The Dark Mode Email Checklist

Dark mode can turn a polished email into invisible logos, muddy brand colors, and unreadable buttons, and you don't control when it kicks in. Each email client handles dark mode differently, so the goal is an email that looks intentional in all of them.

Work through this checklist during build and again during QA.

How clients handle dark mode

Clients fall into three broad groups. Behavior shifts with app updates, so treat this as a starting point and confirm in testing.

Approach	What happens	Typical clients
No color change	Your colors display as coded; some respect your own dark mode styles	Apple Mail (when the email sets its own colors), Gmail webmail
Partial inversion	Light backgrounds turn dark and dark text turns light; areas already dark are mostly left alone	Outlook.com, Outlook apps for iOS and Android, Gmail for Android
Full inversion	Nearly all colors are inverted, including dark areas	Gmail for iOS, Outlook desktop for Windows

Code setup

- [ ] `<meta name="color-scheme" content="light dark">` and `<meta name="supported-color-schemes" content="light dark">` in the `<head>`
- [ ] Matching `:root { color-scheme: light dark; supported-color-schemes: light dark; }` in the CSS
- [ ] Dark styles written inside `@media (prefers-color-scheme: dark)` for clients that support it
- [ ] Outlook.com targeted with `[data-ogsc]` (text color) and `[data-ogsb]` (background) selectors where needed
- [ ] Dark mode overrides use `!important` so they win over inline styles

- [ ] Dark mode classes applied to the elements that need them, including table cells that carry background colors
- [ ] Background colors set on both the table cell and any wrapping element, so nothing shows through unexpectedly

Images and logos

- [ ] Dark logos on transparent PNGs given a subtle light outline or glow so they don't vanish on dark backgrounds
- [ ] A light-version logo swapped in via `prefers-color-scheme` where the client supports it
- [ ] Images with white backgrounds checked for harsh "white box" edges; transparent or rounded backgrounds used where possible
- [ ] Icons and social icons checked for visibility on both light and dark backgrounds
- [ ] Text baked into images reviewed, since clients can't recolor it
- [ ] Alt text styled so it stays readable when images are off in dark mode

Color and design

- [ ] Off-white (e.g. #F8F8F8) and off-black (e.g. #111111) used instead of pure #FFFFFF and #000000, which some clients target for inversion
- [ ] Brand colors checked after inversion, especially reds, oranges, and pastels that can shift noticeably
- [ ] Buttons have enough contrast in both modes; a border helps them stand out if the background inverts
- [ ] Dividers and borders still visible on a dark background
- [ ] Text over background images given a solid fallback color behind it
- [ ] Gradients and background images tested, since some clients drop or invert them
- [ ] Footer and legal text still meet contrast in dark mode

Testing

- [ ] Tested on real devices or a rendering tool (Litmus, Email on Acid) in dark mode
- [ ] Covered at least one client from each group: Apple Mail, an Outlook app or Outlook.com, and Gmail for iOS

- [ ] Outlook desktop for Windows checked separately, since its inversion is the most aggressive
- [ ] Logo, buttons, and CTA reviewed first, as they break most often
- [ ] Dark mode screenshots shared with the client or stakeholders before sign-off
- [ ] Retested after any late change to colors or images

Want this handled for you?

Inbox Standard builds dark-mode-ready, accessible HTML emails, tested across major clients in both light and dark mode before they reach your list. We work directly with brands and white-label for agencies. Get in touch for a quote.