workshop

Email tips & tricks

Are you in charge of your email, or does it make you play catch-up? We thought so. Steve Bass and Jim Welp have some top ways to help you tame your inbox and get a handle on message mayhem once and for all

Sending and receiving email is an easy habit to form because it's so effortless. We'll bet that, like us, you get a mass of email every day: ubiquitous joke lists, annoying chain letters, obnoxious ads and other uninvited garbage mingle with messages you really need. What's an email user to do?

Over the next few pages we provide a guide to using filters and rules to avoid spam (the collective name for all unsolicited email). Plus, we tell you how to handle attachments and preserve your vital data. So before you reopen your inbox, read on.

First, get organised

To keep your inbox in check, you have to organise your messages as they arrive. Keep your inbox empty: reply quickly, file to another folder or forward the email straight away. Try bypassing the conventional alphabetised list of email folders by adding a number and space to your folder names to create your own order.

Another trick is to filter incoming messages based on events and people. For instance, you could set up Eudora to play a sound to get your attention when an email from your boss arrives. Then the message can be routed to the email folder

Avoid spam

• Bounce it back **This is a sneaky way to get off a joke list or to avoid any other form of spam. Use the free Bounce Spam Mail utility to deliver a fake bounce message so the sender will think your email address is invalid. Find Bounce Spam Mail at our Downloads Directory (www.pcadvisor.co.uk/registered).**
• Don't invite spam **If you read mail on newsgroups, be sure to block spam by altering your email address so that it won't work as typed but will clearly signal to people what your valid address is. For example, if your email address is stopspam@pcadvisor.com, change it to 'stopspam-at-pcadvisor.com'.**
• Eudora and Me **Here's a spammer's secret: much of the spam you get isn't really addressed to you. Luckily, two nifty Eudora filters send every email not addressed to you to your 'possible spam' folder.**

Select Tools, Address Book, New (as shown above). Create a nickname called Me and enter all the email addresses that send you email regularly. Now choose Tools, Filter and click New. From the first Header drop-down list, select Any Header. Change Contains to Intersects Nickname, and type Me into the field to the right. For Action, choose Skip Rest from the first drop-down list and leave the others blank.

Follow the same steps to create a second filter, again choosing Any Header from the Header drop-down list, but this time leaving Contains in place and the field to the right blank. For Action, choose Transfer To from the drop-down list, and then select your spam folder. Finally, move these two filters to the bottom of your filter list.
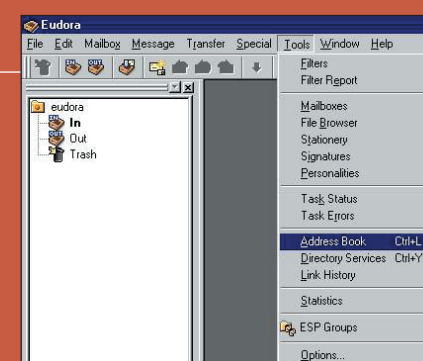
↑ Prevent spam suffocation in Eudora by directing certain messages to a 'possible spam' folder

for work, and set to pop open immediately on your screen. Simple filters can colour-code meetings, messages from friends, joke lists and so on. You'll be amazed at how much easier these filters make sorting your mail.

Filter out spam

Perhaps your best defence against spam is to choose an ISP that seriously defends you against unsolicited messages. Web-based services such as Hotmail and Yahoo provide excellent junk-mail filters; and other ISPs attempt to thwart the spam deluge by blocking known spamming domains. Ask your ISP about its approach to spam prevention and demand that it take action against spammers.

The next line of defence are filters, known as inbox rules. These examine incoming messages, determine their origin and direct them to the trash rather than your inbox when they meet specific criteria. Creating filters is easy once you've set up a few that identify common spam characteristics. Some email programs let you copy existing rules

← Filters can be set to move mail to a specific folder. The Eudora filters can also set sounds to alert you when, for instance, your boss sends a message
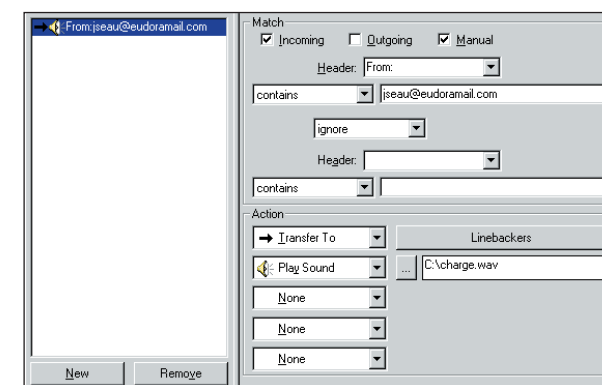
and then alter a few words to block a new spam source.

