

Question: I am headed out of town and I want to set up an auto-reply on my home computer that says I am away and will I'll be back on a certain date. I use Outlook 2002 (Office XP) and have a cable modem connection to the Internet. How do I do this?

Answer: It's good that you have a cable modem. To use this technique you need to have an always-on connection to the Internet on your computer. A cable modem or DSL service (Digital Subscriber Line from your phone company) will both work.

If you use a dial-up modem to connect to the Internet, this technique will not work until your computer is connected to the Internet and it's unlikely that you'll want to leave you modem dialed in to the Internet all the time you are away.

There's also a weird trick to using the auto-reply system in Outlook 2002. There's an option in the program to use Microsoft Word as your e-mail editor, however if this is turned on, then setting up auto-replies is impossible as you need to create a special Outlook template file with an .oft extension that contains your auto-reply message.

So before you start the process, turn off Word in Outlook as follows. Open Outlook, click the "Tools" menu, and then choose "Options". Next click on the Mail Format tab and look for the box that says "Use Microsoft Word to edit e-mail messages". Untick the box. Then click OK.

Now let's create the message that will be sent to people while you are away. Create a mail message as you would normally by click "New" on your tool bar or from the File menu choose "New", then "Mail Message". A new mail message window will appear.

Leave the "To" and "CC" fields blank. In the "Subject" field you could type "I am visiting grandma" or something similarly appropriate.

Next in the body of the e-mail, type a message like:

"Hi. I've just received your e-mail in my inbox. Please note that I am away from Tuesday through Thursday visiting my grandma and grandpa. I am modeling my grandma's knitted colored socks and oversized hats in the Winter Wonderland show in Sudbury. I won't be checking e-mail while I am away, however you can send an e-mail to my Grandpa Bob at bob@bob.com if you need to get hold of me. Or call me on my cell at 416-555-6702.".

Once the autoreply e-mail is written, click the File menu and choose Save As, then choose a folder on your hard drive to store the message in that you will be able to find later (make a note of it).

For simplicity sake, I usually click through to C: drive via "My Computer" and find a folder called "autoreply". You'll have to create this folder the first time you do this.

Next type a filename in the box provided (eg. outtatown) and then in the "Save as type" box choose "Outlook Template". Remember that this option is not available if Microsoft Word is still set as your e-mail editor (see above).

In the main Outlook window, choose the "Tools" menu and then the "Rules Wizard". Click the "New" button. A box will appear. Choose "Start from a blank rule" at the top, then below that in the white box, choose "Check messages when they arrive" item is selected. Click "Next".

In the next screen you need to select the e-mails that the autoresponder will reply to. There are lots of choices (be sure to use the vertical slider on the right to explore all the options). If you want all messages that arrive to get the autoreply, just click "Next". A message warning will pop up if you do this to make sure you want to send it to all the people who e-mail you.

In next dialog box you'll choose what to do when an e-mail arrives. Scroll down using the slider at the right of the dialog box and find the item that says "Reply using a specific template".

You'll notice that the each part of the rule you are creating appears in the "Rule description" box.

When "Reply using a specific template" appears in the rule description, note that "specific template" is underlined. That means it's clickable, and therefore customizable. So click it. A dialog box with the title "Select a Reply Template".

This is where you link to the autoresponder e-mail that you created earlier. In the "Look In" pulldown menu at the top select the second item called "User templates in file system". When you do this you'll notice that the "Browse" button to the right that was previously greyed out is now active. So click it. A "Go to Folder" box will pop up. Now click the plus sign (+) next to "My Computer". A list of drives on your computer will appear. Click the plus (+) sign next to the "C:" drive. It'll look something like this "Local Disk (C:)". A list of folders on your "C:" drive will appear. Select the "autoreply" folder you created earlier and click OK.

The "outtatown" Outlook template we created earlier will be listed in the "email-files" folder. Select it and click open.

Now you'll be back to the "Rules Wizard" box. In the "Rules Description" you'll notice that it says on the bottom line "reply using C:\autoreply\outtaoffice.oft". Click "Next". You'll have the option to create any exceptions. Unless there's some e-mail that you don't want the autoresponder to go to simply click "Next" again. If you do check off the exceptions as appropriate.

On the next screen, name the rule in the top box. Call it "i am away", if you like. Also make sure there's a check mark in the box that says: "Turn on this rule". This will activate

the rule immediately. You can leave the box next to "Run this rule now on messages already in the Inbox" unchecked, unless you want all the messages you have already received to be sent your "out of the office" autoresponse.

Click "Finish". The autoresponder is now set up. It will be listed in the "Apply rules in the following order" box. To modify it select the rule so that it is highlighted and click "Modify" on the right. To remove it click "Delete".

If the box next to the rule is checked it is active, so don't turn it on unless you are ready to leave.

To get to the rule later, start up Outlook 2002, choose the "Tools" menu and select "Rules Wizard".

While you are away you will need to leave the computer on and Outlook 2002 running.