

TAKE CONTROL OF

Apple Mail

COVERS MAIL IN

macOS Mojave–Tahoe
iOS 18 & 26 • iPadOS 18 & 26

by **JOE KISSELL**

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**6TH
EDITION**

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Read Me First

Welcome to *Take Control of Apple Mail, Sixth Edition*, version 6.3, published in February 2026 by alt concepts. This book was written by Joe Kissell and edited by Kelly Turner (up to version 6.1) and Glenn Fleishman (version 6.2 and later).

This book helps you understand the most effective ways to use Apple’s Mail app in macOS 10.14 Mojave or later, iOS 26/iPadOS 26, and iOS 18/iPadOS 18, including customization and troubleshooting. It also helps you manage your incoming and outgoing email efficiently.

If you want to share this ebook with a friend, we ask that you do so as you would with a physical book: “lend” it for a quick look, but ask your friend to buy a copy for careful reading or reference. Discounted [classroom](#) and [Mac user group](#) copies are available.

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Settings vs. Preferences

In macOS Ventura, Apple replaced System Preferences with System Settings, and in most apps (including Mail), what was formerly a Preferences window is now a Settings window. In this book, I generally use a shorthand like “go to Mail > Settings/Preferences” or “open System Settings/System Preferences” to reflect these two possibilities. When I list System Settings separately, that applies only to Ventura or later.

What’s New in Version 6.3

Version 6.3 of this book added coverage of macOS 26 Tahoe and iOS 26/iPadOS 26, and dropped coverage of iOS 17/iPadOS 17. There were hundreds of fiddly little changes involving new icons, rearranged settings, slightly different procedures, and the like throughout the book. The most notable changes are:

- Added [Mail Changes in Tahoe](#) and [Mail Changes in iOS 26 & iPadOS 26](#) to provide an overview of what’s different
- Updated [Work with Notifications](#) to reflect significant changes in Tahoe
- In [Organize by Conversation](#), described new mark-as-read options
- Added information about the new Shortcuts automation for Mail in [What About Shortcuts?](#)
- Included a note about a new prompt to search all mailboxes in [Use Suggestions and Tokens](#)
- Mentioned a problem with creating smart mailboxes in Tahoe (see [Create a Smart Mailbox](#)), a missing Mute icon (see [Mute Conversations](#)), and a missing unsubscribe banner (see [Unsubscribe from Mailing Lists](#))
- Described a change to how blocked senders are managed in [Set Mail’s Junk Mail Filter Correctly](#)

- Updated [Search for Messages](#) to cover the improved interface in iOS 26/iPadOS 26
- Added a new topic about an iPhone/iPad interface element that I call the control bar; see [Use the Control Bar](#)
- Expanded [Scans](#) to include the new Scan Text feature

Note: Because of the significant interface changes in iOS 26/iPadOS 26, I’ve updated screenshots for iPhone and iPad to show those new versions, particularly because this version of the book looks back just to iOS 18/iPadOS 18. I’ve kept most older Mac screenshots, since I cover releases all the way back to 10.14 Mojave. I included images from 26 Tahoe when there is something different enough to show.

Introduction

If Apple Mail is your email client of choice under macOS 10.14 Mojave or later, or iOS 18/iPadOS 18 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: While I was once happy enough with Mail, I became somewhat disillusioned with the Mac version years ago. Unfortunately, each subsequent update over the last several years has made me even less happy. By contrast, Mail for iPhone and iPad, while lacking numerous features from the Mac version, also lacks most of its flaws. It's remarkably good and—despite a few missteps—getting better. So, you may decide to find a replacement email app for Mac but stick with Mail on your mobile devices (or vice versa).

The reason I wrote *Take Control of Email with Apple Mail* back in 2004 (and nine subsequent editions under various titles) was to help Mail users solve problems and eliminate frustrations. But 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.

However, I continue to update this book, because the majority of iPhone, iPad, and Mac users rely on Mail since Apple includes with

their operating system releases, and I'll help you as much as I can to work within its limitations. 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 possible.

