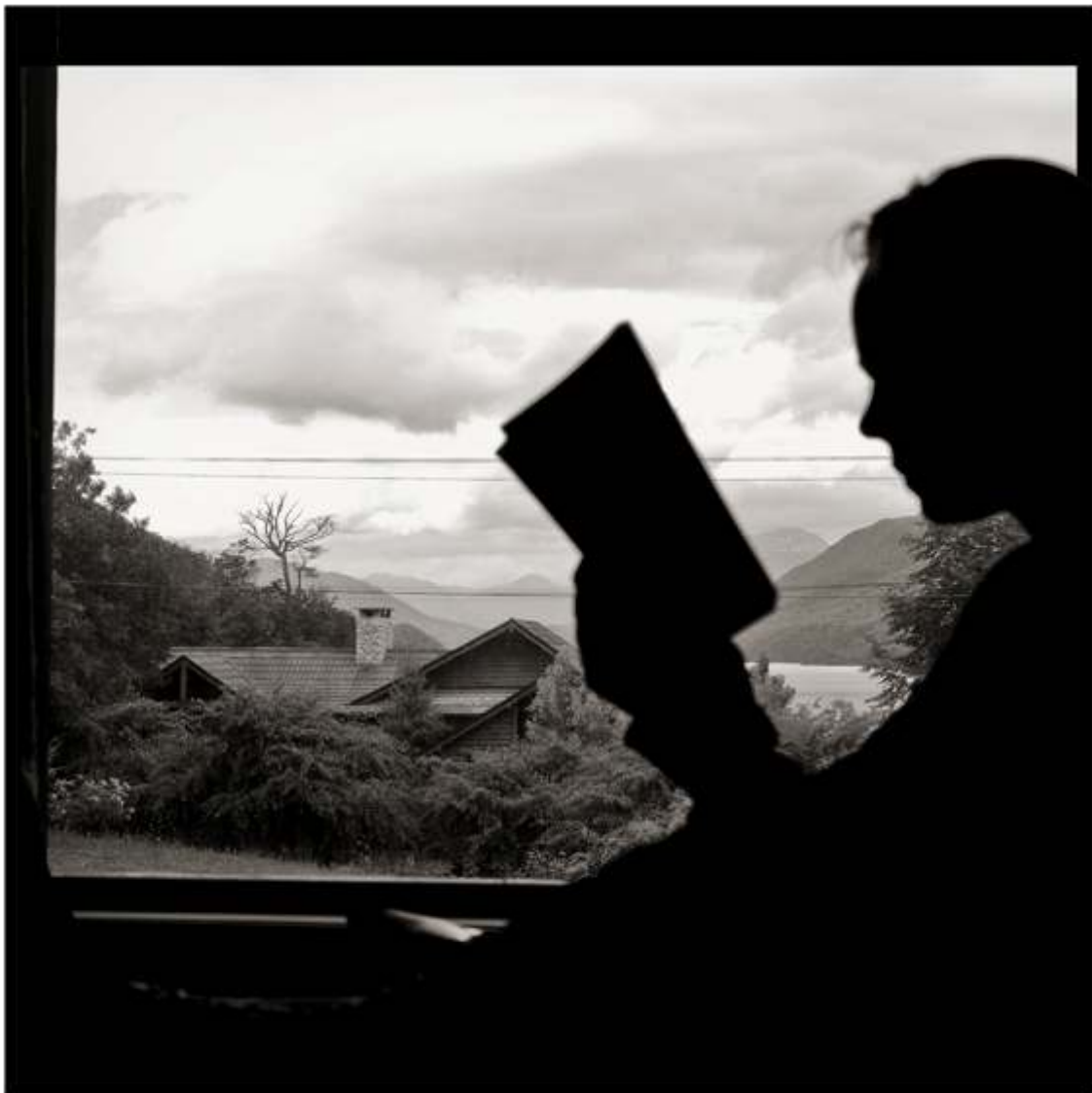


A Short, Happy Guide to Email Mastery

By Claire Díaz-Ortiz



jose m. diazortiz ©

(Images from Jose Díaz Ortiz)

Copyright **Interwebs Publishing** 2013

INTERWEBS publishing

Introduction



I don't live in your inbox, but I think I know it.

Here's what (I think) I know about your email inbox:

- It's full.
- It's always grasping towards inbox zero, but never quite reaching it.
- It represents annoyance, negativity, and overwhelm.
- It just ain't pretty.

