

AI FOR REAL PEOPLE · A SHORT COURSE FROM PFI

Inbox

A short, hands-on course on using AI to make your inbox 20 minutes lighter next Monday morning.

About 30 minutes

Free

Five short lessons

No videos

No quiz you can fail

You will actually try things in this course — open an AI tool in another tab, paste in a real email, see what happens. You do not have to follow along. But the people who do are the ones who walk away with the habit.

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Pacific Forward Initiative is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. PFI is a Hawaii-based nonprofit helping individuals, communities, and small businesses build the future-defining skills needed to thrive in a changing economy. This course is free, and it stays free.

Welcome

Your inbox is not the problem. The volume is the problem.

The average working adult gets about 121 emails a day. About 70 percent of us call it our number-one source of workplace stress. That is not a personal-productivity failure. That is math.

This course is not about clearing your inbox. It is about spending twenty fewer minutes on it next Monday morning.

What this course is

A short walkthrough of one thing — using AI to sort, read, and (sometimes) reply to email faster than you can alone. Five short lessons. About thirty minutes total. No videos.

What this course is not

- A pitch for any particular AI tool.
- A promise of "Inbox Zero" (which research shows is often a myth that makes things worse).
- A test you can fail.

How this course works

You read. You try a few things in your own browser, in your own AI tab. You answer a couple of questions to yourself (not graded, not saved). You move to the next lesson when you are ready.

Think of it like an old-school text adventure. You are the person it is happening to. The lesson asks you to do something small, you do it, the next part shows you what to notice.

You can skip any of the questions. You can skip whole lessons. You can do this on the bus, on your lunch break, on the couch.

One thing to know before we start

AI is very good at reading, sorting, and rewriting. AI is much worse at *knowing what matters to you in an email a person you care about sent you*. So we are going to use it for the first thing and be careful with the second.

By the end of this course you will know one small, reliable routine for keeping the top of your inbox in your control. Whether you use it is up to you.

A SHORT SELF-CHECK BEFORE WE BEGIN

Three quick scenarios. Ask yourself if any of them sound like you.

Scenario 1. It is Monday morning. There are more than 30 unread emails. You look at the number and feel a small, familiar tightness in your chest.

Scenario 2. You told someone last Thursday that you would get back to them "soon." It is now Wednesday of the next week. You have not.

Scenario 3. You spent 45 minutes on email this morning and are not sure what you actually did with the time.

If even one sounds familiar, you are in the right course. Keep going.

If none sound familiar — also fine. The habits in this course will still shave time off your week.

A note about the live version

Everything in this course also runs as a free live 30-minute class on Zoom. Alex walks through the same workflow in real time, takes questions, and shows what AI looks like in action with a real inbox. If you want that, sign up at lu.ma/pacforward. The next session is on the website.

If you would rather just read your way through this course, that works too. Keep going.

BEFORE LESSON 2 — SET UP AN AI TOOL

This course is tool-agnostic. It works with any popular AI chat tool. If you do not already use one, take 2 minutes now to set up a free account with the AI tool of your choice — the free versions are enough for everything in this course.

If you are not sure which to pick, that is fine. They all do the same basic thing for a beginner: you type, it answers, you correct it when it is wrong. Pick one and stick with it for this course.

Your first email-and-AI conversation

The best way to start using AI with email is to use it as a *reader*, not a *writer*. Let it tell you what is in your inbox before you ask it to touch a single reply.

What you will do in this lesson

Copy one real, confusing email into an AI chat, ask it what the sender actually wants, and check whether it got it right.

TRY IT NOW

Open your AI tool in another browser tab. Find one email in your inbox — real one, not a test — where you are a little unsure what the sender is actually asking for. A vendor. A colleague copy-and-pasting a long thread. A neighbor's HOA update. Something you have re-read once already.

Copy the whole email. Paste it into the AI chat. Then type this exactly:

COPY AND PASTE

In one sentence, tell me what the sender wants from me. Then tell me any specific deadline they mentioned. If either is unclear, say "unclear" instead of guessing.

Send it. Read what comes back.

Stop here. Actually do this before reading on.