A quick word of warning: until you get the hang of creating filters, it's possible that one of them might send an important message from your boss into the trash. To cover yourself, funnel-filter spam into a 'possible spam' folder and delete the junk manually every few days. Experiment by creating a quick filter to block the domains of countries that spammers often use to route their junk – their two-letter country codes are in the spam's header. Current favourites include South Korea (.kr), China (.cn), Chile (.cl) and Slovenia (.si).

• In Outlook Express Select Tools, Message Rules, Mail. Click the Cancel button to close the New Mail Rule dialog box (for now) and select the Blocked Senders tab in the Message Rules dialog box. Click the Add button and enter either the spammer's email address, such as spammer@spams-r-us.com, or the domain that sent it, such as spamorama.com.
• In Outlook 2000 Select Tools, Rules Wizard, and New. Select the box marked 'Check messages when they arrive' and then click Next. Highlight the checkbox next to specific words in the Rule description and enter a country code such as .kr. Choose Next, then select 'Move it to the specific folder'. Click the blue underlined word specified in the Rule description, highlight your spam folder and click Finish. When you get spam bearing some other country domain, Outlook 2000 lets you copy this rule and easily modify it for the new country code.
• In Eudora To create a filter in Eudora, right-click a spam message and choose Make Filter. Highlight the field with the domain (it will be in either the From or the Any Recipient field) and delete everything that precedes the period and country name. Choose Transfer to Existing Mailbox, scroll to the Possible Spam folder and click Create Filter. In the ad-sponsored version of Eudora, version 5.0.2, click the In button, select the Possible spam folder and click Create folder.
• In AOL If you want to create an AOL Mail filter, you must first establish a screen name that you will use to receive email only from domains you trust – for example, PCAdvisor.co.uk – and from the people you choose to add to your accepted list.

← Eudora makes it easy to create a filter to block spam from specific countries, such as the UK
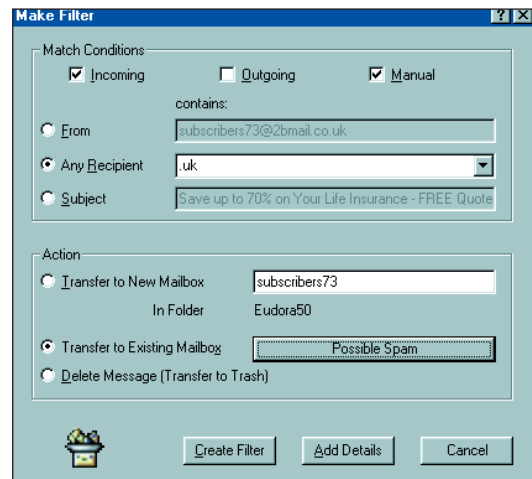
First, log in with your Master screen name and choose Preferences. Select Parental Controls, Set Parental Controls, Email Control, Customize. Click Next, choose the option that allows mail only from the sources you list and add the names of those sources to the list.

Reaching server limits

When someone sends you an email message it travels to your internet service provider, which holds it on an email server until your email client – for example, Outlook – fetches it. Your email inbox gradually accumulates messages, however. Most ISPs limit you to between 5MB and 10MB of server space to store the messages you receive.

For those who frequently send and receive large files, a service like WhaleMail (www.whalemail.com) might prove useful. This web-based service is totally free and lets you store as much as 75MB of email content for two weeks. It also gives other people you specify access to the files.

However, if your email application doesn't delete retrieved mail from your email provider's server automatically every few days – especially if you get large file attachments – your ISP will reject new

Your next step is to create new screen names – each with its own email controls – to use for receiving email from specific newsgroups, business associates and long-winded family members.

