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Use Outlook rules to automatically categorize emails [1]

June 4, 2026 by ES and UIS Communications [2]

Outlook rules automatically act on incoming emails based on conditions you set — flagging messages for follow-up, moving them to specific folders or tagging them with a color category. Set up a rule once, and Outlook applies it to every matching message going forward.

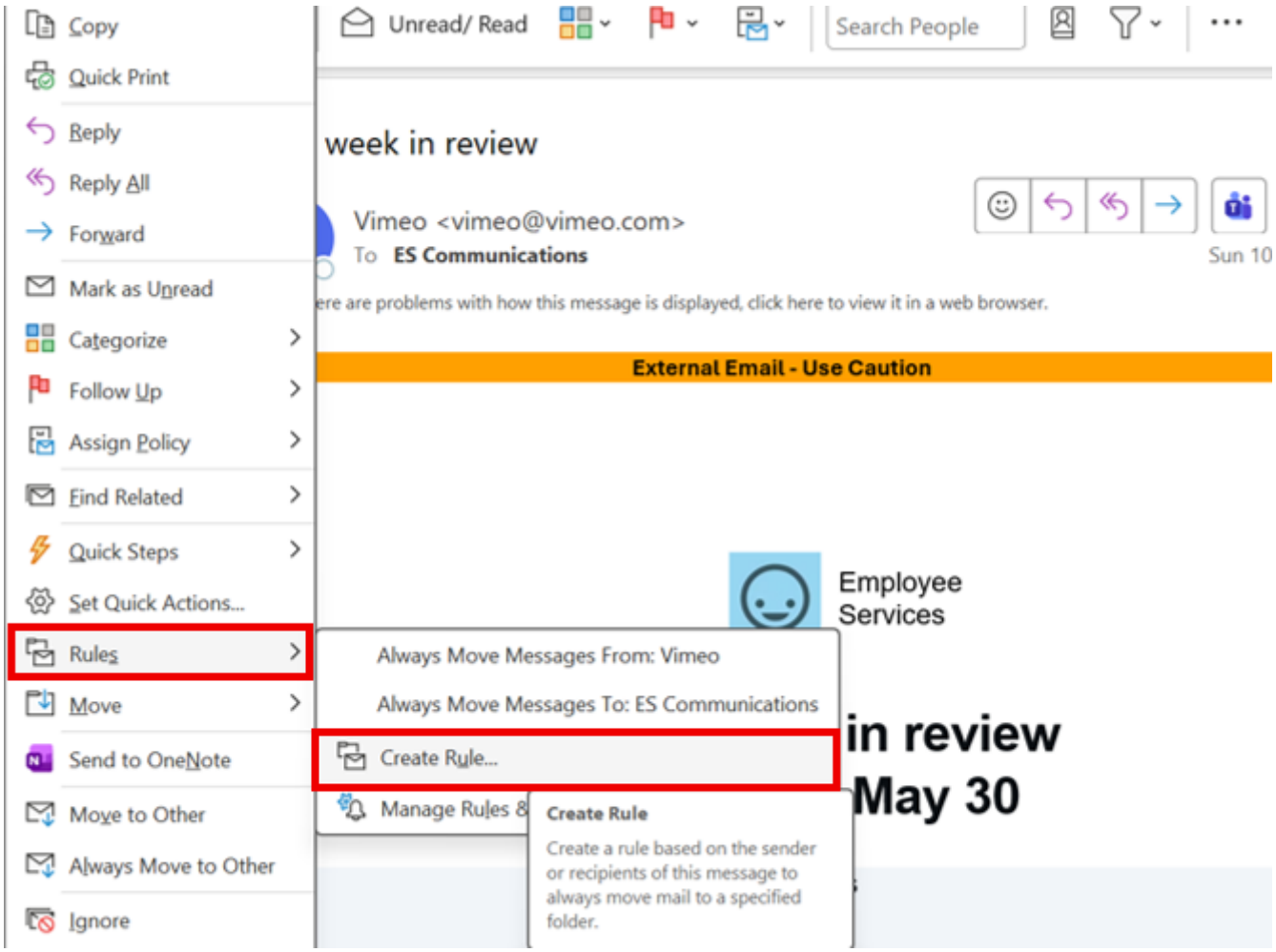
Rules can be triggered by different criteria, including sender, subject line, recipients, importance and attachments. The subject line is often the most reliable trigger. For example, if you receive the Work/Life newsletter regularly, a rule can tag every message with that subject line with a specific color category, making those emails easy to spot in your inbox.