Regardless of which Apple platforms you use, this book is about how to make Mail meet your needs as closely as it is capable. However, this isn't a comprehensive reference guide: I skip over basic tasks that you either know how to do already or can figure out easily by consulting the Help menu.

Several chapters (and portions of other chapters) apply equally to Mail for Mac, iPhone, and iPad, but most of the book focuses on the Mac version of Mail, which is only right, since it has far more features (and problems) than the mobile versions. The final chapter, [Use Mail for iPhone & iPad](#), covers the differences between the desktop and mobile platforms as well as the special strengths, weaknesses, and idiosyncrasies in the mobile version of Mail.

Special Note: About MailMaven

Mail has never been the only game in town—there are lots of other Mac, iPhone, and iPad email apps. Now there's a new one from SmallCubed called [MailMaven](#), for Mac only. I was involved in its development and wrote its documentation; I also wrote [Take Control of MailMaven](#), available at no cost. I'm now using it as my main Mac email app, though I still use Mail on my iPhone and iPad. (For a taste of what the app is like, [see this blog post](#).)

I want to be candid and transparent up front, since this is a book about Apple's Mail app. I used and promoted Mail for so long because it was the best email app I could find—but *only* with the addition of SmallCubed's MailSuite plugin, which wasn't compatible with changes Apple made starting in Sonoma.

MailMaven incorporates all the bells and whistles MailSuite offered, and much more, making it a more powerful, yet easy-to-use email app. So, if, despite getting help from this book, you want more from a Mac email app, MailMaven is worth your consideration!

Apple Mail Quick Start

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 [Mac] and/or [iPhone & iPad] 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](#). [Mac/iPhone & iPad]
- Get a grip on POP, IMAP, SMTP, Exchange, and more as you [Learn About Email Protocols](#). [Mac/iPhone & iPad]
- Make sure you understand account-setup details and how Mail deals with common tasks. See [Master Mail Concepts](#). [Mac]

Find the ideal Mail setup for your needs:

- Tailor Mail to your needs and tastes with settings, shortcuts, plugins, and more as you [Customize Mail](#). [Mac]
- Take Mail even further. See [Extend and Automate Mail](#). [Mac]
- Gmail user? You're in for some weirdness, so there's a whole chapter just for you: [Use Gmail with Mail](#). [Mac]

Become a better Mail user:

- Search like a pro. Read [Find Your Messages](#). [Mac]
- 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](#). [Mac/iPhone & iPad]

Handle exceptional tasks:

- [Sign and Encrypt Messages](#) for privacy. [Mac/iPhone & iPad]
- Perplexed by an error message or other misbehavior in the Mac version of Mail? Read [Fix Mail Problems](#). [Mac]
- Make the most of Mail on your iPhone or iPad. See [Use Mail for iPhone & iPad](#). [iPhone & iPad]

Learn What's New in Mail

Each new release of Mail in Tahoe, Sequoia, Sonoma, Ventura, Monterey, Big Sur, Catalina, Mojave, and in iOS 26/iPadOS 26 contains new features and design changes compared to earlier versions. Skim this chapter to see which of these may be important to you. Even if you're not especially interested in what's new, you may find it interesting to skip ahead and read about once-useful features that are now gone in [Mail's Disappearing Features](#).

Mail Changes in Tahoe

Mail, like other Apple apps in macOS 26 Tahoe, adopts the new Liquid Glass styling, with all the big rounded corners and transparency and distracting visual effects. But most of the changes were cosmetic rather than functional.

Other changes:

- You have more choices as to how messages in a conversation are marked as read; see [Organize by Conversation](#).
- A Shortcuts automation can be triggered when an email message is received; see [What About Shortcuts?](#).
- The button that used to make it easy to save a search as a Smart Mailbox appears to be nonfunctional, as I explain in [Create a Smart Mailbox](#).
- The Mute icon is missing from the toolbar by default, but you can put it back; see [Mute Conversations](#).
- The Unsubscribe banner seems to be missing too; see [Unsubscribe from Mailing Lists](#).
- The interface for viewing blocked contacts has changed; see [Set Mail's Junk Mail Filter Correctly](#).

