Using Mail Rules on a Mac to Detect and Delete Junk Mail

Apple Mail's rules can catch junk that the built-in filter misses and move or delete it automatically. The steps below use current macOS menu names. On older versions, **Settings** is called **Preferences**.

Before you start: two things to know

1. **Rules only run while Mail is open on that Mac.** If Mail is closed, or you read mail on your iPhone first, the rules won't act on those messages. For filtering that happens on the server (iCloud addresses only), set up rules at iCloud.com > Mail > Settings > Rules instead.
2. **Start by moving messages to Junk instead of deleting them.** "Delete Message" sends mail to Trash, which can be emptied automatically. Run each new rule as a "Move to Junk" rule for a week or two. Once you're sure it doesn't catch real mail, switch the action to Delete.

How to create a rule

1. Open **Mail > Settings > Rules**.
2. Click **Add Rule**.
3. Give it a **Description**, such as "Junk – lottery subjects."
4. Choose **If any** or **If all** of the following conditions are met.
5. Set the conditions. Click **+** to add more.
6. Set the actions under **Perform the following actions**.
7. Click **OK**. Mail asks whether to apply the rule to messages already in your mailboxes. **Apply** runs it on them now; **Don't Apply** affects only new mail.

You can also run your rules by hand: select some messages and choose **Message > Apply Rules** (Option-Command-L).

Example rules

Example 1: Delete mail Apple has already flagged as junk, after a few days

If **all**:

- *Message is Junk Mail*
- *Date Received > is greater than > 7 days old*

Actions: *Delete Message*

The week-long gap gives you time to rescue anything flagged by mistake.

Example 2: Block entire spam domains

If **any**:

- *From* > *ends with* > `@cheap-meds-online.biz`
- *From* > *ends with* > `@promo-blast.net`

Actions: *Delete Message*, then *Stop evaluating rules*

Add a new line each time a new spam domain shows up.

Example 3: Typical scam subject lines from strangers

An "any" rule would match a keyword from anyone, including friends. To avoid that, use "all" with the sender test plus one keyword. If **all**:

- *Subject* > *contains* > `You've won`
- *Sender is not in my Contacts*
- *Sender is not in my Previous Recipients*

Actions: *Move Message* to *Junk*

Mail can't mix "any" and "all" in one rule. To cover more keywords, duplicate the rule (select it and click **Duplicate**) and change the keyword. Good candidates are "Claim your reward," "Final notice," "Your account has been suspended," and "Bitcoin."

Example 4: Mail that wasn't actually addressed to you

Much spam is BCC'd to huge lists, so your address isn't in the To or Cc fields. If **all**:

- *Any Recipient* > *does not contain* > `yourname@example.com` (use your real address)
- *Sender is not in my Contacts*

Actions: *Move Message* to *Junk*

Mailing lists you subscribe to can also fail this test. If that happens, add a condition such as *From does not contain* `newsletter@trustedsite.com`.

Example 5: Phishing that impersonates your bank

If **all**:

- *Message Content* > *contains* > `verify your account`
- *From* > *does not end with* > `@yourrealbank.com`

Actions: *Move Message* to *Junk*, *Set Color* > red

This one is safer to flag than to delete, so you can report it to your bank if you want.

Tips for rules that work well

- **Rule order matters.** Rules run top to bottom; drag them in the list to reorder. Put your "always keep" rules first, for example *From is in my Contacts* > *Stop evaluating rules*, so later junk rules can never touch mail from people you know.

- **Rules use plain text matching only.** Mail rules don't support wildcards or regular expressions, so use *contains*, *begins with*, and *ends with*. Matching is not case-sensitive.
- **Narrow rules by account.** Add an *Account* condition when a rule should apply to only one mailbox.

Related settings

- **Turn on the built-in filter.** Go to **Mail > Settings > Junk Mail** and check **Enable junk mail filtering**. Choosing **Perform custom actions > Advanced** gives you a rule-like editor for the junk filter itself.
- **Empty Junk automatically.** In **Settings > Accounts > [account] > Mailbox Behaviors**, set **Delete junk messages when** to *One week old*. This alone removes old junk with no rule at all.
- **Empty Trash automatically.** In the same pane, set **Erase deleted messages when** so deleted junk doesn't pile up.
- **Train the filter.** When junk gets through, select it and click the Junk button (the bin with an X) in the toolbar. When real mail lands in Junk, click **Not Junk**. Mail learns from both.