

How to make friends with your e-mail inbox

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Recently I read about [a proposal for eliminating e-mail](#). After all, e-mail consumes time, adds extra pressure to an already stressful workplace, fragments attention, and feels like a never-ending black hole sometimes. One friend says bluntly, “I hate e-mail.” Some have written about [taming the e-mail monster](#), and others have already abandoned e-mail in favor of texting or other forms of communicating.

But I’m still a fan of e-mail. For all of its downsides, e-mail can also be a fast and convenient way of communicating. When it’s too early or too late to phone my sisters, I can still send them an e-mail with my latest news, and they can read it whenever it works for them. I can read and respond to church and writing e-mails at times that suit my workflow, so I don’t get interrupted during a meal or when I’m needing to concentrate on my sermon or blog post.

So rather than eliminating e-mail, or thinking of e-mail as a monster to be tamed, today I’m sharing my **seven ways of making friends with your inbox**:

- 1. Have more than one e-mail address.**

It might seem ironic to manage e-mail by having multiple addresses, but I find it works well since it means that for the most part, other people do my filing for me, and I’m not overwhelmed by one huge unwieldy inbox.

So church-related e-mails go to my church address, writing related e-mails go to my writing address, family and friends use a separate address, and the millions of rewards programs I’ve joined go to a fourth address. This relieves some of the always-on pressure of e-mail since I’m not always on to everything and everyone—I don’t generally check my church e-mail on my day off, and by the same token I’m not distracted by my IHOP birthday reward e-mail on church time.

There are some overlaps of course, since some people from my church respond to my writing e-mails, and I'm still transitioning friends from an old e-mail address to my family and friends set-up. E-mail, like life in general, doesn't always fall into neat categories, but I don't stress about that. If a church member replies to my writing address, I'm OK with replying back from there. (So please don't stop e-mailing me!) Or if the church council agenda comes to my writing address, I simply forward it without reading to my church address to deal with later.

If you're going to try this multiple address method, one additional tip—don't give everyone all of your addresses and expect them to figure out which one to use when. Just give them the address you want them to use, which is easiest for them and less confusing. So when I signed up at the new Choices market, I gave them just my fourth address that I want them to use, and they don't need to know about my other ones.

2. Have e-mail office hours.

When I taught at a local Bible college, I would have office hours set aside for seeing students, and now I try to set aside specific time for my church and writing e-mail. I find that setting some boundaries around that e-mail time helps me focus. So for example, I give my fourth address only sporadic "office" hours maybe once a week or even less, since those e-mails don't need a lot of attention. When I'm in sermon-writing mode, I'm not distracted by another half-dozen e-mails about worship details that can wait until my e-mail office time later in the day.

3. When you've finished with an e-mail, move it into a separate folder.

I know people who keep thousands of e-mails in their inbox and use search whenever they need to find something, but I prefer a more streamlined approach, so I reserve my inbox for e-mails that I still need to read or respond to, and move everything else into separate folders. For my church e-mail, I have separate folders for general church e-mails, our e-bulletin, and my work with the Future Directions Task Force. For my writing e-mail, I have separate folders for each writing project such as [Abingdon Press](#), [Loishelen Designs](#), and my different speaking engagements. For me, having a less cluttered inbox

leads to less cluttered thinking.

4. **Use priority flags or stars.**

By using folders, I keep my inbox list short enough that I can usually scan what's there, star or flag whatever needs to be answered that day, then leave the rest. E-mail is not an emergency. It may be convenient and widely used, but it's not the only or always the best way to communicate, so sometimes I'll leave an e-mail in my inbox as a reminder to pray, or to send a card, text, Facebook message, or phone.

5. **Use e-mail as a writing warm-up.**

Some writers treat e-mail as an interruption, as a necessary bit of administration that isn't real writing. But whether I'm writing an e-mail or writing in my journal, whether I'm writing for my blog or a book, in each case, I'm putting words together to communicate. So for me, writing e-mails is real writing, and I will sometimes answer e-mails as a writing warm-up to get ready for writing a sermon or blog post. I tell myself it isn't procrastination; it's prelude.

6. **Use auto-response.**

When I know I'm going to be away from my church e-mail for more than a day or two, I let people know with an auto-response so they'll know not to expect an immediate answer. I find it also helps relieve that vague feeling that I should be checking my e-mail even while I'm on vacation or study leave.

7. **Don't answer.**

I once felt that I needed to answer every e-mail, and I still feel that way about any e-mail that's sent to me personally. But for mass e-mails inviting me to the latest community fundraiser or Billy Graham event, invitations to take a restaurant survey, or e-mails where I'm cc'd but not expected to answer, then I don't respond unless I want to attend or have something specific to say. I figure that not only saves me time, but I'm doing the sender a favor by not cluttering their inbox with another unnecessary e-mail. Oh, and I don't answer any of those e-mails about the trip I supposedly won or my recent inheritance either.

So that's how I'm making friends with my inbox, and so far I think the feeling's mutual.

Originally posted at [Yamasaki's blog](#)