

# Zero Inbox! Using MailTags

By Tom Gilson

[Thinking Christian Blog](http://www.thinkingchristian.com)

Mac users: You've probably heard of *Inbox Zero*, the art of keeping your email inbox tamed and under control. That's fine, and it's helpful; but I'd like to ask you to imagine something better: **Zero Inbox!**

That's right. Could you imagine how much simpler your life at work would be if your Inbox didn't even matter? It's possible, using Mail.app and MailTags (<http://www.indev.ca/MailTags.html>).

Here's a screenshot of the mailboxes I pay attention to in Mail. Do you see anything missing? There's no Inbox there. I have no idea how many messages are in my Inbox, and I don't care. Still, I'm more on top of my email flow than I've ever been.

Here's how. I'll start with the setup, then I'll tell you about the work flow. The initial setup takes a few minutes. After that, though, it's easy. (See the disclaimer on the last page.)

## Setup

### MailTags

I've marked five Keywords as "Preferred" in MailTags. Marking them as Preferred places them automatically in the Mailbox list (or sidebar). One of them, TC\_Comments, is a special-use Tag that isn't part of the workflow I'm describing here, so you don't need to pay it any attention.

@Action means I have something to work on, and probably soon (although the Tickle Dates tell me when they really belong on the agenda.) @Followup usually has to do with a conversation I need to stay on top of. @Waiting is for mail messages I've sent that need a reply. Hold for Later is for messages that I might or might not be interested in coming back to some day.

If you ever check your mail on any other device, you will want to add one more Keyword to MailTags: "Hold\_for\_iOS" Setting that tag will keep the message from being included in a "Ready to Archive" Smart Mailbox, and will thus keep it in an Inbox where you can always find it easily on your other computer, tablet, or mobile phone.

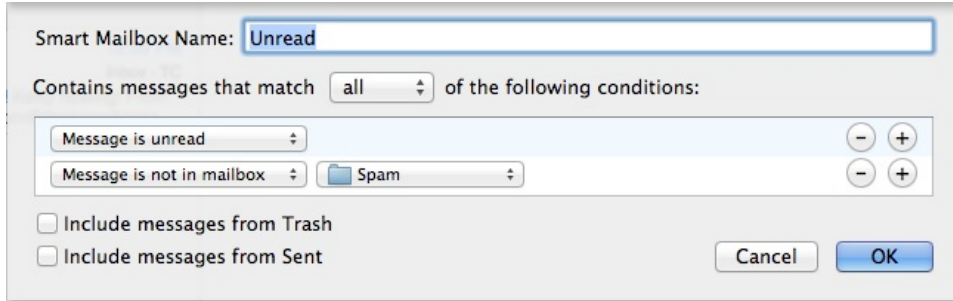
I've also defined several projects in MailTags. There are some that I want to be able to get to with just a click. I've marked them as Preferred, which places them in the Mailbox list as well.



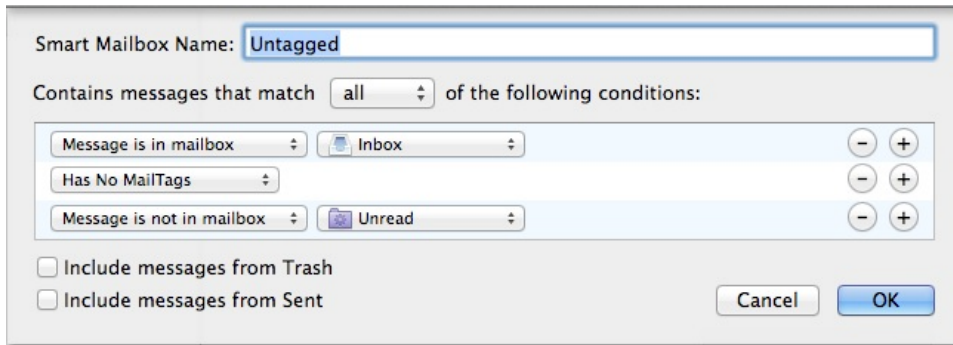
### Smart Mailboxes

Your setup continues with the creation of three or four Smart Mailboxes. One of them, “Flagged in iOS, is needed only if you use an iPhone or iPad to read mail, too. The Smart Mailbox settings look like this:

