Gmail).

**Gmail on the Web vs. Gmail in Mail**

Gmail started as a web-only email system; POP and IMAP access were tacked on later. As a result of its web focus, Google designed Gmail to handle email in a fundamentally different way from conventional email servers. Although I don’t care for Gmail’s model, I understand why a lot of people prefer it—but unfortunately, it’s a way of looking at email that Mail can’t entirely replicate. Here are some of the key differences:

- **Labels vs. mailboxes:** On the Gmail website, you can apply descriptive labels to each message to help you find messages with
Find Your Messages

The Spotlight search feature in macOS automatically indexes all your Mail messages for super-fast searching, either from within Mail or using the system-wide Spotlight menu.

You can search using natural language rather than relying on special keywords or formulations. However, if you want to do complex searches, you can. With a flexible system of search tokens (which I explain in a moment), Boolean searches, and other options, you can find almost any message you can describe.

And, you can even save a search by converting it into a smart mailbox, as I describe at the end of this chapter, in Work Smarter with Smart Mailboxes.

**Note:** If you dislike Mail’s entire approach to searching or find that it just doesn’t scratch your itch, you might consider a tool from Nisus Software called [InfoClick](https://www.nisussoftware.com/infoclick). This app uses its own search engine and a unique interface to find Mail messages. It’s not my cup of tea, largely because it can’t search for *phrases* (such as “Take Control of Apple Mail”)—it treats every word independently. Your mileage may vary.

Perform a Natural Language Search

Here’s a novel idea: when you’re searching for email, just describe what you’re looking for in your own words. You can use plain English (or plain whatever-language-you-speak) in Mail’s Search field, as well as in system-wide Spotlight searches, to find email messages.

**Note:** In Big Sur, if you don’t see the Search field in the toolbar, click the Search 🕵️ icon to display it; click the chevron ➤ icon to hide it again.
There’s no rulebook, no list of approved words or phrases. You just describe what you want. Here are some examples:

- emails from John Smith
- messages to John Smith
- messages with “split pea” in the subject
- email with “split pea” in the body
- email from John Smith in the last week
- mail from Morgen including photographs
- mail I ignored from Adam
- unread messages from this week
- messages from bruce about security

There are countless other ways to search using natural language, but the point is: don’t try to outthink Spotlight. Just ask the question that you’re thinking.

Having said that, I should point out a few things I’ve noticed about natural-language searches in macOS Mail:

- **Results aren’t always exhaustive.** For example, if I ask for unread messages, Mail shows me only recent unread messages. You should not assume that because a message doesn’t show up in a natural-language search, it doesn’t exist.

- **Mail doesn’t care about your wording.** Notice how, in the examples above, I interchangeably used email, emails, mail, and messages. Mail knows those all mean the same thing. So, don’t get hung up on picking exactly the right term.

- **Mail is smart, but it can’t read your mind.** If you search for messages from “Bob,” you may have a particular person in mind, but Mail doesn’t know which of the many Bobs in your saved mail you’re interested in. Be more specific if the results aren’t what you want.
Take Control of Your Inbox

Does your Inbox contain hundreds of messages? Thousands? Tens of thousands? If so, you may find it nearly impossible to tell which messages you’ve dealt with and which still require action, and finding a particular message in that long list may be a daunting challenge. You need to take control of your Inbox!

Although everyone’s different, I’d like to offer some suggestions that will help you manage the flow of incoming messages. I don’t particularly care whether you do things my way, but please think carefully about the types of messages you receive and come up with a plan to deal with them that works for you.

I begin this chapter with a series of pointers that apply equally to macOS (and other desktop platforms) and iOS/iPadOS. Then I discuss specific approaches for each platform in Develop an Email Strategy. I also talk briefly about how to Back Up and Restore Your Email and how to Import Email.

Take Responsibility

The first step to taking control of your Inbox is recognizing that you, and only you, bear the responsibility for making your own email manageable. If you feel overwhelmed by email, don’t point the finger at email as a medium—or at Apple Mail, your email provider, or your correspondents. You can make email work for you, but as with a diet or fitness program, it requires time, effort, and perhaps discomfort on your way to success. No app, service, or technique can do all that for you magically, even though such things can certainly help a bit.

As I said in my TidBITS article It’s Not Email That’s Broken, It’s You, email as such isn’t the problem, but rather the bad habits many people have gotten into when it comes to dealing with their email. Perhaps your mother, like my mother, was fond of saying, “This room isn’t
going to clean itself up!” By the same token, I can assure you that elves will not appear overnight and answer all your delinquent email, file it away for you, and leave you with an empty Inbox. If you want to feel in control of your Inbox, that’s going to require some reflection, experimentation, and changes in habit.

