

FREE GUIDE • NO STRINGS ATTACHED

Twelve ways to get your inbox back

Real uses for AI (artificial intelligence) in email, with the prompt to copy, a worked example, and the part nobody tells you.

Everything here works on whichever platform you already have — Microsoft 365 Copilot, Google Gemini, ChatGPT or Claude. Where the platforms genuinely differ, the entry says so.

Before you start: the one rule

A tool only knows what you hand it. Every prompt below assumes you have given it the actual material — the thread, the file, the numbers — either by pasting it in or by working inside your mail program where it can already see the message. Asking cold produces confident, plausible fiction. Pasting the material takes under a minute and is most of the difference between a draft you rewrite and one you send.

Two rules that follow from it. Never paste anything into a free personal account that you would not email to a stranger; use the business account your company pays for. And read every draft before it goes out — none of these tools should be sending mail on your behalf.

Part one • Catching up

01

Catch up on a thread you were copied into late

Use it when twenty messages have piled up and you only need to know what was decided and what is still open.

THE PROMPT

Summarize this thread in under 150 words. Tell me: what was decided, what is still open, who owes what to whom, and any dates mentioned. Quote the exact wording for anything involving money or a deadline. If something is ambiguous, say so rather than resolving it.

In practice. A twenty-two-message thread about a delayed rooftop unit comes back as: the general contractor agreed to a two-week slip, the owner has not confirmed, the revised date of October 14th appears only in message nine, and nobody has answered the question about liquidated damages. Two minutes of reading replaced with fifteen seconds.

Platforms. Outlook has a Summary by Copilot button at the top of each thread, and the summary carries numbered citations back to the message each point came from. Gmail shows a summary card above the thread once a conversation has more than two replies. Elsewhere, paste the thread into the chat window.

Watch for summaries that quietly average out a disagreement. Asking it to flag ambiguity rather than resolve it is the line that prevents this.

02**Pull the action items out, with owners and dates**

Use it when a thread ends and you need a task list rather than a narrative.

THE PROMPT

List every action item in this thread as a table: task, who owns it, the date it is due, and the message it came from. Only include items someone actually committed to. Put anything that was discussed but never assigned in a separate list underneath, headed "Nobody owns these."

In practice. The second list is the valuable one. On a typical project thread it surfaces two or three things everyone assumed someone else had picked up, which is where jobs slip.

Platforms. Gmail's Gemini side panel offers this as a ready-made instruction — "Create a list of action items for me based on this email." The prompt above is worth typing anyway, because the owner and date columns are what make it usable.

Watch for invented due dates. Requiring the source message for each row makes a fabricated date easy to spot.

03

Decide what actually needs you today

Use it when you open a hundred unread messages and do not know where to start.

THE PROMPT

Go through my unread mail from the last two days. Put it in three groups: needs a decision from me, needs a short reply from me, and can wait. Within each group, order by how much it costs us if it slips. One line each, and say why it is in that group. Do not draft anything yet.

In practice. The "do not draft anything yet" clause matters. Without it you get twelve drafts you did not ask for and have to read all of them to find the two that needed you.

Platforms. This one needs a tool that can see the whole mailbox, not just the open message. In Outlook, Copilot Chat can work across your inbox and calendar, and Microsoft lists prompts of exactly this kind — but it requires a Microsoft 365 Copilot license. Claude and ChatGPT reach a mailbox through their Gmail and Outlook connectors on paid plans. Free chat windows cannot do it; there, use the next entry instead.

Watch for a ranking that mistakes loud for important. Newsletters with urgent subject lines climb higher than they deserve.

04

Find the fact buried somewhere in your inbox

Use it when you remember the conversation but not the words to search for.

THE PROMPT

Somewhere in the last six months, the supplier quoted a lead time for the switchgear. Find it. Give me the number, the date of the message, who sent it, and the sentence it appears in. If more than one figure was quoted, show all of them in order so I can see what changed.

In practice. Naming the people and the topic beats a keyword. "What did Dana say about the deposit?" works where a search for "deposit" returns four hundred results. Asking for all the figures in order is what catches a lead time that quietly moved from six weeks to fourteen.