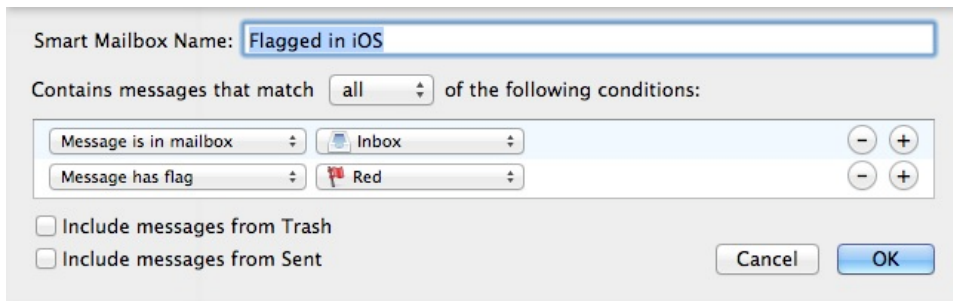
First (choose the appropriate “Spam” or “Junk” mailbox, depending on how you handle that kind of mail):



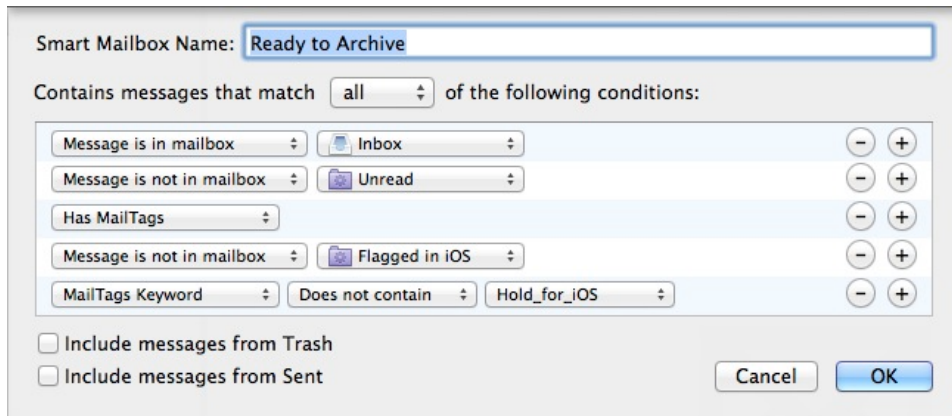
Second:



Third (only make this mailbox if you use iOS-based mobile devices to read mail, too):



Fourth (you can omit the last condition, Hold\_for\_iOS, if you never use any other device to read mail):



## Arranging Your Mailboxes

The final step of setup is to get your inbox out of sight and out of mind. Click on the Mailbox group names (SMART MAILBOXES, TICKLE DATES, KEYWORDS, and PROJECTS) and drag them to the top of the Mailbox list just as you see I've done, in the first graphic shown above.

Your setup is finished. Now for the workflow.

## Workflow

Every message that arrives and isn't marked as spam shows up automatically in Unread. What now?

### New Messages

For every message that comes to you, you can take one of three actions.

*Either:*

1. Answer it immediately (plus Tag it with a project if there's one it belongs to)
- or*
2. Tag it with both a Keyword and a Tickle date, plus a project if there's one it belongs to
- or*
3. or Delete it.

That's not to say I'm always perfectly on top of my own procedures. What then?

### In Case You Don't Follow the "New Messages" Procedure Right Away

As soon as you've done one of those things, the message disappears from Unread. Actually, though, it disappears from Unread even if you've done none of those things. You don't want any messages vanishing forever from view, though, so that's what the "Untagged" Smart Mailbox is for. It catches every message you've looked at without tagging.

So that leads to the next part of the workflow: Every time you review emails, click on Untagged, and process those messages as if they were New Messages.

## Tagged Messages

Once you've done that, every message in your inbox has a Tickle Date and a Keyword. Like magic, they disappear from Unread and Untagged, and they show up like to-do list items your my Tickle Date and Keyword Mailboxes.

*And that's the beauty of the system: You can turn your email nightmare into a manageable to-do list, categorized by when you need to pay attention to each message!*

## Answer, Then Process Tags and Location

With this setup complete, you can follow through on each message and answer it when it needs to be answered. Just click on the Mailbox titled Tickle Dates: Today and take care of each message in there.

Once you've sent your reply, you can decide whether to keep or trash the message. If you delete it you're done with it. If you keep it, you'll need to change the Tag on the message, so that it doesn't stay in today's Tickle Date any longer.

If it needs further attention, change the Tickle Date to when that attention is required.

If your reply needs to wait now for someone else to reply in turn, tag it @Waiting. If it needs a reply by certain date, set that date as a new Tickle Date.

If it needs no further attention, but you want to keep it, go ahead and file it in any Saved Messages folder you prefer to use. (I won't take it on myself here to discuss how you set up those folders.)

