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Five tips for sorting Outlook mail messages

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Outlook downloads most email into the Inbox, which can fill up quickly. Finding what you need when you need it can become a frustrating chore, but with a few easy-to-implement sorting techniques, even the most crowded Inbox can be tamed.

1: Click to sort

You're probably familiar with the click-a-header sort behavior in Outlook. With the Inbox (or any mail folder) open, simply click a column header (From, To, Subject, Received, and so on) to sort by the data in that column. Click a second time to toggle between ascending and descending order. It's a great feature, but it doesn't stop there. You can sort by multiple columns. First, click the primary column's header. Then, hold down [Shift] and click the secondary column's header. If necessary, click a second time to change the sort order (while holding down [Shift].) Continue to add up to four sort columns.

Figure A shows a two-field sort where the primary sort is on the From column and the secondary sort is on the Received column. The triangles to the right of each field title indicate the type of sort. (An up triangle indicates an ascending sort.)

Figure A



These messages are sorted by the From column and then the Received column.

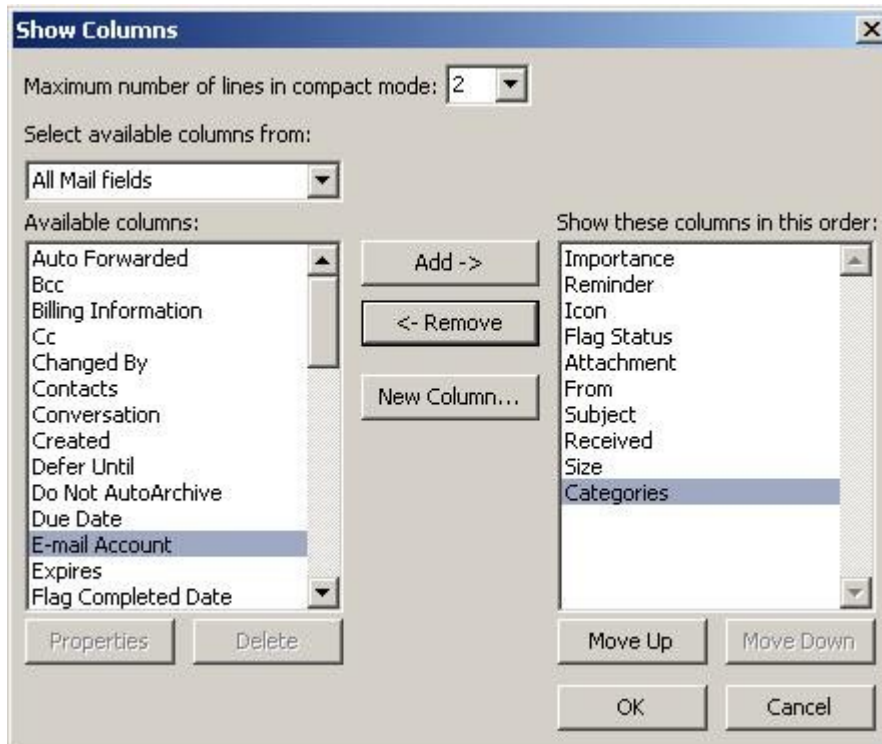
2: Sort by email account

It's not common, but sometimes more than one person shares the Outlook Inbox. (This isn't necessary if you create profiles for multiple users on the same machine.) This arrangement can get messy fast. If you must endure this setup, add the E-mail Account field and sort by it.

Add the E-Mail Account field as follows:

Right-click any header.
 Choose View Settings.
 Click Columns.
 From the Select Available Columns From drop-down list, choose All Mail Fields.
 In the Available Columns list, select E-mail Account, as shown in **Figure B**.
 Click Add and then click OK.

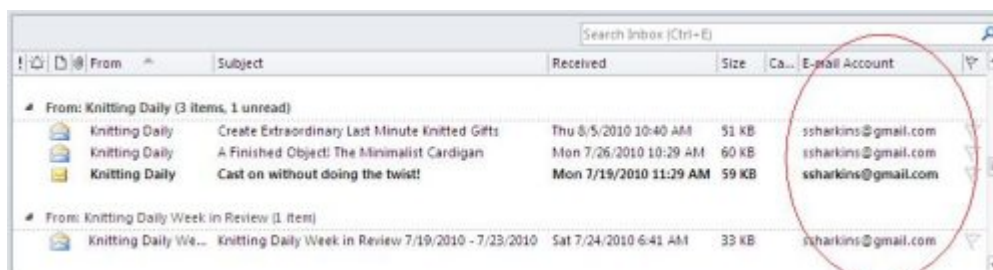
Figure B



Click Add to display account information about each message.

Now you can sort messages using the E-mail Account field (**Figure C**). This isn't the sort of tip many users will need — but those who do will love it. (If you're using Outlook 2007 or 2010, create dedicated folder sets.)

Figure C



Sort messages by account.