Platforms. Gemini in Gmail can find information from previous emails and from Google Drive files. Claude's Gmail connector searches messages and reads whole threads for context. In Outlook, this is Copilot Chat rather than the buttons on an individual message. Watch for a confident answer with no message cited. Always require the date, the sender and the sentence; if it cannot produce them, it did not find it.

Part two • Writing

05

Draft a reply that sounds like you

Use it when the reply is straightforward but you keep putting it off.

THE PROMPT

Below are three emails I wrote myself, then the thread I need to answer. Match the length, greeting and sign-off of my three emails — I am not formal and I do not use exclamation marks. Reply to the thread and confirm we can hit the revised date, but do not commit to anything beyond that. Under 120 words. Use only facts that appear in the thread; if you need something I have not given you, leave a blank and tell me what is missing.

In practice. The three sample emails do more than any instruction about tone. Keep three of your own messages in a note somewhere and paste them in; after a few weeks, move them into your saved instructions so you stop pasting them at all.

Platforms. Outlook has Draft with Copilot in the compose window, with controls to adjust length and tone before you keep the draft. Gmail has Help me write, with Formalize, Elaborate and Shorten. Both work better with the three samples than with the tone buttons alone.

Watch for drafts that commit you to more than you meant. The "do not commit to anything beyond that" clause is not optional.

06

Write the message you have been avoiding

Use it when it is bad news — a price increase, a missed date, a mistake that was yours.

THE PROMPT

I need to tell a partner of eleven years that our rates go up 6% on January 1st. The reason is our own labor and insurance costs, not anything they did. Write it in under 150 words. Lead with the number and the date — no warm-up paragraph. State the reason in one sentence. Do not apologize more than once, do not say "unfortunately", and do not blame the economy. End by offering a call. Nothing about loyalty or valued partnership.

In practice. The banned-phrase list is what makes this work. Left alone, every tool writes three sentences of cushioning before the number, which is exactly what makes a price letter feel evasive. Tell it what not to do and you get something you would actually sign.

Platforms. Any of them. This is worth composing in a chat window rather than in the mail program, so you can push back on two or three drafts before anything lands near a Send button.

Watch for justification creep. If the draft explains itself for more than a sentence, it reads as an apology and invites negotiation.

07

Pressure-test a message before you send it

Use it when you wrote it yourself and you are annoyed.

THE PROMPT

Here is a draft I wrote. Do not rewrite it. Tell me: how it will read to someone already defensive, any sentence that could be quoted back at me in a dispute, anything that reads as an admission of fault, and any question I asked that they can answer with one word and dodge. Then give me the three smallest edits that would fix the worst of it.

In practice. "Do not rewrite it" keeps your voice on the page. You get a review, not a replacement. The question about one-word answers regularly catches the real problem: an email that lets the other side agree to nothing.

Platforms. Outlook has this built in as Coaching by Copilot, which reviews tone, clarity and how the reader is likely to take it, and needs a draft of at least 100 characters before it will run. Gmail has Proofread and Refine. The prompt above goes further on the legal-exposure question than either button does.

Watch for the urge to apply all suggestions at once. Take the two that matter and leave the rest.

08

Say it again for a different reader

Use it when the same news has to go to the crew, the owner and the insurer.

THE PROMPT

Take the message below and give me three versions. One for the field crew — short, plain, what changes for them tomorrow. One for the owner — what it costs, what the new date is, what I need from them. One for our insurer — factual, dated, no speculation about cause. Same facts in all three. Do not add any fact that is not in the original.

In practice. Writing the same thing three times is where an afternoon goes. The constraint that matters is the last sentence: without it, the insurer version grows a cause nobody established.

Platforms. Any of them. Do this in a chat window rather than the compose box, since you want all three side by side.

Watch for drift between versions. Check that the date and the dollar figure are identical in all three before any of them goes out.

Part three • Turning mail into work

09

Find out what you committed to

Use it when you have a nagging sense you promised somebody something last week.

THE PROMPT

Look at the mail I have sent in the last ten days. List everything I committed to doing, with who I said it to, what I said, and any date I gave. Include soft promises like "I will get back to you" and "let me check". Put anything already more than three days old at the top.