WHAT YOU SHOULD HAVE SEEN

The AI's answer will be short and specific — one sentence about what the sender wants, one line about the deadline. If it said "unclear" on either, that is not the AI being unhelpful. That is the AI being honest — the email itself is unclear, and now you know what to ask the sender about (or which part of the email to re-read carefully).

Notice what the AI *did not* do. It did not offer to reply for you. It did not tell you whether the request is reasonable. It did not judge the sender's tone. It read the email and gave you back the request. That is the right first move.

Why start with reading, not writing

Because AI is very good at pulling meaning out of dense text — and very bad at knowing what you would actually say back. If you start with "help me write a reply," the AI has to guess at both the content *and* your voice. If you start with "tell me what this person wants," it only has to do the reading part. You take over from there.

A QUICK QUESTION FOR YOURSELF · not graded, not saved — just for you

Was the AI's summary better than, worse than, or about the same as what you had gotten from re-reading the email yourself?

For most people the answer is "better on the request, about the same on the deadline." That is the pattern to trust.

TRY TO REMEMBER · TWO QUESTIONS, UNGRADED

Try answering each one yourself before reading ours. Your answers aren't saved.

1. Why is it better to ask the AI what an email *wants* before asking it to draft a reply?

Our answer: The AI is much better at reading (pulling out the request) than at writing in your voice. Reading first gives you the fact; writing is your job.

2. What is the AI doing when it answers "unclear" instead of guessing?

Our answer: Telling you the email itself is ambiguous — so you know what to ask the sender or read again yourself. That is honest, not unhelpful.

Want someone to walk through this with you in real time? The free live class covers the same ground at lu.ma/pacforward.

The Monday routine

Here is a 15-minute routine you can do every Monday morning. It will not clear your inbox. Nothing clears anyone's inbox. But it will give you the top of it back.

What you need: an AI chat tool open in one tab, your inbox open in another. Fifteen minutes without interruption.

The routine, step by step

Step 1 (2 minutes). Look at what's in front of you with your own eyes.

Before you touch the AI, scan the subject lines of your last 20 or so unread emails. You are looking for two things: (a) anything obviously urgent that a person needs from you today, and (b) anything obviously junk that you can just archive. Handle both by hand. This will usually take a minute or two and clears the extremes.

Step 2 (5 minutes). Ask the AI to sort the rest.

Copy the subject lines of the remaining unread emails into your AI tool. Type this:

COPY AND PASTE

I am going to paste subject lines from my inbox. Sort them into three categories: needs a reply this week, can wait, does not need a reply. If any are unclear, put them in "unclear" — do not guess.

Read the sorted list. If the AI put something in the wrong bucket, move it. The point is not for the AI to be perfect. The point is to have a sorted list in front of you in 5 minutes instead of 25.

Step 3 (5 minutes). Handle the "needs a reply this week" pile.

For each email in that pile, decide fast: reply now (under 2 minutes), draft now and send later, or add to a to-do list for later this week. If you want AI help drafting, use the prompts on the last page of this course. But *you* decide which reply is worth writing, not the AI.

Step 4 (3 minutes). Send a two-sentence "I got it" to the "can wait" pile.

For each one that can wait, paste the email and type:

COPY AND PASTE

Write a 2-sentence reply that acknowledges this and says I will get back to them by [date I actually can].

Send those. Now those people are not waiting on you in silence, and you have bought yourself a real deadline.

What the routine actually buys you

The point is not productivity. The point is that on Wednesday morning you do not still owe somebody an answer from last Friday. The relationships hold. The work does not pile up on you in the same way. That is the time-back this course is about.

One habit that catches the AI's mistakes

For subject-line sorting, the AI will occasionally miscategorize an email — usually because a subject line is misleading and the real ask is buried in paragraph 3. Once a week, spot-check three emails from the "does not need a reply" pile by opening them. If the AI was right on all three, you can trust the pattern. If it was wrong on one, note the pattern (a certain sender? a certain kind of subject line?) and adjust your prompt next Monday: "By the way, emails from X often look routine but are usually urgent — flag those as 'needs a reply.'"

