Overcome Email Overload

Get Through Your Electronic Mail Faster

The Problem

- 2.4 hrs each day on email (Ferris Research)

- 2.6 trillion message per year in 2000, 9.2 trillion per year by 2005 (IDC)

- 7 trillion messages per day by 2002 (Forrester Research)

What have you seen?

Why Is Email Such a Problem?

- We use email a lot.
  - Email is fast.
  - Email is easy.
- Email is immature technology.
  - Printing has had 400 years to develop.
  - Even the tools that exist aren't well-utilized.

Solutions

What this class will cover:

- Organizing and Prioritizing
- Cutting Down on Incoming Messages
- Spending Less Time on Responses
- Writing Better Messages
  - Reducing Ambiguity
  - Conveying Emotional Tone
  - Getting and Keeping Attention

Overcome Email Overload

Organizing and Prioritizing

Problems

- You might read low-priority messages before high-priority messages.

- You might miss important messages.

- You might answer questions that no longer need responses.

- You might need to re-read an earlier message to make sense of its follow-up.

Strategy

- Automatically Prioritize Messages
  - Read high-priority messages more often than low-priority messages
  - Keep conversations together
- Hide messages when done with them

BUT!

- Prioritizing strategy depends heavily on which email program you use.

Rules AKA Filters

- Your email program might let you prioritize automatically with tools called "rules".

- Rules take specified actions when a message meets specified conditions, e.g.:
  - Condition: message is from boss
  - Action: raise priority level

Note: Not all email programs have rules.

Naming Problem: "Rules" or "Filters"

- Outlook: Rules
- Outlook Express: Message Rules
- Netscape: Message Filters
- Eudora: Filters
- AOL: none (but can use Netscape)

In this presentation, I say "rules".

Move Message to Folder

- Dangerous, even though most commonly advised action.

- Most people use email as "to-do" list.

- Hard to see active messages when spread across several folders.

Assign Category to Message

- Best approach for most people:
  1. Assign category to message
  2. Sort inbox first by category, second by date.
  3. When done with message, move out of inbox.

  Result: Inbox contains all your "to-do" messages, sorted in priority order.

What's a "Category"?

- A category is an attribute of a message that you can set and sort by.

- Different email programs let you set/sort different attributes:
  - Outlook and Outlook Express: "Categories"
  - Eudora: "Labels"
  - Netscape: "Priorities"
  - AOL: none (but you can use Netscape 6 to check your AOL mail)

Categorization Strategy

- Use categorization strategy that is trivially easy – so even your computer can do it.

- Easiest way to categorize: by sender's group.

- Exception: mailing lists by recipient

- Exception: jokes, junk mail

Category Examples

- Immediate coworkers, people inside company, family, friends, retailers, each mailing list

- Note: Use project-based mailing lists to sort by project

Sorting By Category

- Outlook: alphabetical
  - Add prefix, e.g. A-Spouse, C-Boss, D-Coworkers, F-Family, H-InsideCompany, M-Friends, J-MailingList1, K-MailingList2, Z-JunkMail

(Leave room between letters for future expansion)

- Eudora: by label order

How Many Categories?

- Outlook: Categories (unlimited number)
- Eudora Pro: Labels (15 for Mac, 7 for PC)
- Netscape: Priority Levels (6)
- Eudora Light: Priority Levels (5)
- Outlook Express: none
- AOL: none (but can use Netscape)

Not Enough Categories?

Split messages into three types: High-, Medium-, Low-Priority

- High-Priority
  - messages that need action
  - e.g. message from the boss
  - assign to category

Not Enough Categories?

- Medium-Priority
  - messages to read, but no action likely
  - E.g. company-wide announcements
  - move to folder, watch folder

Not Enough Categories?

- Low-priority messages:
  - don't want to read
  - E.g. junk email
  - move to folder, ignore folder (most of time)

Email vs. Paper Filing Strategies

- Email is different from paper.
  - Paper has no "find" or "search" tools.
  - Can take literally hours or days to find memo in filing cabinet.
  - Email has good "find" and "search" tools.
  - At worst, takes minutes or hours to find email message.
- Use filing strategy for email that minimizes *filing* time, not *retrieval* time.