Note: I’ve updated the screenshots for iPhone and iPad to reflect iOS 26/iPadOS 26. However, since this book covers Mac versions back to 10.14 Mojave, I’ve changed only a few of the Mac images to show the Tahoe interface, where it seemed especially important.

Mail Changes in Sequoia

The initial release of Sequoia didn’t feature many changes to Mail, but in versions 15.1–15.4, several more appeared:

- You now have the option to [Hide or Show Contact Photos](#).
- Mail Categories is a less-than great feature that tries to organize your Inbox(es) for you, but ends up hiding messages you probably want to see. See [Manage Mail Categories](#).
- Several new features were added to Apple Intelligence:
 - Priority messages, in which Mail tries to guess which messages are most urgent and scoots them to the top of your message list; see [View Priority Messages](#)
 - Automated (and occasionally somewhat accurate) summaries of messages and threads; see [View Message and Thread Summaries](#)
 - Smart Replies, which try to “help” you compose quick replies; see [Use Smart Replies](#)
 - Writing Tools for polishing your writing or even composing text from scratch; see [Use Apple Intelligence Writing Tools](#)
- As far as I can tell, BIMI (Brand Indicators for Message Identification) are no longer there, but if not, it’s not a great loss, because I never found that feature to work consistently.

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 Mail for iPhone and iPad supports POP, it doesn't let you create new mailboxes to file messages locally. That means an iPhone or iPad doesn't work well as the *sole* device used with a POP account, and since POP works best when used with a single device, this mismatch of capabilities makes POP less than ideal for iPhone/iPad.

Master Mail Concepts

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 iPhone or iPad user, be sure to read [Understand Special Mailboxes](#), much of which is also applicable to iPhones and iPads.

Set Up Accounts

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 Settings/Preference Pane

For starters, there are two places where you can add, edit, or remove accounts: in Mail > Settings/Preferences > Accounts (or, just for adding accounts, the shortcut Mail > Add Account) and in System Settings/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 Settings/System Preferences > Internet Accounts pane is that many account types (including iCloud, Exchange, and Gmail) include more features than just email, and affect more apps than just Mail. Internet Accounts provides a

central location where you can enable or disable individual data types like Mail, Calendars, Contacts, and Notes for each account.

- The reason for the Mail > Settings/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 Settings/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 Settings/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 > Settings/Preferences > Accounts:** Visit this pane to edit outgoing (SMTP) servers, add secondary From addresses, change the behavior of special mailboxes (see [Understand Special Mailboxes](#)), and adjust details such as whether to download attachments or use an IMAP path prefix.
- **System Settings/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, sometimes 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 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 app. 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. Starting in Tahoe, you can also toggle the sidebar by clicking the Sidebar  icon at the top of the window. (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 Settings > Appearance or 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 reordered 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 [Use 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 27**) appears briefly in the same location when Mail is performing a background task that takes more than a moment.

Improve Your Privacy

Email is not the most private means of communication, as messages are normally unencrypted and subject to interception and inspection in a variety of ways. I cover how to use encryption with Mail in [Sign and Encrypt Messages](#), later. Here, however, I want to draw your attention to two privacy-related features introduced in macOS 12 Monterey and iOS 15/iPadOS 15: Mail Privacy Protection and Hide My Email. Both attempt to reduce the amount of personal information you expose while using email.

About iCloud+

iCloud+ is Apple’s newish term for their paid tiers of iCloud storage, ranging from 50 GB to 2 TB. Starting in late 2021, anyone paying for the extra storage also gets [a bunch of other features](#) relating to privacy and security.

For the purpose of this book, the only features that require iCloud+ subscriptions are Hide My Email (see [Hide Your Email Address](#), later in this chapter) and custom email domains (see the sidebar [What About Custom Domains?](#)).