When you get spam offering 'Secrets to spy on others' or promising that you'll 'Make millions in three weeks' use a short, unique portion of the subject or message text in the filter. Don't use the entire subject – the next one will be different – and ignore the email address because that changes, too. Spend five minutes a day for a week creating an effective filter and you should notice a satisfying lack of spam in your inbox.

messages once you exceed its storage limits. You may receive a warning but, if not, here's what to do.

• **In Outlook Express 5.5 and Outlook 2000** Click Tools, Accounts and select the proper account. Click Properties, Advanced, check 'Leave a copy of message on server' and 'Remove from server after 5 days' (the default), but change the 5 to 2.
• **In Eudora** Select Tools, Options, Incoming Mail. Check 'Delete from server after 0 days', but change the default zero to 2.

Adding the personal touch

Email messages can be quite stark as they lack the layout and structure of a letter. However, it's easy enough to personalise the mail you send out with footers that tell the recipient who you are and how to contact you. Depending on the email account you use, you may find built-in customisation features that allow you to append the details listed at the end of your outgoing mail messages. In Hotmail, for example, click on the Options tab and select Signature. Type in the text of the message you wish to appear and click ok.
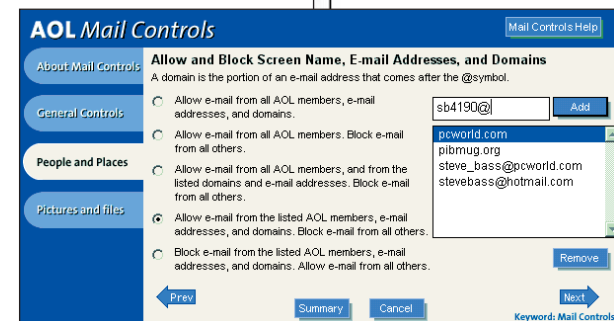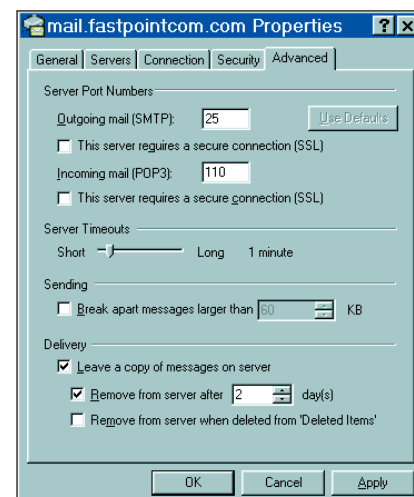
Alternatively, trial versions of signature software, such as AOL PowerTools Light and Keyboard Express, can be downloaded from www.pcadvisor.co.uk/registered.

Sign off in style

If your email account won't let you automatically append your contact details or favourite quote (older versions of AOL's software, for instance, omitted this facility) you can still work around the problem.

• **In AOL 6.0** Add an email signature by clicking the pen icon on the righthand side of the pane. Choose Setup Signatures and tap in your message. Support for more

→ It's easy to personalise your email in Hotmail – simply add a footnote, which will attach itself to all of your outgoing messages

↓ You can set AOL's mail program to block incoming mail from all sources that you haven't approved in advance

VBS (Visual Basic script) worms from entering any email client. Obtain a copy of VBS Defender from our Download Directory at www.pcadvisor.co.uk/registered.

than one signature template (so you can differentiate between business and personal messages) means you'll need to click the Pen icon each time you want a signature to be sent.

Scan attachments for viruses

Email attachments come in many shapes and sizes, but they all have one thing in common: they're potential virus bombs that can seriously damage your system. For this reason, you should always save attachments to your hard drive and scan them with an antivirus tool before you attempt to view them.

• **In Outlook Express 5.5 and Outlook 2000** Open the email message, select File and Save Attachments. Browse to the folder where you want to save the email attachment.
• **In Eudora** Eudora will automatically send attachments to the folder of your choice. Choose Tools, Options, Attachments and click the Attachment directory button.