I know your inbox, because I bet it's mine.

In the past year, as I've taken a long, hard look at the way I work, I've also taken a long, hard look at my inbox. What it means to me, what it doesn't mean to me, and the potential repercussions of throwing the darned thing out the window.

In the end, by rethinking the way I think about email, I've come to some semblance of peace about a thorny topic. In this short ebook, I'll be looking at a few key themes that can help you (and me) on the journey to email bliss – or, at least, email mediocrity.

Why Email is Work. (And Why it Isn't)



It's an age-old question.

And one even our forefathers puzzled over.

Are those emails you spend hours writing each day really *work*, or are they a horrific distraction from the *real* work you need to get done?

Here are two perspectives.

Amazingly, I believe both.

Perspective #1: No, Emailing is Not Work

This theory goes like this: real work is creation-based. Real work leads to tangible results. Real work launches products, writes books, records songs.

Real work is when you push away the distractions, buckle down, and get something created at the end.

Email is nothing like this.

Instead, email is a nightmarish hamster wheel in which you are never done.

As my friend Jon Acuff likes to joke, can you ever be done with the Internet?

Do you ever log off and say, “Yup! I finished the Internet today!”

In a word? No.

Same thing goes for email.

You will never be done with email. Someone will always want to ask you to do something. Someone will always want you to respond about something.

Someone will always be there. *In your inbox*. Waiting for you to respond in a timely manner.

Perspective #2: Yes, Emails are Work

This perspective doesn't poke holes at the other side of things, but rather takes a different tack. In this theory, you admit that yes – emailing sucks,

emailing is a never-ending hamster wheel of madness, emailing does not lead to creation, and emailing is a something you will never be “done” with.

But, it argues that the reality is that emailing is necessary to our jobs. We need to email to succeed in our careers. We are expected to email with clients, partners, and coworkers. We are also expected to do so in a timely manner.

Do we like it? No. But it’s the reality.

And thus, that means email *is* work. That means that email is not something that can just be “fit in” at the end of the day around “real” work. Instead, it means that we need to acknowledge the hours we must spend emailing each week and make those part of our expected work.

So, when you say you “didn’t work” over the weekend when in reality you spent 4 hours emailing, you actually didn’t take a break. *You did work. You emailed.*

So there you have it. Two wildly different perspectives on the reality of the time we spend emailing.

Do you think email is work? Or do you think email is the essence of non-work? How do you treat email in your daily life? As a job? Or as an unnecessary addition?

The One Email I Won't Respond To

[Managing email](#) is one of the most trying, time-consuming, and overwhelming parts of every professional's daily life. And although many of us buy into the theory that email isn't work (because real work should be creation-based), the unfortunate reality we all have to face is that, sadly, [email is work](#).

Why? Because we need to do it to get our jobs done, it takes up time, and it's an expected part of our professional roles. So, even though emailing may not be helping you get that product launched, or that book into your publisher, it is part of your job.

Ugh.

I believe that email can become even more challenging when you face a regular stream of *unsolicited* emails. These are emails from folks you don't know who want things, want to tell you things, want to ask you things, or want to yell at you about things (see more on that last one below).

As someone with an active online life - and a [blog with 35,000 newsletter subscribers](#) - I get a lot of these unsolicited emails. And, for years, I've tried hard to respond to many of the ones I get. This doesn't mean I respond to every email - not by a long shot - but it does mean I try.

But there's one type of email I won't respond to, and it's the one type of email I recommend you never respond to either.

What email is that? It's the most toxic of all bad emails out there.

The irrationally negative email. The I-hate-you email. The YOU SUCK email.

Is there an email sitting in your inbox that screams at you for something you likely never did? An email that bashes you for something someone read about you in an article that isn't even true? An email that makes inaccurate assumptions about your life and berates you for them?

My advice: Just don't respond. It's not worth your time.

In 2006, when I first started a popular blog and random people online who didn't know me were able to contact me for the first time in my life, I started learning this lesson. Seven years later, I'm still at it. I'm not perfect, and I mess up. Just this month, I responded to one because it was so appallingly offensive. The result? I started an idiotic chain of toxic emails that took up my headspace for a few of my short hours on this planet.

Was it stupid? Highly. Did I regret it? Very much so. How did it end? I stopped responding and put a filter in gmail to immediately trash all future emails from the person.

The lesson is simple. Got an insanely negative email in your inbox from someone you don't know about something you're not responsible for? Don't answer. Unless you want to feed a troll. Then go ahead and respond. Spend your energy trying to convince someone who hates you of an alternative position. Start an email war.