The steps below use color categorization as the rule action. Before following along, make sure you have a color category set up [3].

Create a rule

In classic Outlook

1. **Right-click** an email that matches the type you want to tag, then select **Rules > Create Rule**.

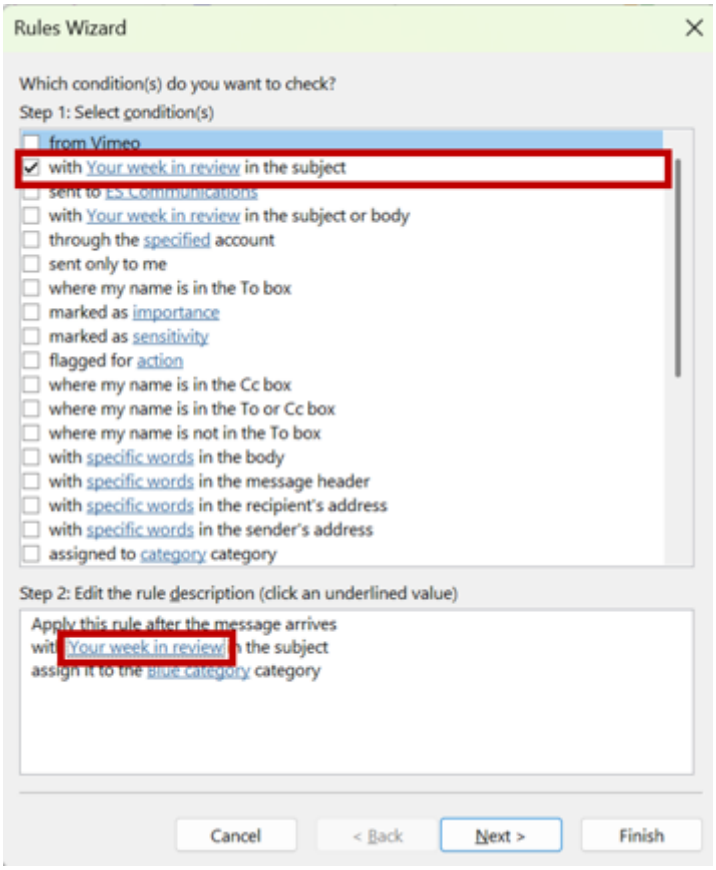


2. In the Create Rule dialog box, click **Advanced Options** to open the Rules Wizard.

3. Under **Step 1: Select condition(s)**, check **with specific words in the subject**.

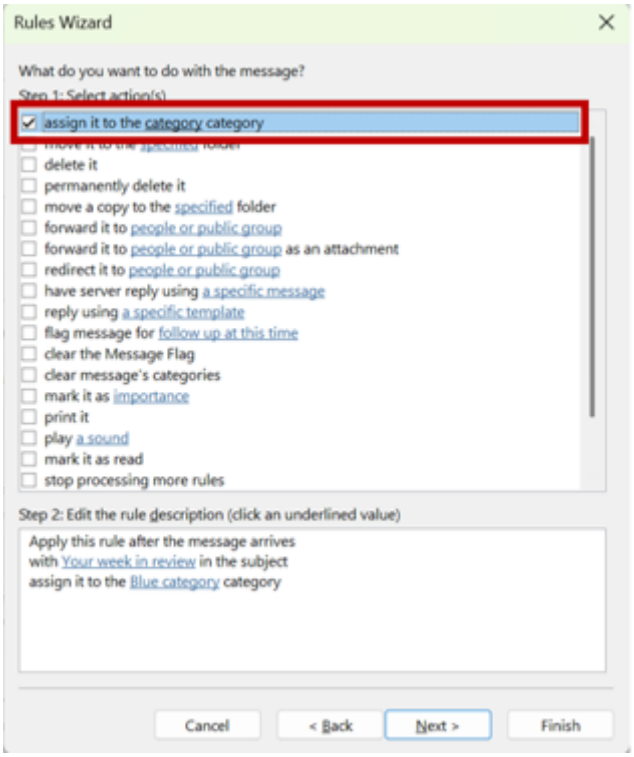
4. Under **Step 2: Edit the rule description**, click the underlined **specific words** link.