You Need Fewer Folders Than You Think

- As few as 2 (inbox and "done")
  - Outlook
  - Eudora for the Mac
- 7 to 20 folders
  - All other programs
- Extra folders compensate for not enough categories *or*
- Archiving in multiple folders

Naming Your Folders

Name like categories:

- Add prefix, e.g. A-Spouse, C-Boss, D-Coworkers, F-Family, H-InsideCompany, M-Friends, J-MailingList1, K-MailingList2, Z-JunkMail

Rule Order

- Rules run in the order they are listed. Use this order:

1. Mailing lists
2. Important people
3. Junk

- Stop running rules after categorizing message!

Useful Rules

- ## Move mailing list message to folder

If any recipient is floss-list@catfloss.org

Then move the message to the J-floss folder

- ## Categorize messages from boss

If the sender is pat@flossrecycling.com

Then assign the message to the B-boss category

Useful Rules

- ## Categorize messages from coworkers

If the sender "is in" coworkers list

Then assign the message to the d-coworkers category

- ## Categorize messages from colleagues

If the sender's address contains @mycompany.com

Then assign the message to the h-insideCompany category

Rule Condition "is in"

- How to do "is in" condition:
  - Eudora: From intersects nickname
  - Outlook 2002: sender is in address book
  - Outlook 2000, Outlook Express: From contains <list of people>
  - Netscape, AOL: none

Useful Rules

- Get rid of spam

If message contains "visa or mastercard"
Then move message to z-JunkMail folder

If message contains "1-900"
Then move message to z-JunkMail folder

Useful Rules

- ## Default (not work, friend, family, list)

If a message gets this far

Then assign the message to t-UnknownSender category

Reduce Incoming Messages

Where Do Unwanted Messages Come From?

- junk emailers
- mailing lists
- coworkers
- friends

Reduce Junk Email

- Get a free account (e.g. Yahoo) for personal use.

- Get a free account for retailers.

- **Keep your work address private!!**

Reduce Mailing List Email

- Unsubscribe from mailing lists that you don't read.

- Mailing lists are run by software, not humans*, so you have to know how to unsubscribe.

- Different lists use different software.

*except for Outlook Global Address Lists

How to Unsubscribe

- The address of the list administration software is *not* the same as the address to post a message.

- List administration address should be in the first message you get
  - *keep that message someplace safe!!*

- If you lose the administration address, look in the headers or in the footer.

Unsubscribe Commands

- "unsubscribe" usually works
  - put in header and in body
  - follow it with the name of the list
  - maybe with your email address:

Subject: unsubscribe floss-talk

-----

unsubscribe floss-talk mabel@flossrecycling.com

Getting Help

- Most mailing list software will give you help.

- Try info, help, or nonsense.

- Try several things:

Subject: help floss-talk

-----

help floss-talk

info floss-talk

alsfdjlsa floss-talk

Write to Discourage Responses

- Write clearly (covered later)
- Use formal language
- Signal the end of conversations
- Save your thanks
- Avoid rhetorical questions

Use Formal Language

- More informal language signals more intimacy – encouraging responses.

- More formal language is distancing – discouraging responses.

Signal Conversation End

- This handy phrase will save you from reading a reply:

No Reply Needed

(Abbreviate someday to NRN)

- Low effort, high savings

Don't Thank Right Away

- Empty "thank you" messages distracting, can be difficult to put into context.

- "Thank you" encourages "you're welcome" responses.

- Thank them next time you see or write them.

Avoid Rhetorical Questions

People will answer them anyway.

Subject: Re: safes

> Have you ever seen those little safes

> they have in hotels? Please put some in

> the Cafeteria.

Yes, there was a safe in the hotel I stayed

in last week.

Discourage 3rd-Party Chatter

Has this happened to you?

- You send to many people
- Someone does a Reply-to-All
- Your correspondents get in arguments with each other.

Solution:

- Reply-to-Sender instead of Reply-to-All
- Bcc

Send Fewer Messages

- Don't send
  - "me too"
  - junk mail
  - jokes
  - any kind of chain letter
- Don't Cc excessively

Ask People to Stop!

If you don't ask your friends to stop sending you jokes, "me too", chain letters, they will send you more!

CAUTION: You must be **very** polite.

Spend Less Time On Responses

Don't Respond

- Don't say "thank you" or "you're welcome" (right away).