Use Mail Privacy Protection

The Mail Privacy Protection feature introduced in Monterey and iOS 15/iPadOS 15 makes it more difficult for people and companies to track you through email. (At least it does in theory; read on for a significant qualification.)

When you enable this feature, by default, Mail downloads any remote images in email messages in the background, using an obscured IP address. This means that, if the message includes a tracking pixel (with a user-specific string at the end of its address), loading the image signals to the sender *that* you opened it, but not precisely *when* you opened it, *how many times* you opened it, *where* you opened it, or whether you forwarded it. (And, because the sender doesn’t know your

Mac's real IP address, they can't use that, in combination with web tracking, to build up their profile of your behavior.)

Because tracking pixels are ubiquitous and a lot of people consider email tracking to be creepy, it's nice to have a feature that gives senders less information about you.

To enable Mail Privacy Protection, do the following:

- **macOS, Monterey or later:** Go to Mail > Settings/Preferences > Privacy and select Protect Mail Activity.
- **iOS/iPadOS:** Go to Settings > Apps > Mail > Privacy Protection and turn on Protect Mail Activity.

However, weirdly, Mail Privacy Protection still *does* load those tracking images, and therefore still *does* tell the sender that you, specifically, received the message. If the sort of privacy you're looking for includes hiding from senders the fact that you received and opened their messages at all, you won't get that without some extra effort. To do so, counterintuitively, you have to *disable* Protect Mail Activity in the above locations. Once you do so, two more options appear:

- **Hide IP Address:** This feature sends any requests for remote content (typically embedded images, which may include the invisible tracking pixels) through proxy servers to prevent the sender from knowing your IP address and location. In other words, this is a portion of Mail Privacy Protection, but not including the automatic background loading feature. I suggest enabling this feature.
- **Block All Remote Content:** This setting prevents Mail from downloading embedded images and other content automatically at all, though you can still load such images manually, if you like. I also suggest enabling this feature.

Note: In previous versions of Mail, there was a checkbox called "Load remote content in messages," which, when unchecked, did exactly what Block All Remote Content does. I recommended then, and still recommend now, using this feature rather than the full Mail Privacy Protection, which actually provides less privacy!

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 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 how plugins or extensions 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.

Understand Plugins vs. Extensions

For many years, developers were able to add features to Mail for Mac by writing special apps called *plugins* (see [Use Plugins](#)). Plugins could be quite powerful, altering the way Mail receives and sends messages, adding useful new interface elements and menu commands, and remedying missing or poorly implemented features.

However, for whatever reason, Apple offered only grudging support for plugins. With each major release of macOS, Apple made it progressively harder for plugins to function, limited the scope of what they could do, and made life more difficult for both developers and users of plugins. (In addition, plugins had to be revised in at least a small way

for every *minor* release of macOS—another seemingly pointless hassle.)

Then, with Monterey, Apple announced a whole new architecture for third parties to interact with Mail: *extensions*, which developers can create using a framework called *MailKit* (though you as a user may never encounter that term). Unlike plugins, extensions have Apple’s explicit approval, and [Apple’s documentation](#) makes it sound as though extensions can do nearly anything. Unfortunately, many types of functionality available in third-party plugins (such as adding tags to messages, applying rules to outgoing messages, and changing signatures) can’t be achieved with extensions.

Starting with macOS 14 Sonoma, Mail [no longer supports plugins](#) at all, and extensions have become the only way developers can add features to Mail or alter its behavior. Some plugin developers were able to retool their software to function as extensions. For example, [Mail-Butler](#) and [SpamSieve](#) still work in Mail under Sonoma and later, although their user interface has changed a bit.

But any plugins you had installed under Ventura or earlier no longer function once you upgrade to Sonoma. And plugins, because they’re a completely different sort of software, can’t be simply *updated* to become extensions; in almost every case, you’ll need to either download extensions that replace your existing plugins, find alternatives, or do without those features.

To summarize, here are the available options based on your version of macOS:

- **Sonoma or later:** Only extensions are supported.
- **Monterey and Ventura:** You can use either plugins or extensions.
- **Big Sur or earlier:** Only plugins are supported.

