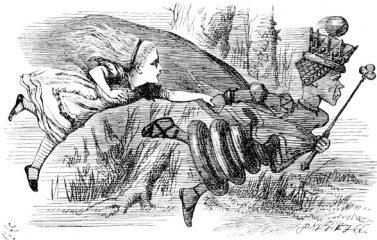


Keeping up with the Red Queen

Tips and Tricks for Keeping up With Email Inboxes

Wed, Mar 13, 2024



“Well, in our country,” said Alice, still panting a little, “you’d generally get to somewhere else—if you ran very fast for a long time, as we’ve been doing.”

“A slow sort of country!” said the Queen. “Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!”

Lewis Carroll, [*Through the Looking-Glass: And What Alice Found There*](#)

The Computer Age has us going through many more email messages in a day than the number of snail-mail items we used to go through. Thus, it would be nice to get the computer to do some of the work of sorting our email before we have to deal with it.

An ideal spam filter would catch all the email that you never want to see (or that is dangerous) and nothing that you might actually want to read. That word *might* carries a bit of a load, though: even if an ideal spam filter existed, there would still be emails that you wouldn’t *always* want it to remove automatically.

That’s leads to the 2 things that tonight’s program is about: making it easier to get to email that’s useful to you and making it easier to rapidly go through the email that probably isn’t important (but sometimes might be).

Sorting IRL

In the physical world (sometimes called **meat space** or **IRL** for ‘in real life’) you probably have a routine for dealing with the snail mail you receive each day. Mine is that I go to the mailbox, grab the mail, sit down at a desk, and sort through the items by making 3 or so piles:

- **Spam**¹: “You may be a winner!”, “You have been preapproved for our credit card!”, “Big-State-U Alumni Association Cruise on the Rhine!”, “Crypto!!!!!!”

These probably go straight into the recycle bin.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=anwy2MPT5RE>

- **Graymail**²: Announcements of sales at a store I do occasionally shop at, donation solicitations from my favorite charities, newsletters from community groups, alumni magazines.

These probably get some level of consideration before getting recycled. Occasionally one of them will make it into the 3rd pile.

- **Wanted mail**³: Letters from friends, magazines or professional journals I subscribe to, and so on, but also bills and other annoying but important mail.

Email: Spam

In email, your email provider probably has spam filters that are fairly effective at pulling the scams and complete junk out. Occasionally I find a legitimate piece of graymail in the spam folder & will mark it as not being spam to train the spam filter more precisely. Even less frequently, some clear spam makes it into my inbox and I have to flag it as spam.

Email: Unsubscribing from unwanted graymail

One person's graymail is another's spam, but legitimate organizations will have a link to unsubscribe from their list somewhere in the email. The exact process varies from organization to organization: for some, clicking the link is all you need to do, and you get taken to a page saying you'll be unsubscribed but may get some emails for a brief period; for others you'll get taken to a page where you have to check some boxes on your email preferences in order to unsubscribe from the different categories of email that the organization sends.

Generally speaking, you should unsubscribe rather than flagging "legitimate" graymail as spam. However, it should not be a herculean task to unsubscribe, and if an organization has made it too difficult to do so or continues to send email after you unsubscribe, feel free to flag the email as spam. I think that Leo's (see the link in footnote 2) rule of thumb of giving them 24 hours to deal with unsubscribing you is probably about right: there's no reason it should take 2 weeks.

Email: Separating the... various sorts of wheat

Now that we've dealt with the clear chaff, we're at the heart of tonight's program: setting tools up for getting straight to various sorts of email that you actually want to read (or at least that you want to deal

2 Marketers and the general public agree that the word *spam* means 'email you didn't ask for' (see, for example, <https://askleo.com/what-is-and-is-not-spam/>), but marketers will say that you *did* ask for their "legitimate" marketing materials by not unchecking or checking the appropriate box. They use the term *graymail* for "legitimate" marketing mail.

Note that under this marketers' definition, the credit card offer and the Lorelei song inviting me to the Rhine in the previous list of examples would not be spam since I hadn't opted out of letting some 3rd party sell the spammers their mailing list. That is absurd. Hence, I'm using the term *graymail* to mean mail that the recipient wants on some but not all occasions. Mail that's never wanted, regardless of its "legitimacy," is spam.