5. Type the word or phrase you want Outlook to look for — for example, "Work/Life" — then click **Add** and **OK**.



6. Click **Next**. On the actions screen, check **assign it to the category category**.

7. Click the underlined **category link** in the rule description, select your color category from the list and click **OK**.



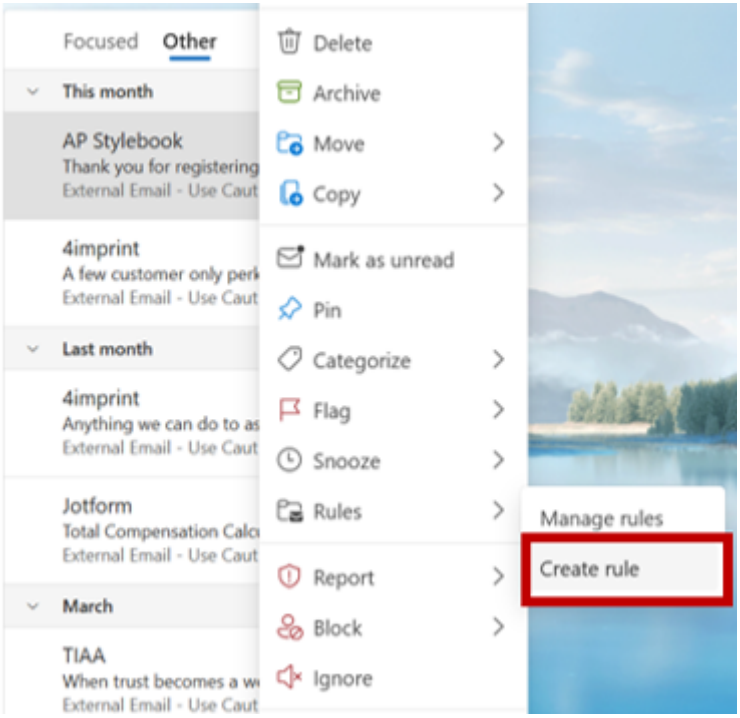
8. Click **Next** twice to skip exceptions.

9. On the final screen, name your rule. To apply it to existing messages in your inbox, check **Run this rule now on messages already in "Inbox"**.