So, although I can’t solve this problem for you, I can offer some tips and suggestions that, I hope, will point you in the right direction. That’s what the remainder of this chapter is about.

**Consolidate Your Accounts**

Since you’re reading this book, I assume you have at least one email account. Maybe you have two (personal and work)—or maybe, like me, you have more than a dozen. My excuse is that I need to have accounts for almost every major type and provider for testing purposes because I write about email. But I know lots of people who accumulate accounts (especially free accounts) for no particular reason and then end up wasting time and effort checking, managing, and maintaining them all.

So, allow me to make a few suggestions to make your life simpler and to make Mail in macOS and iOS/iPadOS work better.

Begin by choosing one account to be your primary *personal* email account. (Of course, you may need to keep work email separate, and that’s entirely reasonable.) Then, rather than send out change-of-address notices to anyone who might have each of the other addresses—assuming you can even remember who has which one—visit the web interfaces for all other accounts, set them up to forward incoming messages to your central account, and disable those accounts in Mail on your Macs and iOS/iPadOS devices.

Once you’ve performed this one-time procedure, your correspondents can keep using your old addresses, but you benefit by having just one place to check for incoming mail and one place to store the messages you want to save. Having fewer accounts to check will make Mail peppier, too.
In the previous chapter, *Take Control of Your Inbox*, I looked at the ways you can improve your management of incoming email. In this chapter we look at the flip side: handling *outgoing* email. I felt it was important to spend a few pages on this topic, because anyone who doesn’t exercise care in sending email becomes part of the problem for other people dealing with *their* incoming mail.

Lots of people are bad at email—you can probably think of a few examples immediately—and I want to make sure you’re not one of them. But even if you’re fantastic at sending email, I hope the points I make in this chapter help you to set a good example and teach other people how to improve their email skills.

**Don’t Be Part of the Problem**

The most common mistakes people make when sending email aren’t premeditated or malicious; they’re simply a matter of not thinking things through—or not looking at email from the recipient’s point of view. If your guiding principle is to send only email messages you’d be happy receiving yourself, you’re already well on your way to being a better correspondent.

But what counts as email courtesy isn’t always obvious, so let me offer several specific tips:

- **Use Bcc for lists**: When one of my sons was in preschool, I used receive email messages a few times a month sent to all the parents by a member of the parents’ association. And all 108 addresses were in the To field, which meant I had to scroll past them when viewing the messages on my iPhone before I got to the message body. It also
meant I knew every other recipient’s email address, which not everyone is comfortable sharing publicly.

When sending a message to multiple people—especially a long list, and even more especially when they don’t know each other—put your own address in the To or Cc field, and put all the recipient addresses in the Bcc (blind carbon copy) field (see Message Header). That way, each recipient’s address is hidden from the other recipients. And they’ll thank you for it.

- **Be careful with Reply All and Cc:** Suppose you’re the recipient of a message sent to multiple people, and their addresses are in the To or Cc fields. You might be tempted to click Reply All out of habit, but please think before you do. Does everyone else on that list really need to hear what you have to say, or just the sender? Or perhaps a subset of the recipients? You can individually delete email addresses when replying to all, and more often than not, replying to everyone on a long list amounts to unwanted clutter for most of them.

Similarly, think before adding someone as a Cc recipient. People regularly Cc me on complaints, bug reports, and other matters that vaguely involve a book or article I’ve written, but really: I don’t need to be involved, and I assure you that putting my name on a message you send to Apple (or whomever) won’t lend it any more weight. Ask yourself whether the potential Cc recipient truly needs to be involved in a discussion.

- **Don’t forward nonsense:** Jokes, funny animal pictures, political screeds, and other such stuff that gets endlessly forwarded is nearly as bad as spam. You can’t stop someone from sending this material to you (although you can ask politely), but you can certainly make sure you’re the last link in the chain. Seriously, no matter how funny or apt you find one of these generic messages, your friends and family don’t need to read it.
Sign and Encrypt Messages

Back in Signatures, I explained how to add a signature to the end of each message with your contact information, a quote, or other content. But a message can also have a digital signature, a (normally invisible) string of characters that confirms to the recipient that the message truly comes from the address it appears to come from, and that the message contents haven’t been altered in transit.