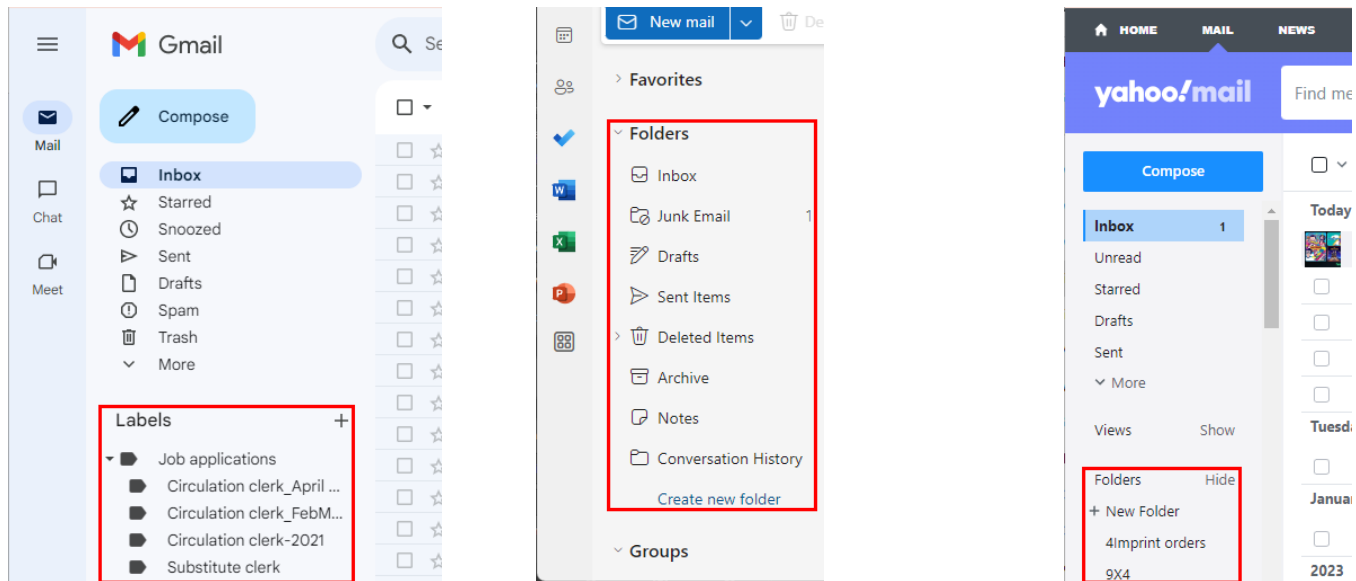
3 As you can see from the examples, *wanted* might be a strong word to use here, but I don't know of a popular term for this class of mail.

with rather than suffer consequences). The tools have different names depending on the email provider, but they come down to 2 parts:

- A set of classes that you find useful for labeling your email with (your email service might call these *labels*, *tags*, *categories*, *favorites*, *folders*, or something along those lines)
- A set of rules that the email service will apply to incoming email to automatically sort it into those classes (*rules* or *filters* are often the terms used)

Tags

You may already apply tags (Gmail **Labels**, Yahoo **Folders**, or Outlook **Folders**) to some of the email that you keep. The great thing about tags is that you get to decide what goes into your system: what terms to use, how many to have, sometimes even their hierarchy.



Above are images of the Web browser views for Gmail **Labels**, Outlook **Folders**, and Yahoo Mail **Folders**. You can add new tags for any of the 3 by way of +, **Create new folder**, or + **New folder**, respectively. For each of these 3 email services, anyway, you can set up subfolders or sublabels to get finer-grained systems for filing emails.⁴

Rules/Filters

Gmail **Filters**, Outlook **Rules**, and Yahoo Mail **Filters** are the means these services have for presorting your email for you. As well you might suppose, there are differences among the 3, but the general idea is to start with an email of a sort that you'd like to be able to find easily, whether in the future in your

⁴ Creating classification hierarchies can take you down rabbit holes. I've sometimes gone wild and then later found that browsing the tags got hard because of the clutter. Meanwhile, I had tags that only applied to a couple of emails, so I scaled back by refiling some emails into the parent categories. Like much of life, finding the right balance in a classification system is iterative.

archive or in your incoming, new mail. In the menu hidden under an ellipsis (... or :) or a hamburger (≡) you'll find something like "Create a new rule" or "Filter messages like this." Choosing that command will open a dialogue for creating the rule:

- What are the triggers? (Sender? Subject line words? Words anywhere in the message?)
- What is the action that should occur? (Tag it in a certain way? Mark it as important?)

You can also go back and tweak rules you've already set up. Generally, you get to the appropriate place to do that through the settings for your mail service.

Image credits:

[*Alice & the Red Queen running to stay in place*](#)

By John Tenniel

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