3: Sort by criteria using search folders

Sometimes, you have conflicting needs. For instance, suppose you store messages from specific departments in corresponding folders, but you're working on a project that affects

more than one department. Do you store those messages by sender or by project? Thanks to search folders, you can do both — sort of. The solution is to create a search folder and view all messages that match custom criteria.

To create a search folder, do the following:

Right-click Search Folders in the Navigation pane and choose New Search Folder.

In the New Search Folder dialog, click Create A Custom Search Folder in the Custom section.

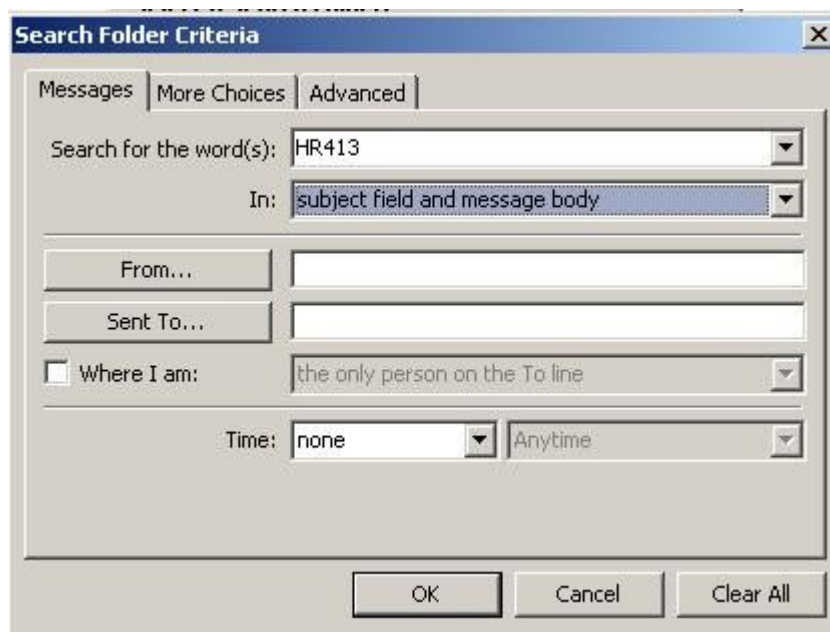
Click Choose.

In the Custom Search Folder dialog, enter a name for the custom folder and click Criteria.

Use the Messages tab to specify content. In **Figure D**, the custom search folder will display any message that refers to the project HR413 in the subject or the body of the message. Using other available options, you can expand or narrow your search. Two additional tabs offer more options.

Click OK three times to create the search folder. Outlook will immediately search for messages that match the criteria you specified.

Figure D



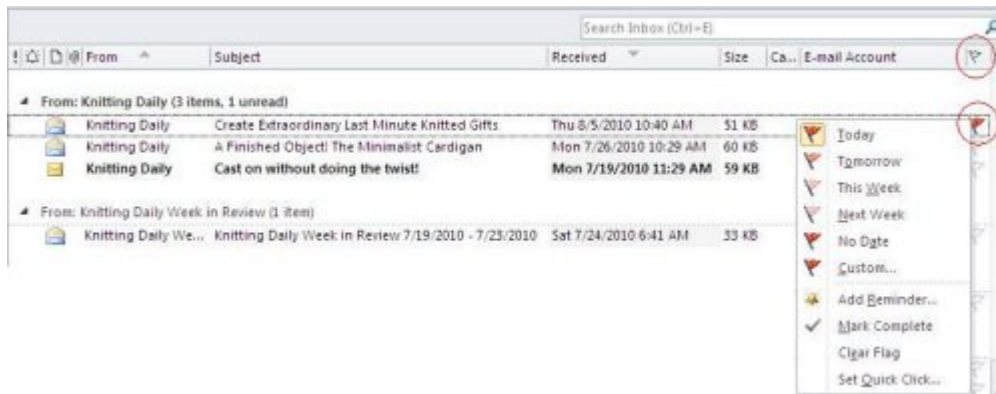
Search for specific content in messages.

Search folders update continuously. Once you create the folder, it always displays the most up-to-date message list.

4: Sort by flags

Flags are an easy way to mark an email quickly and then forget it — at least for a while. Add flags to incoming and outgoing messages you want to refer to later. Simply click the flag icon (probably to the right). The default color is red, but as you can see in **Figure E**, there are plenty of options.

Figure E



The default flag color is red, but you can assign several colors to custom categories.

To view all your flagged messages, simply click the flag column header.

5: Delete!

The final sorting tip isn't really a sorting tip at all — but it can still ease your email sorting misery. Try to reduce the number of messages in your Inbox and other custom folders. On a regular basis — and every single day isn't too often if you get a lot of email — spend a few minutes deleting messages you no longer need. Delete unnecessary emails the minute they arrive. Delete messages as you respond to them, unless you need to maintain a correspondence trail. Make this a part of your routine and don't shrug it off. After all, mountains of messages can waylay even the best sorting practices.

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