10. Click **Finish**. Outlook applies the rule to all matching incoming messages going forward.

In new Outlook for Windows

1. Right-click a message in your inbox, hover over Rules and select **Create rule**.

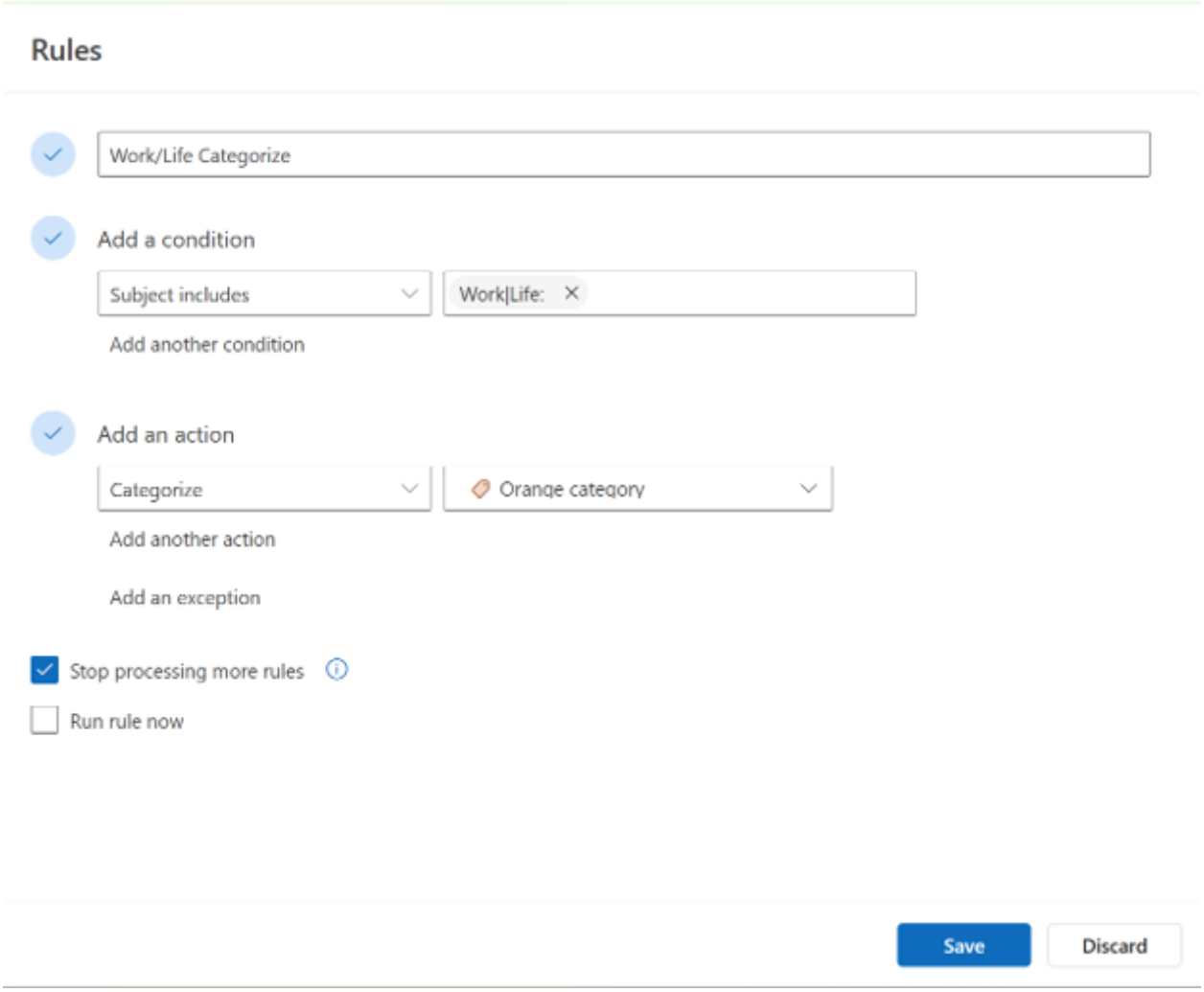


2. In the dialog that appears, click **More options** to open the full rule settings page.

3. Name your rule.

4. Under **Add a condition**, choose how Outlook should identify matching messages:

a. Select **Subject includes** and enter the word or phrase to match in the subject line.
b. Select **From** to trigger the rule based on a specific sender.



5. Under **Add an action**, select **Categorize** and choose your color category from the list.
6. Click **Save**. The rule applies to all incoming messages going forward.

TIP: To edit, disable or delete a rule in new Outlook, go to **Settings > Mail > Rules**.

Find tagged emails

Once your rule is running, find every tagged message by typing the following in the Outlook search bar:

category:"Category Name"

Replace "Category Name" with your category's label. Outlook returns the full list of matching messages.

Other ways to use rules

Automatically applying a color category is one example of what rules can do. A few other common uses:

- Move newsletters or notification emails to a dedicated folder automatically. Set the condition to a recurring sender or subject line and select **Move the message to the specified folder**

as the action.
- Flag emails from a priority sender for follow-up so important messages are easy to find.

REMINDER: Email rules are helpful for organization, but you remain responsible for reviewing communications sent to your inbox. If you use rules to move messages into folders, be sure to check those folders regularly so you don't miss important information.

Outlook email [4]
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