But I don't recommend it.

Do you respond to negative emails, or are you able to ward off the toxicity and remember it's probably not worth your time? In contrast, have you ever responded to a negative email and turned around someone's poor opinion into a positive one?

I Didn't Email You Back Because I Wanted to Personally Offend You (And Other Assumptions We Make about Digital Communication)

This week, more than two strangers sent me emails outlining their apparently deep personal offense at the fact that I had not yet responded to their emails to me asking for things they want.

The emails were *much* more dramatic versions of the following:

"This is my second email in one week to you. Frankly, I just don't understand why you haven't responded. I'm trying to convince myself there is some email problem because I am really shocked by this."

...and...

"I need you to write back, as I explained in my earlier note. Why are you tweeting if you aren't emailing? Everyone says you are communicative, but this

experience has certainly proved otherwise. Why are you doing this given that you know how important this is to me?"

Keep in mind that both emails came from people I do not know, who were asking me to do things to benefit them (not me).

Such emails (which come in varying degrees a few times a month) create in me two conflicting desires.

Desire #1: Never respond to the person's original query because they have annoyed me so thoroughly.

Desire #2: Offer myself as an email consultant to the person to explain that this is not how email works.

This kind of behavior can best be described by a bizarre term I once heard that is both immature and horrid sounding and unbelievably accurate. The

term is “butt-hurt“, and my theory is that it comes from the emotions that arise during children’s playground kickball games wherein you kick balls at other people’s backsides and make them cry when you make contact.

Essentially, this playground potty-talk denotes the feeling of “Shucks! Ah man! She/he doesn’t like me!” personal offense wherein one hangs their head low and croons loudly.

The main thing about being “butt-hurt” is that the hurt is disproportionate to the offense.

And getting personally offended by a stranger who isn’t responding to your email (or responding timely enough for your liking) about something that you are asking them to do for you (because we all know if it were the other way around you wouldn’t need to hear from them so urgently!), is the essence of butt-hurt.

It is also the essence of dumb.

(And the essence of annoying.)

Instead of assuming the stranger is trying to personally offend you, why not consider a few of these (Plausible! I personally promise!) conclusions:

- The stranger gets 250 emails every day and cannot respond to all her emails.

- Of those 250 emails, 100 of them are people asking for stuff (favors/insight/help/support) that does not directly benefit the stranger herself. Since the stranger cannot live her entire life doling out favors, she cannot be expected to respond favorably to all such requests.

- Your email was just not that important to the stranger.

- Your email was actually *really* important for the stranger but she lost the email/deleted it/archived it/forgot about it mistakenly because of the typical organizational mishaps that occur when you get 250 emails a day.
- The stranger has been sick, offline, having a baby, or otherwise engaged for the 72 hours in which your response did not come. Forgive her.

Email is an art.

Knowing how to email people you want to do things for you (especially when they have little to no incentive to do what you want them to) is an even higher art form. It's a balancing act of gentle pitching and kindness and deference and always assuming the best about the other person's intentions, and the worst about the other person's free time to respond to emails. If you're unclear of the rules of email, don't come to the table wearing your heart on

your sleeve ready for personal offense to slight you when responses are not immediate. You're just setting yourself up for disaster.

Do you ever find yourself offended when someone doesn't respond to your email? How do you handle it? Do people come to you up in arms when you don't respond to them?

The Best Way to Respond to Email

Here's the thing.

In *theory*, I believe that email isn't work. In my view, email isn't a creation-based process that results in shipping your next product out the door, or writing your next book, or recording your next album. Email isn't as creatively taxing as getting a project done, and email doesn't add up hour after hour, day after day, to a completed project.

And so, for those reasons, I agree with folks who say that you should never email first thing in the morning. Instead, with those first few hours of peak energy that most of us have upon waking, we should focus on our most difficult task of the day, and get that done. This is not a new idea.

It's a theory proposed in [Eat that Frog: 21 Ways to Stop Procrastinating and Get More Done in Less Time](#) and in many other books on productivity. I even touch on it in my own ebook about creating a morning routine, [The Present Principle: Seven Steps to Life in the Now](#). (I'll go further into depth in my upcoming book, [Greater Expectations: Succeed \(and Stay Sane\) in an On-Demand, All-Access, Always-On Age](#).)