- Don't respond to junk mail.

- Don't answer messages from strangers.

- Don't answer if you're *not* in the To list unless there is a direct question to you *or* the sender made a false statement.

Read All Messages Before Replying to Any

- Someone else might have answered the question already.

- The sender may have decided he/she didn't need the answer after all.

Use Prewritten Responses

For example,

- Driving directions
- All-purpose response to vague questions
- "I'm busy but will get back to you"
- "Please don't send me chain letters"
- "Please don't send me jokes"
- "Please use Bcc"

Use Auto-Responders

- Rules frequently can reply automatically
- Out-of-Office messages (Outlook)

- BUT! Dangers:
  - Spammers can find out your address is "live".
  - Friends/colleagues can get tired of your vacation message.

Reduce Ambiguity

Use Context and "Vocal" Techniques

Why is Clarity Harder in Email?

- Email lacks the context of paper.
  - Paper stock and printing style convey a lot of context.
  - Email lacks gestures, intonation, and facial expressions of speech.
- Email lulls you into inappropriate speech-like habits.

Context

What is this headline about?

Bulls and Bears Face Similar Challenges

Sports?

Stocks?

Large Mammals?

Provide Context by…

- Quoting the previous message
- Making references concrete
- Ask detailed questions
- Say what action you want
- Repeat subject in body

Quoting

- Not too much, not too little
- Frequently only need one sentence
- Less than half the message should be new

Make References Concrete

Avoid words that take the place of other words:

- Pronouns (he, she, ours)
- Common names (Mike, Steve, Jessica)
- Relative places (here, there)
- Relative times (yesterday, next Tuesday)
- Concepts (idea, information, data)
- Conversation holders (that, what he said)

Ask Explicitly for What You Want

Poor usage:

Blue might be better than yellow for the covers.

Is this:

- – An order?
- – An opinion?
- – A request for more information?
- – A request for an opinion?

Better:

Could we save money by making the covers blue instead of yellow?

Ask Explicit Questions

- Best: say
  - Which aspect of the subject interests you
  - How much detail you need
  - How knowledgeable you are already

- Frequently, saying what you will do with the information will answer the other questions.

Ask Explicit Questions

- Poor:

Please tell me about the building heating system.

- Better:

The conference rooms in building 154 are too cold. I'd like to reset the thermostats, but can't figure out how.

How do I change the temperature settings in the bldg 154 conference rooms?

Repeat Subject in Body

Subject: party at Mama Del's1730h-1930h 2/6

Please join us in celebrating Mabel's 45th birthday party at Mama Del's! Appetizers at 1730, dinner at 1800.

About 20% of the receivers wrote back to ask what day the party was

Intonational Grouping

Poor usage:

Which would you like: hot dogs with gelatin, or lasagna with corn on the cob or green bean casserole?

Is the green bean casserole a main dish or a side dish?

Intonational Grouping

- Better usage:

Which would you like:

+ hot dogs with gelatin

+ lasagna with

corn on the cob or

green bean casserole?

Intonational Grouping

- Best:

Which would you like:

+ hot dogs with gelatin

+ lasagna with corn on the cob

+ lasagna with green bean casserole?

Emphasis

Poor usage:

John said that he would go to the store tomorrow.

What's John's point?

- He wasn't going to go today?

- He wasn't going to the restaurant?

- He is hurt that you doubted his promise?

Emphasis

John said that he would go to the store *tomorrow.*

Or

John said that he would go to the store *tomorrow*.

Italics

- – Are harder to type
- – Don't always display properly
- – Are frequently harder to read

Convey Emotional Tone

Why do people get so angry?

- Text lacks vocal inflection, gestures, facial expression

- Sender can't read receiver's mood

- Receiver has no built-in cooling off period

- Email is usually shorter than paper memos

- Email can be more personal than paper memos

Important to convey

Indicate these clearly in your messages:

- Emotional state
- Uncertainty
- Urgency

Use Stand-Ins for "Vocal" Tools

- Emoticons
- Emphasis
- Um, Uh, Er
- Capital letters (SPARINGLY!)
- Punctuation

Punctuation

- (?) – uncertainty

  She's the president(?).

- ?foo? – uncertainty about a phrase

  She's the ?first female CFO?.