In addition, Mail can encrypt messages, scrambling their contents so that only someone with the necessary key (presumably, the recipient) can view their contents, thereby ensuring private communications.

In this chapter I discuss if and when you should use digital signatures and encryption, how they work behind the scenes, and how to go about signing and encrypting messages in Mail.

Learn When and Why to Sign or Encrypt Messages

Let me start with the essential question of whether, or under what circumstances, you should even think about signing or encrypting messages. It’s not something everyone needs to do, and if you never need to do it, you need not bother reading the rest of this chapter. But the need could arise at some point—and even if you don’t need to sign or encrypt, you may find that there are some benefits to doing so.

Note: One could argue that even though most email doesn’t need to be encrypted, using encryption routinely (even when not needed) is a smart idea. If you encrypt only certain messages, that could suggest to an attacker that you have something to hide, and that those encrypted messages are where it’s hidden.

Most of us are accustomed to thinking of email as being private. One person sends a message and someone else receives it; as long as no
one is looking over either person’s shoulder or snooping on their computers when they’re not around, we presume that whatever was in that message is known only to the sender and recipient.

Indeed, that’s how things work most of the time, just as with paper letters: Most of the time no one except the intended recipient opens a letter to see what’s inside. But mail theft, tampering, accidents, and honest mistakes do occur. It sometimes happens that a person who shouldn’t see what’s inside an envelope, does. And when the contents of that envelope are highly confidential, sensitive, or valuable, someone else reading your mail can become a serious problem indeed.

Email is no different. It should be private, but it isn’t always. Each message exists not only on the computers of the sender and recipient, but also (at least temporarily) on each party’s mail server. In addition, a message may pass through any number of intermediate servers and routers, and may be backed up along the way in the data centers of one or more ISPs. In any of these places, a message could be read by an employee of the ISP, and it could be intercepted in transit by a hacker—or a government agency—during its journey.

(“Doesn’t SSL encrypt my messages?” you may ask. SSL secures a message only between Mail and the incoming or outgoing mail server, but doesn’t prevent someone from reading that message while it’s on a mail server, or during other legs of the delivery process.)

Because so many millions of email messages are exchanged every day, the probability that any particular message you send or receive will be read by someone who shouldn’t see it is incredibly small—but not zero. So, consider what would happen in one of these situations if the wrong person read email you sent:

- You need to email your accountant detailed information about your income, expenses, and taxes.

- You need to provide someone with your credit card number, social security number, or other sensitive information by email.
Fix Mail Problems

As I said earlier in this book, the macOS version of Mail has a number of reliability and behavior problems, and many of them are things you can’t fix, because you didn’t do anything to cause them—only Apple can fix them. So, although I can’t offer solutions to every problem, I’ve compiled solutions to some of the most common (and serious) problems in the pages ahead, including difficulties receiving and sending mail, problems with damaged mailboxes, and misbehaving Spotlight searches.

Although some of this information may provide useful background for resolving issues in Mail in iOS/iPadOS too, the specifics are different; see Troubleshoot iOS & iPadOS Mail Problems for help with Mail in iOS and iPadOS.

Fix Incoming Mail Problems

If Mail cannot download incoming messages, the cause may be anything from an incorrect setting in Mail, to a server problem, to a loss of internet connectivity. Work through each of the following sections until you resolve the problem.

About the Activity Window

To check what Mail is doing behind the scenes, choose Window > Activity. A small floating window appears, displaying detail about each activity Mail is performing. If there’s only one activity (and I’ve never seen more than two at once), the mini activity monitor at the bottom of the sidebar shows the same information. Unfortunately, the Activity window no longer lets you cancel tasks, as was the case in Yosemite and earlier.

For these two reasons, there’s little point in using the Activity window anymore—just look at the mini activity monitor in the sidebar.
Try Connection Doctor

To open Connection Doctor, choose Window > Connection Doctor. In the Connection Doctor window, Mail lists each incoming and outgoing email account you’ve configured—even those you’ve temporarily disabled. It attempts to log in to each account, and if it fails with any of them, it shows an explanation of why it failed. These explanations aren’t always helpful, but they often give you a good starting point in debugging problems, and are written in refreshingly plain English. If the Connection Doctor window suggests a specific fix, try that first. Otherwise, proceed with the following steps.

Username and Password Errors

If you enter your password in Mail > Preferences > Accounts (or in System Preferences > Internet Accounts), macOS stores the password in your keychain (which is usually what you want). If, for security reasons, you prefer for Mail to prompt you for your password each time you connect, leave the Password field blank.