But telling you when *not* to email isn't suggesting you when you *should* respond to emails. So when should you respond to emails, if not in the first few hours of the morning when you first turn on your computer?

I believe there are a few key times when it's best to do *real* emailing. And by "real" emailing" I mean when you spend a chunk of time devoted to working through a bunch of emails, and not when you send a one-off urgent response to something from your iphone or from your computer while you're typing furiously in a Word document to meet a deadline in another screen.

Here are the best times, according to me:

- As much as possible, email should be done in bulk. There are always one-off exceptions to this rule, but in order to attain true productivity you need to slot the bulk of your emailing into specific times of the day – and preferably not too many times! The alternative, which most of us fall into the trap of, is doing our “real” work all day with email perpetually in the background, ready to interrupt our concentration and derail us for the most minor of emails.

- Email should be done when you have *less* energy, rather than *more*. So figure out when that is, *whenever* it is, and create a block of time in your schedule to fit in your emailing in that period. In my experience, the lull in the afternoon is a great time to go through a bunch of non-urgent emails.

- If you believe in multi-tasking (which I do, within certain limits), email can even be a great candidate for a multitasking activity. Try emailing while listening to a conference call (on mute), while wrangling a kiddo or two, while watching the news, or while monitoring the spaghetti sauce.

So when do you get the bulk of your emailing done? Do you agree that email should be done when you have less energy - not more? What have you found work for you in taming the email beast?

Email Etiquette: Six Tips to Dominate Your Inbox

There were quite a few responses to my recent post, [I Didn't Email You Back Because I Wanted to Personally Offend You](#).

Fittingly, many of them came to me via email. And *many* were quite good.

I've pulled together some of the best ones, with hopes that they might help you (or enrage you!) in your quest for true email etiquette domination.

Without further ado...

Six Tips for Email Etiquette (from you readers):

1. On Salutations:

*I highly recommend you encourage readers to **say hello, hi, buon giorno**, anything that gets the 'hello' across (especially when they're asking*

for something!). It's easy, it's nice and it warrants a response other than 'Why should !?!'

2. On Writing a Good Subject Line

Make your subject heading useful to the recipient.

3. On Not Saying the Wrong Thing

Never email anything you wouldn't mind having on the front page of the newspaper (you never know when someone will forward the message or who knows what).

4. On Not Receiving a Response

In the business world (the one inhabited by fast-moving strangers asking questions) has a Cardinal Rule: If you don't receive a reply, the answer is "No." People don't call back to say, "No."

5. On Using the Phone (!)

If it's slightly tricky or a very nuanced message where you want to make sure not to offend, pick up the phone!

If what you need to say is too long and complicated, pick up the phone! In other words, keep emails short and to the point

6. On Keeping the Peace

Thich Nhat Hanh advises to "write in such a way that the other person is receptive toward reading"...

There are pacifists who can write protest letters of great condemnation but who are incapable of writing a love letter. You have to write in such a way that the other person is receptive toward reading; you have to speak in such a way that the other person is receptive toward listening. If you do not, it is not worth the trouble to write or to speak.

To write in such a way is to practice meditation.

These are great tips, and aside from the tips about picking up the phone, I pretty much agree with all of those. (I'm an introvert, what can I say.)

What tips have I (and my readers missed) that help you dominate your inbox?

Why I Read My Spam

I am a big advocate of scanning through your spam folder in Gmail (or whatever email program you use) every month (if you use Gmail, it is probably automatically erasing your spam every 30 days).

I recently did my spam scan, and found the following useful things incorrectly buried in my Spam folder:

- A notice that my husband was now following me on Twitter.
- A nice, long note from a reader about Twitter for Good.
- Multiple people wanting to advertise on websites I own.
- A couple responses to a hiring query I put up on a website.
- A number of offers from page rank 0 sites to help me [increase my page rank](#) of 6.
- The wiring information about the \$2.8 million that the country of Nigeria owes me.

In sum, it's worth it to scan your spam every month.

It takes 5 minutes, and there might be something in there of use. If not, you will still be entertained, and will possibly come away with some excellent financial advice or medical recommendations.

Why the Demise of Hotmail is the End of an Era



Jose M. @azorbiz ©

This week, a tiny little news item appeared on the right side of my screen as I scanned something vastly more important. In no uncertain terms, it alerted me to *the end of an era*.

[Hotmail is dying.](#)

Yes, folks, it's true.