- … - pauses, implying uncertainty or depression

  Chris? … She's the president ... Not like me…

In Defense of "Vocal" Stand-Ins

Why do people need to write funny?

- Writing is hard for many people.

- With many emails, people don't have time for many rewrites.

- Email's shortness gives less time to convey tone.

- Email is very personal.

If You Think Someone Insulted You

- Be calm.

- Put it aside.

- Ask a colleague to find a different interpretation.

- Phone the sender.

- Be calm.

Get and Keep Attention

Send messages your correspondents will read and respond to

Get Attention With

- Subject lines

- Addressing method

- Reader's name

- Self-identification

- Importance levels

Subject Lines

- Subject lines should be compact and informative

- A good way to come up with a subject line is to imagine saying

  - "I'd like to talk to you about…"

  - "I have a question about…"

- The words that complete the sentence usually make a good subject line.

Subject Lines

- Signal words like REQ, FYI, BTW, URGENT

   REQ: send me Phrockmeijer report

- Reader's name

   MABEL: Phrockmeijer report

- EOM (End Of Message)

   Phrockmeijer report done, plz pick up EOM

Addressing Method

- When to use To

  - Replying to a request

  - They might know the answer to your question

  - You want them to take an action

- When to use Cc or Bcc

  - For their information only

  - Outcome will affect reader

  - If they might have comments or corrections

Use Reader's Name

- Not just for subject lines
- Shows that the message is designed for them, not thrown at random people

  Subject: Phrockmeijer report done

  Mabel,

  I need an update on last week's staff meeting.

Self-Identification

- Who are you? In what role are you acting?

- How did you hear of your reader?

- Why will your reader be interested in your message?

Importance Levels

- Can be useful, but misused often enough that people ignore them.

- Mark no more than 10% of your messages high-importance.

- Mark low-priority messages with low-importance.

Keep Attention

- Make the message easy to read
- Make your points easy to find and respond to
- Make them think you're worth responding to

Make the message easy to read

- ## Shorten the message
  - What scrolls off the screen frequently scrolls out of short-term memory.
- ## Shorten paragraphs
  - It's harder to find a sentence in the middle of a long paragraph.
- ## Avoid attachments
  - Attachments take time to launch and can have viruses.

Make points easy to find and respond to

- Cut extraneous information
- Put the most important topic first
- Discuss one issue per message
- Summarize at beginning and end
- Separate quotes with blank lines
- Shorten quotes

Cut Extraneous Information

> **Will you have the report done by Friday?**

Well, Ernie is being a real pain. I don't understand why he can't seem to answer a simple question, but he goes on and on and on and doesn't ever seem to say anything useful. And he smells bad! I don't know *when* the last time he took a bath was! You'd think he grew up in a barn. He is such a pain to work with that I have pretty much given up on including him in anything and am doing it all myself. The good news is that now I'm making much faster progress, and think I'll have it done by Thursday. How's that for blazing speed?

Vs.

> **Will you have the report done by Friday?**
Yes. I think I'll have it done by Thursday

Put Most Important Topic First

Will you have the report done by Friday?

BTW, would you like to go to lunch tomorrow?

This keeps people from spending a lot of time on a minor issue before coming to the major issue.

Better: One Topic Per Message

- People frequently respond to only the first or last issue:

  > **Will you have the report done by Friday?**

  > **BTW, would you like to go to lunch tomorrow?**

  Yes, that would be great! Meet me at 11:30.

- One topic per message prevents this from happening.

- Good to only respond to one topic per message.

Summarize at Top and Bottom

Mabel – The staff meeting brought up three issues: temps, picnic, and training.

We're budgeted for three more temps. Do you have any boring jobs a temp could do?

We're looking for a place to have the PSZ picnic. Where was your husband's picnic was last year? I remember he liked it.

Marty says its time for our CPR certifications again. Did you get certified already?

To summarize:

+ Do you need any temps?

+ Where was your husband's picnic?

+ Are you current on your CPR certification?

Make them think you're worth responding to

- Use good grammar and spelling
- Explicitly show your status with self-identification or signatures

But note: good context is more important than good grammar and spelling

Review

- Use rules to organize and prioritize
- Reduce incoming messages
- Spend less time on responses
- Reduce ambiguity
- Convey emotional tone
- Get and keep attention