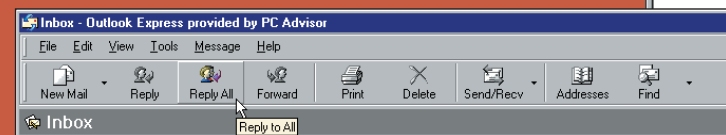If you're after maximum security, try VBS Defender. This free tool blocks all

Upgrade to Outlook 2002

If you open an Outlook attachment that contains a worm, the malicious program propagates by sending a copy of itself to everyone in your Address Book. As discussed earlier, the answer is not to click on suspicious attachments. This is all very well in theory, but in practice most of us are guilty of doing so at some stage.

Because of this, Microsoft has idiot-proofed Outlook 2002, so if you're concerned about attachments an upgrade might be wise. The program looks at the file extensions of attachments and simply won't let you open ones it considers high risk.

Its list of suspect attachments includes plenty of common file types such as EXE (executable) programs, VBS (Visual Basic script) files and HLP (help) files. If someone sends you a file Outlook deems unacceptable, you'll receive an error message. If you really need to exchange one of these file types, you could try compressing a file and sending it as a ZIP attachment. Alternatively, use a free web-based account for your email attachments. The inconvenience seems like a small price to pay for greater security. ■
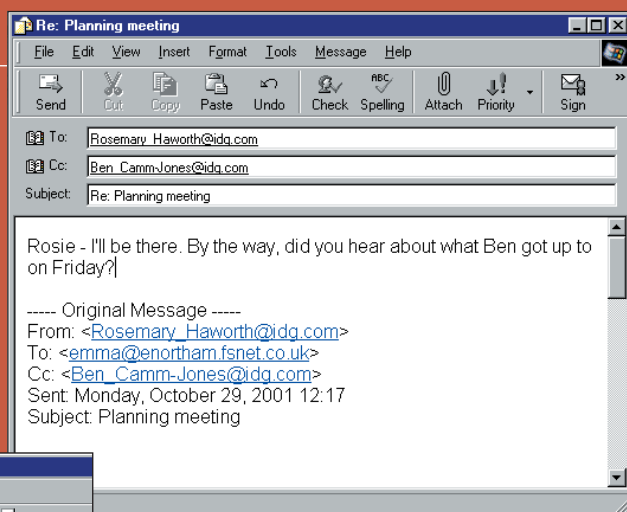
Cardinal rules of email

Even seasoned email users may sometimes breach email etiquette. However, if you follow our cardinal rules of email, you'll always say what you mean.

• Keep it private **Don't reply to a mail list message with 'Thanks' or 'I agree' – reply privately instead. No matter what, cut the balance of a lengthy email before replying.**
• Sign on the dotted line **Adding a signature line at the bottom of your email ensures that the reader knows who's writing and provides other useful information as well. However, keep it to three lines, including your email address.**

← ↑ Don't click 'Reply to all' if your response is going to mention anything that would be better kept between the two of you…

• Bonus tip **Add 'mailto:' before your address, as in 'mailto:stevebassomatic@yahoo.com'. When people click the address, a new message window opens automatically.**
• Play it safe **There's 10 people on an email thread, and you're about to reply to the sender with some juicy gossip. Play it safe – double-check that you didn't hit Reply to All.**
• Keep it clean **Cursing somehow looks worse in email. Avoid swearing, or at least soften it with asterisks. Harsh language often sounds even angrier in email, and curt messages that aren't meant to be harsh at all can come across as cold.**
• Don't showcase your lousy spelling **Take a second or two to spellcheck your email. Better still, set your email program to**

check messages automatically. It's also no excuse if your email client doesn't include a built-in spellchecker – go to SpellCheck.net to give your message the once-over. It's a free service, which includes a thesaurus and also translates into French, German and Spanish.
• Don't cry wolf **Use your email program's Return Receipt function only when it's critical that you know your message was received. Overusing Return Receipt wastes bandwidth and, if your message isn't terribly important, you may aggravate the recipient. If your message is really critical, try using one of those newfangled things called telephones. And another thing: don't mark the mail 'High priority' unless it truly is a high priority.**

← To maintain inbox storage, set Outlook 2000 and Outlook Express 5.5 to delete messages from the server automatically

More email tips & tricks can be found at www.pcadvisor.co.uk/about/printplus.cfm