Two simple email tips to save you hours per week

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One of our everyday business tools is email. However, I wouldn't mind betting that you've not had any formal training on how to use it. Here are a couple of really simple tips that might make a difference for you. After all, finger picking at a computer isn't increasing your precious teaching time.

I'll share the instructions in Outlook 2010, and if you have a different version or system, your Help menu will guide you.

Turn off your alert – it is one of the most insidious interrupters

You almost never need to know you've just received yet another email but very few of us can ignore a beep or flashing message. When our energy is low or the current task is challenging it is way too easy to be distracted. The path is: File/Options/Mail/Message Arrival – and then untick all four options.

Now, instead of constantly dodging in and out of your email system, hounded by pings and flashes, you're in charge. You will choose how often you wish to communicate, and when. Put your focus on your high-value work and do email in suitable gaps. You might want to add something extra in your standard email signature to indicate your changed practice. One of my Australian speaker colleagues has the following just under his name: 'Please call me if you need a quick response.' His phone number is just below.

Or you might say something like: 'I reply to my emails a few times a day. Please phone… if your query is urgent.'

To save unnecessary keystrokes, turn anything you repeatedly write into a 'Signature'

It might be driving instructions, information to parents or students, invitations to a school event, seasonal greetings, instructions to the printer – and that's just for starts. I have about 12 signatures to choose from. You can write directly into the Signature wizard (detailed below) but it's quite a small box. I find it faster and easier to create elsewhere. Usually I'll copy the required text from a new email, or if it's a large block of information you might grab it from an existing document. Highlight the block of text and copy it. (Shortcut Ctrl + C = Copy). In Outlook, File/Options/Mail/Signatures/.

Choose 'New', give it a name, and then drop in your block of text. Choose OK.

When you're in the message area of an email you're composing and ready for your block of text, place your cursor in the relevant place and then choose the Signature button on the ribbon above. If you've got more than one signature you'll see a down arrow. Click on the arrow and all your signatures will be listed. One click and your text of choice is inserted. Voila! There may be things you need to change, but getting the 'bones' into an email will save you significant time.

A couple of signature work-arounds, due to some clunky Outlook programming

Once you've set up the new signature, go back and open Signatures again. You may find (on the right hand side) that what you've just set up has become the default for every new outgoing email. We don't want this, so just reset to 'None' for outgoing mail, which allows you to pick whichever signature is relevant. One other annoying Outlook 10 feature – you can only choose one signature. Pick another

and your first choice vanishes in a puff of digital smoke. If you want two or more blocks of text, open another email box, drop the second signature in there and then cut and paste.

There are other ways to create templates (for that's what Outlook calls this form of signature). This one is my favourite.

Have fun exploring the time efficiencies of your email program. (And what about teaching them to your students?)

ET

Robyn Pearce is known around the world as the Time Queen, helping people discover new angles on time. Check the resources on her website http://www.gettingagrip.com including a free report for you: 'How to Master Time in Only 90 Seconds'. She travels regularly to Australia to work with schools on Professional Development days and also conferences.