One plugin I described in detail in earlier versions of this book that could not directly translate into an extension is SmallCubed Software’s [MailSuite](#), which incorporated four modules: Mail Act-On (for filing

Use Gmail with Mail

If you have a Gmail account and want to use it in Mail on a Mac, 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 Workspace 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.

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 back in 2013, I described my decision in [Why \(and how\) I'm saying goodbye to Gmail](#). Nowadays, I have additional reasons to avoid Gmail, and there are more options for alternative providers.

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 systemwide 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](#). 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 systemwide Spotlight searches, to find email messages.

Note: In Big Sur or later, 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 attachments
- 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 that accuracy is highly variable. Here a few other things I've noticed about natural-language searches in Mail for Mac:

- **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 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!

If you’re using macOS Sequoia 15.4, iOS 18.2, or iPadOS 18.2 or later, Apple would really like you to use Categories (see [Manage Mail Categories](#)) to control what you *see* in your Inbox, though that doesn’t affect what’s actually *in* your Inbox. As I said earlier in the book, I think Categories are a terrible idea, poorly implemented, and I don’t recommend using them.

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 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

Become a Better Correspondent

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—of 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 to 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 Mac 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 for iPhone/iPad too, the specifics are different; see [Troubleshoot iPhone and iPad Mail Problems](#) for help with Mail on iPhones and iPads.

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 > Settings/Preferences > Accounts (or in System Settings/System Preferences > Internet Accounts), Your Mac stores the password in your keychain—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

Use Mail for iPhone & iPad

So far, the bulk of this book has been about Mail on a Mac. Although I've mentioned Mail for iPhone and iPad from time to time (and some of the things I've discussed apply equally to all platforms), Mail for iPhone/iPad has enough unique characteristics that it deserves its own chapter. As was the case for Mail on a Mac, 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 effectively on your iPhone or iPad—especially aspects of Mail that are unclear, obscure, or otherwise confusing.

Note: Examples of features in Mail for iPhone and iPad I cover elsewhere are [Manage Mail Categories](#), [View Message and Thread Summaries](#), [View Priority Messages](#), [Use Smart Replies](#), and [Hide or Show Contact Photos](#).

I begin with a list of the key differences between Mail for Mac and Mail in for iPhone/iPad. Then I move on to [Configure Mail for iPhone and iPad](#) and wrap up with how to [Troubleshoot iPhone and iPad Mail Problems](#).

Mail for iPhone/iPad vs. Mail for Mac

Mail for iPhone and iPad 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 iPhone/iPad version makes accommodations for smaller screens, a touch-screen interface, and the numerous user interface conventions that differ from those on a Mac. 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 iPhone/iPad version of Mail:

- **No *local* 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.) However, with iCloud accounts only, you can create, enable, or disable rules right on your device, just as you can on iCloud.com. Go to Settings > *Your Name* > iCloud > Mail and tap iCloud Mail Rules.
- **Push (but no IMAP IDLE):** Mail for iPhone and iPad 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 for Mac is likely to display messages from such servers *before* Mail for iPhone and iPad.

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 the Mail icon on your iPhone or iPad 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 Mac version of Mail caches complete copies of all messages in all IMAP and Exchange mailboxes, syncing them in the background, Mail for iPhone/iPad 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

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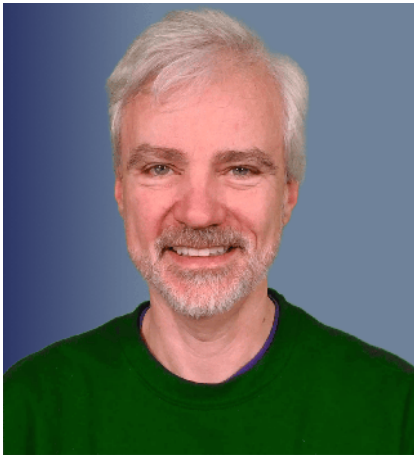
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