Sometimes, even after successfully checking your email many times with the password you entered, Mail displays a dialog claiming that the mail server has “rejected” your password. Worse, you may re-enter your password—and even select “Remember this password in my keychain”—but find that another error message pops up as soon as you click OK. This annoyance may be due to any number of causes, but most have simple solutions.

If Mail suddenly begins prompting you for your password repeatedly when checking incoming mail (after retrieving it correctly earlier), try these steps in order until the problem goes away:

1. Click Cancel, wait a minute, and check your email again. Sometimes the problem goes away on its own—most likely because of a glitch with the server or your connection to it. (If your account is offline, choose Mailbox > Take All Accounts Online.)

2. If the problem persists, return to Keychain Access. Make sure that Passwords or All Items is selected under Category, locate your mail
So far, the bulk of this book has been about Mail on a Mac. Although I’ve mentioned Mail for iOS and iPadOS from time to time (and some of the things I’ve discussed apply equally to all platforms), Mail in iOS/iPadOS has enough unique characteristics that it deserves its own chapter. As was the case for macOS Mail, I’m not going to cover every feature here. Instead, I want to point out the most important things you need to understand in order to use Mail for iOS and iPadOS effectively—especially aspects of Mail that are unclear, obscure, or otherwise confusing.

I begin with a list of the key differences between Mail in macOS and Mail in iOS/iPadOS. Then I move on to Configure Mail in iOS & iPadOS and wrap up with how to Troubleshoot iOS & iPadOS Mail Problems.

Mail in iOS & iPadOS vs. Mail in macOS

Mail in iOS and iPadOS shares a great deal in common with Mail on a Mac, so anyone accustomed to one platform should be able to pick up the other easily. Naturally, the iOS/iPadOS version makes accommodations for smaller screens, a touch-screen interface, and the numerous user interface conventions that differ from those of macOS. I won’t spell all those out here, but I do think it’s worth pointing out several key differences in functionality—as well as a few similarities you may not have noticed.

Here’s what you should know about the iOS/iPadOS version of Mail:

- **No rules or spam filtering:** If you want to sort messages or weed out junk mail automatically, it’s best to set these tasks up on your mail server. (See Use Rules and Control Spam, respectively.)

- **Push (but no IMAP IDLE):** Mail in iOS and iPadOS supports push delivery of messages from iCloud, Exchange, and Yahoo IMAP...
accounts—and push works even when Mail isn’t open (see Fetch, Push, and IMAP IDLE). However, IMAP servers that offer only IMAP IDLE as a way of “pushing” messages don’t give you push delivery on an iOS device. As a result, Mail in macOS is likely to display messages from such servers before Mail in iOS/iPadOS.

Push delivery, where applicable, works with your Inbox and—for iCloud and Exchange accounts only—with other mailboxes you explicitly set up (see Change Account Settings).

In addition, note that even with iCloud and Exchange accounts, although Mail pushes new messages to your device immediately, it does not push changes made on other devices, such as moved or deleted messages. So, if your Mail icon in iOS/iPadOS says you have one unread message, and you delete that message on your Mac, the “1” badge won’t disappear right away; you may need to open Mail to force it to resynchronize its Inboxes.

- **Limited mailbox syncing:** Related to the last point...whereas the macOS version of Mail caches complete copies of all messages in all IMAP and Exchange mailboxes, syncing them in the background, Mail for iOS/iPadOS doesn’t (which is a good thing, because that would chew up lots of cellular bandwidth and storage space).

  Instead, for IMAP accounts, Mail syncs only the Inbox in the background. For Exchange accounts, you can specify how far back to sync email messages (from a day to a month, or all messages), and as I mentioned in the previous point, you can select, for iCloud and Exchange accounts, which mailboxes should have their messages pushed to your device. As for any other mailboxes, Mail syncs them only when you tap on them to display their contents.

  This may be significant if you use server-side filters or rules to sort your messages into mailboxes, because mailboxes other than Inbox won’t indicate that they contain any new, unread messages until you manually select them.

- **Autocomplete for multiple addressees:** If you regularly send messages to the same set of addresses (for example, your spouse
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Joe Kissell is the author of more than 60 books about technology. In 2017, he also became the publisher of Take Control Books, when alt concepts inc.—the company he runs along with his wife, Morgen Jahnke—acquired the Take Control series from TidBITS Publishing Inc.’s owners, Adam and Tonya Engst.

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