In practice. Run this on a Friday afternoon. The soft promises are the point — "I'll check and come back to you" is the single most common thing that never happens, and it is the one that costs a relationship.

Platforms. Needs mailbox access, so the same licensing note as entry 03 applies: Copilot Chat with a Microsoft 365 Copilot license, or Claude and ChatGPT with a mail connector on a paid plan.

Watch for it reading pleasantries as commitments. Skim before you act on the list.

10

Turn a thread into a meeting that is worth having

Use it when a thread has gone around three times and someone says "let's just get on a call".

THE PROMPT

From this thread, write a meeting agenda. Three items maximum, each phrased as the decision that has to come out of it, with the minutes it should take. List who has to be there and why. Underneath, write two sentences the attendees should read first so nobody spends the call catching up. If the thread does not contain a decision that needs a meeting, say so.

In practice. The last sentence saves more time than the agenda does. Perhaps one thread in three comes back with "this can be settled in a reply".

Platforms. Outlook can create a meeting invitation straight from a thread with the Schedule with Copilot button, and Gemini in Gmail can propose times against your Google Calendar. The agenda still has to be asked for; neither button writes one worth sending.

Watch for agendas with six items. Three is the cap for a reason; a longer list means the meeting has no decision at its center.

11

Pull a list out of your mail and into a table

Use it when the information you need exists, but it is scattered across nine messages.

THE PROMPT

Below are nine quotes that came in by email. Build one table: vendor, item, unit price, lead time in weeks, quote date, and whether freight is included. Leave a cell blank if the email does not say — do not estimate. Add a short note underneath listing which vendors left something out, so I know who to chase.

In practice. Ask for it as comma-separated values if you want it in a spreadsheet — paste the result straight into Excel and it lands in columns. The "leave it blank, do not estimate" instruction is what keeps the table trustworthy.

Platforms. Any of them, though pasting the source emails into a chat window is more reliable than asking a mail-side assistant to gather them for you.

Watch for filled-in blanks. Spot-check three cells against the original messages before anyone makes a purchasing decision from the table.

12

Set up a standing morning briefing

Use it when you want the first ten minutes of your day back permanently.

THE PROMPT

Every weekday at 7:30, give me a one-page briefing: anything that arrived overnight needing a decision from me, anything I was asked for more than two days ago and have not answered, today's meetings with the thread each one came from, and any date or dollar figure that changed since yesterday. Under 300 words. If nothing needs me, say so in one line rather than padding it out.

In practice. This is the entry that changes a day rather than a task. The last sentence is what keeps it honest — without it you get 300 words every morning whether or not anything happened, and you stop reading it by week three.

Platforms. Scheduling a prompt to run on its own is a paid feature and the platforms differ most here — Microsoft 365 Copilot, Gemini and ChatGPT each handle recurring prompts differently, and what is available changes often. If yours cannot schedule, paste the prompt in manually each morning; it still works, it just needs the click.

Watch for trusting it too early. Run it alongside your normal routine for two weeks and check what it missed before you rely on it.

WHERE TO START

Pick one. Use it every day this week.

Entries 01 and 05 are where most people see the hour come back first, and neither needs anything beyond the account you already have. Twelve at once is how this ends up abandoned by Friday.

Sources

Platform behavior described above was checked against the vendors' own documentation. These products change frequently; where a button has been renamed since publication, the capability usually still exists under a new name.

1. Microsoft, Summarize an email thread with Copilot in Outlook — support.microsoft.com
2. Microsoft, Draft an email message with Copilot in Outlook — support.microsoft.com
3. Microsoft, Get email coaching with Copilot in Outlook — support.microsoft.com
4. Microsoft, Chat with Copilot in Outlook — support.microsoft.com
5. Microsoft, Frequently asked questions about Copilot in Outlook — support.microsoft.com
6. Google, Collaborate with Gemini in Gmail — support.google.com/mail/answer/14355636
7. Google, Catch up on email threads with AI Overview conversation summaries — support.google.com/mail/answer/16561387
8. Anthropic, Gmail connector for Claude — claude.com/connectors/gmail

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