The 350 million of us who at one point signed up for accounts with hotmail will now be forcibly “encouraged” to migrate over from memorable old monikers like soccer4evaEVA1996@hotmail.com or iluvbeachesandpez04191977@hotmail.com to new, Outlook-friendly accounts.

Today, **I’m sad.**

Sad for my 18-year old claraponi1@hotmail.com self. (And, additionally, for my claraponi2@hotmail.com self, an account created out of necessity when I lost the password for the original account and proved mentally unable to figure out how to go about resetting it.)

For the self that didn’t have an email address until her first day of college right near the turn of the millennium. And then promptly signed up for a dozen.

For that same self that, within three months of never having had an email address, managed to “spam” (their words, not mine) her 80-person freshman dorm mailing list so thoroughly that she was blocked from said dorm list. (Who *didn't* want to hear what I was thinking, doing, *feeling* at all moments of my wildly transformative first year of college, I wondered.)

For the self that, with tears, was told by the upper-class Resident Computer Counselor in the freshman dorm that there was no way, at the turn of the millennium, to check a school email account while at home on Christmas break (read: from a non-school computer) and accepted this email-less 2 week holiday as a first, grim experience with what would one day be referred wistfully to as “unplugging”.

For that self, I reach back through the ages and shout: FAREWELL, or, more appropriately, CUL8R.

If I could only remember my passwords, I would log into you fine accounts now and stare at the thousands upon thousands of surely relevant emails that have piled up in the years of my absence.

Goodbye, dear friend. Saying goodbye to you is almost as hard as it was to say goodbye to Santa.

#hotmail4eva

Have a great hotmail email memory? I'll weep, uncontrollably, alongside you in this difficult time.

Recommended Resources and Reading



I love reading about working smart to work better – especially when it comes to digital communication. Here are some of my favorite books in the genre:

- [What the Most Successful People Do at Work](#)
- [What the Most Successful People Do Before Breakfast](#)
- [What the Most Successful People Do on the Weekends](#)
- [Eat that Frog!](#)
- [The Clockwork Muse](#)

About the Author



Claire Díaz-Ortiz is an author, speaker, and technology innovator who has been named one of the [100 Most Creative People in Business by Fast Company](#). Claire was an early employee at Twitter, where she was hired to lead social innovation, and where she still works today.

In Claire's work, she has been called everything from "[The Woman Who Got the Pope on Twitter](#)" (*Wired*) and "[Twitter's Pontiff Recruitment Chief](#)" (*The*

Washington Post) to a “[Force for Good](#)” (*Forbes*) and “[One of the Most Generous in Social Media](#)” (*Fast Company*).

Claire is the author of several books, including [Twitter for Good: Change the World, One Tweet at a Time](#), which explores the TWEET model framework she is known for developing to help organizations and individuals best excel on Twitter. She has also written [Greater Expectations: Succeed \(and Stay Sane\) in an On-Demand, All-Access, Always-On Age](#), a handful of [ebooks](#), and [Hope Runs: An American Tourist, A Kenyan Boy, a Journey of Redemption](#).

She is a frequent international speaker on business, innovation, and social media at such diverse conferences as South by Southwest, The Mashable Social Good Summit, BlogWorld, Personal Democracy Forum, and United Nations events. ([Go here](#) for a list of her past and upcoming speaking engagements.)

Her popular business blog at www.ClaireDiazOrtiz.com boasts more than 100,000 monthly readers. She is also a [LinkedIn Influencer](#), one of 300 hundred global leaders chosen to provide original content for the LinkedIn platform.

Claire holds an MBA from Oxford University, where she was a Skoll Foundation Scholar for Social Entrepreneurship, and has a BA and an MA in Anthropology from Stanford University.

She is the co-founder of [Hope Runs](#), a non-profit organization operating in AIDS orphanages in Kenya. Claire also owns [Saving Money Media](#), a six-year old network of websites that help families live better on less.

She has appeared widely in major television and print news sources like CNN, BBC, Time, Newsweek, the New York Times, the Washington Post, Fortune, Forbes, Wired and many others.

Claire has lived on four continents and traveled to more than fifty countries.

She used to run marathons, but now it makes her tired just to think about it.

She is a foster mom to a Kenyan teen, an [extreme introvert](#), and a crazy reader ([she reads 200 books a year](#)). She also boasts an unnatural passion for [tiny houses](#) and rooibos tea.

Find her via [@claire](#) on Twitter, on [LinkedIn](#), or join more than 40,000 newsletter subscribers to her blog at www.ClaireDiazOrtiz.com.