A NOTE FOR HAWAII INBOXES

A lot of working adults here run side conversations on email that are personal as much as professional — a question about a meeting also includes asking how someone's mother is doing. The AI does not know that context. If a reply needs warmth before it gets to business, write the warmth yourself in one sentence, then ask the AI to draft the business part below it. The warmth has to be yours.

TRY TO REMEMBER · THREE QUESTIONS, UNGRADED

Try answering each one yourself before reading ours.

1. Why do you scan with your own eyes for 2 minutes before you touch the AI?

Our answer: To catch the obviously-urgent and the obviously-junk yourself. The AI is faster on the middle 80% of email — not on the extremes.

2. What do you do when the AI's sorted list has one email in the wrong category?

Our answer: Move it. The AI is a sorting partner, not a decision-maker. It will be right most of the time and wrong sometimes.

3. What is the point of sending a 2-sentence "I got it, will reply by [date]" to the "can wait" pile?

Our answer: So the sender is not waiting on you in silence, and you have set yourself a real deadline. Trust in the relationship is preserved without you needing to write the full reply this second.

The live class walks through this routine with a real inbox — an attendee's or Alex's — in real time. If you want that, join at lu.ma/pacforward.

The tricky email

The Monday routine handles most of your inbox. There is a slice it does not — the tricky email.

A tricky email is any of these:

- A message where the tone is hard to read (are they angry? confused? just formal?)
- A reply you have been drafting in your head for days
- Anything you would rather not send at all

For those, AI can help you *rehearse* what to write. But do not let it write the send-version for you.

The tone-check move

Copy the email you got. Paste it into the AI. Type this:

COPY AND PASTE

Read this email and tell me: how might someone in a bad mood have written it, and how might someone in a good mood have written the exact same thing? Point out any specific words or phrases that could go either way.

Send it. Read what comes back. You will often find the email is not as sharp as it felt on first read. That is useful information. You will also find the AI is sometimes overly reassuring — it will not tell you an email is definitely rude, because it does not know the sender. Trust your gut on top of what the AI gives you.

The rehearsal move

Draft your reply yourself first — even if it is rough. Then paste your draft plus the original email into the AI. Type:

COPY AND PASTE

Here's the email I'm replying to: [paste]. Here's my draft: [paste]. Keep every point I made. Rewrite my draft two ways — one shorter, one warmer. Do not add any information I did not include. Do not change the meaning.

Read both versions. Pick the one closer to how you write. Edit it until every sentence sounds like you.

The check before you send

For anything important, one more move before you hit send. Paste your final draft. Type:

COPY AND PASTE

Read what I am about to send. Tell me: 1) Am I giving them information they did not ask for? 2) Am I leaving out information they did ask for? 3) Is there anything that could be misread? 4) Anything that sounds defensive or angry when I did not mean it that way?

Read the AI's answers. Fix what needs fixing. Then send.

THREE KINDS OF EMAIL YOU SHOULD NOT HAND TO AI

Some emails are too personal, too important, or too emotionally loaded to delegate the writing on. For these, use AI only for the tone-check step — never for the drafting step. The three big ones:

- 1. Condolences.** When a friend's parent dies, write the note yourself. Ask the AI later if the tone is right. Do not let it write the words. Recipients can tell.
- 2. Apologies.** People can feel it when an apology is generic. If you are apologizing for something real, spend the extra ten minutes.
- 3. High-stakes family or relational conflict.** Anything involving your marriage, your kids, your siblings, a close friend, a coworker you actually care about. The AI will produce fluent, hollow prose. The person on the other end will feel it. Use AI to think out loud with (in a separate chat, not the reply itself) if you need to. Do not use it to draft the send.

The rule of thumb: if you would feel embarrassed for the recipient to find out you used AI to write it, do not use AI to write it.

TRY TO REMEMBER · THREE QUESTIONS, UNGRADED

Try answering each one yourself before reading ours.

1. What is the difference between using AI to *tone-check* an email and using AI to *draft* an email?

Our answer: Tone-check keeps the words yours; you use AI to double-check how they might land. Draft has the AI generating the language itself. For anything important, keep it in tone-check mode.

2. Name at least one of the three kinds of email you should not fully hand to AI.

Our answer: Condolences. Apologies. High-stakes family or relational conflict.