Then, after you've moved it into your preferred Saved Messages folder, remove all Tags except for Project Tags. It's saved, and it's out of your workflow, just as it should be.

If you've fallen behind, just follow exactly the same procedure with Tickle Dates: Past.

## Or Ignore For Now

What about Upcoming and Future Tickle Dates? Ignore them. I mean, *blissfully* ignore them. You've already decided you don't need to pay them any attention until some future day. This system keeps them from cluttering your view until the day you want to see them. Out of sight, out of mind is a good thing in this case: if they're not cluttering up your view, they're also not cluttering up your time and attention.

## Dealing with Mail on iPhone or iPad

MailTags is unavailable for iOS devices. The workflow to use on those devices goes like this:

1. Answer it, then Tag or Delete it  
*or*
2. Flag it without answering it  
*or*
3. Delete it

The purpose of flagging it is to mark it as, "I want to Tag this message, and I plan to do that when I get back to my Mac."

When you do get back to your desktop or laptop Mac, click on the Flagged in iOS Mailbox and take care of any work you need to do there.

(I do not have any mobile device other than iOS, so I cannot make recommendations on how to handle non-iOS mobile workflow. Sorry.)

What if you've opened the message on your computer, Tagged it, set Tickle Dates, and so on, but you think you might want to have it available to work with on your mobile device? No problem. It's still in your Inbox, and it will be there when you look for it on your mobile. If you want to make doubly sure it stays there, tag it "Hold\_for\_iOS." That will keep it out of your "Ready to Archive" mailbox.

If it's a message that you know you *won't* want to look at on your mobile, though, you'd certainly prefer not to have it there cluttering up the mailbox. Read on, and you'll soon understand how to simplify that part of your workflow, too.

## Then What?

By now you've noticed that the workflow doesn't necessarily require you to remove messages from your Inbox. It doesn't even require you to look in your Inbox. *You never need to look in your Inbox*—unless it's on a mobile device.

Still, I know some people like to look in their Inbox. Some of us have to because we're reading mail on other devices. In that case you'll want to keep the Inbox uncluttered.

To do that, click on your Ready to Archive Smart Mailbox. That mailbox collects all the mail messages that have been processed through the above Workflow. They've also not been marked, "Hold\_for\_iOS."

(Please note that I do not recommend you use the "Archive" function in Mail; instead, move the message to an actual mailbox. That way it will still be available to be found in the appropriate Smart Mailbox. Use the Archive function once every six to twelve months to clean up very old messages if you like, but otherwise stay clear of it.)

You can now safely move all these messages to your preferred Saved Messages folder. Since each message is Tagged with a Project, Keyword, and/or Tickle Date you can still find it in the appropriate Smart Mailbox. It won't make the slightest difference whether it's actually located in the Inbox or anywhere else. From now on you'll mostly be looking for messages by their Tags and in their Smart Mailboxes.

If you're *really* paying attention, you've probably already figured out that once you've tagged a message with the appropriate Tickle Date, Keyword, and/or Project, you can put it somewhere else right away. You don't have to wait until you've completed its workflow. It will show up in the appropriate Smart Mailbox no matter what.

Why then would you want to Tag a message, Hold\_for\_iOS? There's only one reason: it keeps it in your Inbox in case you want to be able to find it later on your iOS device. Remember, your Inbox doesn't matter on your computer; this is Inbox Zero! But if you think you might want to find that message on some other device like a mobile phone, tablet, or another computer that doesn't use MailTags, you should keep the message in your Inbox for use on those devices. That Tag will protect the message from showing up in the Ready to Archive Smart Mailbox, making it easy for you to keep it in the Inbox where you'll want to be able to find it later.

## Finished? Congratulations! You've achieved Zero Inbox!

And you're all set for the easiest email workflow you've ever experienced.

*I offer this workflow at no cost and with no guarantee, either expressed or implied, and no commitment to provide technical support.*

*This system certainly works for me, but I have no control over MailTags, the user's computer, or the user's MailTags setup or workflow. Therefore the user of this workflow assumes all risk for any lost messages or other failure of the system, as well as any resultant consequences.*

This article was [originally published](#) on the [Thinking Christian](#) blog.

**If you've never visited**, please take a look at my [free ebook offer](#), check out the provocative book [True Reason: Confronting the Irrationality of the New Atheism](#), or else start reading on the blog with one of my [featured articles](#). Thanks for visiting!

Product endorsement disclosure: Indev, the creator of MailTags, has provided me with complimentary software in exchange for my publishing this article—but I developed this workflow and fell in love with it well before I contacted them about it.