Why Does My Email Look Broken in Outlook?

The short answer: classic Outlook for Windows displays emails using Microsoft Word, not a web browser engine. Word was built for documents, not web pages, so it ignores much of the modern code that other email apps handle easily.

That's why an email can look perfect in Gmail or on an iPhone and still arrive in Outlook with odd fonts, missing images, or a collapsed layout. The good news: every one of these problems has a known fix.

Which Outlook?

"Outlook" is really several different apps, and only one causes most of the trouble.

Version	How it displays email	Trouble level
Classic Outlook for Windows (2007 through Microsoft 365)	Microsoft Word engine	High
New Outlook for Windows	Web-based, similar to Outlook.com	Low
Outlook.com (web)	Web browser	Low
Outlook for Mac	Apple's WebKit engine	Low
Outlook for iOS and Android	Mobile web engine	Low

Microsoft is moving people to the new Outlook, but the classic version remains common in workplaces and is expected to be supported for years. If your audience includes office workers, plan for it.

Common problems and their fixes

What you see	Why it happens	The fix
Your brand font turns into Times New Roman	Outlook doesn't load web fonts and falls back to Times New Roman when no backup is set	Specify a safe backup font (like Arial or Georgia) in a way Outlook will respect
Background images are missing	Word doesn't support CSS background images	Add Outlook-only code (VML) behind the image, plus a solid background color
Rounded buttons become square or shrink to a text link	Word ignores rounded corners and padding on links	Build "bulletproof" buttons with table cells or VML
The layout stretches too wide or columns break	Outlook ignores `max-width` and many layout styles	Use fixed-width tables wrapped in Outlook-only "ghost" tables
Thin white lines or gaps appear between sections	Word rounds sizes and adds spacing around images and cells	Set images to display as blocks and control line heights for Outlook
Images appear huge or blurry	Outlook relies on HTML width attributes and can rescale images on high-DPI screens	Set explicit width and height attributes on every image
An animated GIF won't move	Outlook 2007–2016 shows only the first frame	Design the first frame to work on its own
Spacing looks off	Word ignores padding and margins on many elements	Apply spacing on table cells instead

What you can do

You don't need to learn the code, but these questions will tell you whether your emails are being built to hold up in Outlook.

- [ ] Do you test every email in classic Outlook for Windows before it goes out?

- [ ] Can I see screenshots of how this email looks in Outlook, Gmail, and Apple Mail?
- [ ] What happens to our brand font in Outlook, and which backup font did you choose?
- [ ] Are our buttons coded to work in Outlook, or are they images?
- [ ] If a design element can't work in Outlook, what will Outlook readers see instead?
- [ ] Do you know what share of our list opens in Outlook? (Your email platform's reports can show this.)

Want this handled for you?

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