3. What is the "rule of thumb" test for whether AI-drafting is appropriate for a given email?

Our answer: If you would feel embarrassed for the recipient to find out you used AI to write it, don't use AI to write it.

This is the class where the live version does something a writeup can't — Alex works through a real tricky email from an attendee, live. If you have one you have been sitting on, bring it to lu.ma/pacforward.

What you did, what's next

You came into this course wondering if AI could actually help with the mess that is your inbox. You leave with one small, reliable Monday routine — plus a rule for when AI is the wrong tool.

That is the whole course.

Your checklist — what you can do now

Tick each one you have actually done. These are reminders for you, not us.

- ☐ I have signed in to an AI tool at least once.
- ☐ I have asked an AI to tell me what an email is asking for.
- ☐ I know how to sort my inbox with AI in about 5 minutes.
- ☐ I know how to send a "got it, will reply by [date]" acknowledgment fast.
- ☐ I know the three kinds of email that are not for AI drafting.

What to do this week

Pick one Monday morning in the next two weeks. Set a 15-minute timer. Run the routine from Lesson 3 on your real inbox.

The first time takes about 20 minutes because you are figuring out the moves. The second time takes 12. By the fourth week it is a rhythm you do without thinking.

A QUESTION, IF YOU WANT TO ANSWER IT · optional, not saved

What was one moment in this course where something surprised you, or something clicked, or you thought "wait, I could use this for..."?

If you want to tell us, email hello@pacforward.org — Alex reads every reply.

Two things that go further than this course

The Field Guide to AI — a free downloadable PDF that covers everything in this course plus chapters on paperwork, family conversations, and the honest limits of AI. pacforward.org/repository.

The free live class — 30 minutes on Zoom with Alex. Same material, but live, with your questions answered in real time. People who attend the live class consistently say it lands differently than the self-paced version. If you got value from this course, the live version is the next step. lu.ma/pacforward.

KEEP THIS PAGE

The prompts, in one place

Five prompts from the course you can copy when you need them — plus three more to grow into. Open this page when you sit down to do your inbox on a Monday morning. Replace the bracketed parts with your actual situation.

1 • Ask what an email wants — from Lesson 2

In one sentence, tell me what the sender wants from me. Then tell me any specific deadline they mentioned. If either is unclear, say "unclear" instead of guessing.

2 • Sort your inbox — from Lesson 3

I am going to paste subject lines from my inbox. Sort them into three categories: needs a reply this week, can wait, does not need a reply. If any are unclear, put them in "unclear" — do not guess.

3 • Send a "got it, will reply by [date]" — from Lesson 3

Write a 2-sentence reply that acknowledges this email and says I will get back to them by [date I actually can].

4 • Tone-check — from Lesson 4

Read this email and tell me: how might someone in a bad mood have written it, and how might someone in a good mood have written the exact same thing? Point out any specific words or phrases that could go either way.

5 • Check before you send — from Lesson 4

Read what I am about to send. Tell me: 1) Am I giving them information they did not ask for? 2) Am I leaving out information they did ask for? 3) Is there anything that could be misread? 4) Anything that sounds defensive or angry when I did not mean it that way?

THREE MORE TO TRY — THESE BUILD ON THE FIVE ABOVE

6 • Rewrite in your voice, shorter

Here is my draft: [paste]. Keep every point I made. Rewrite it two ways — one shorter, one warmer. Do not add information I did not include.

7 • Catch mis-sorted emails

I sorted these emails last week as "does not need a reply." Take another look. Is there anything here that actually needs a response? Explain why you flagged what you flagged.

8 • Learn a sender's pattern

Here are the last 5 emails I got from [person]. What kind of email do they usually send — informational, urgent, needs a decision, just checking in? What is the shortest polite way to respond to each kind?

One habit to keep: use prompt 4 (the tone-check) any time you are about to reply to something that made you a little annoyed. It is the highest-return habit in the course.

‘A‘ohe pau ka ‘ike i ka hālau ho‘okahi

"All knowledge is not learned in one school."

Pacific Forward Initiative is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. Our courses are free for everyone — if this one gave you time back, you can help keep it that way at pacforward.org/donate.

FORWARD TOGETHER