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Sending e-mail from PHP: mail() or SMTP

PHP & Development

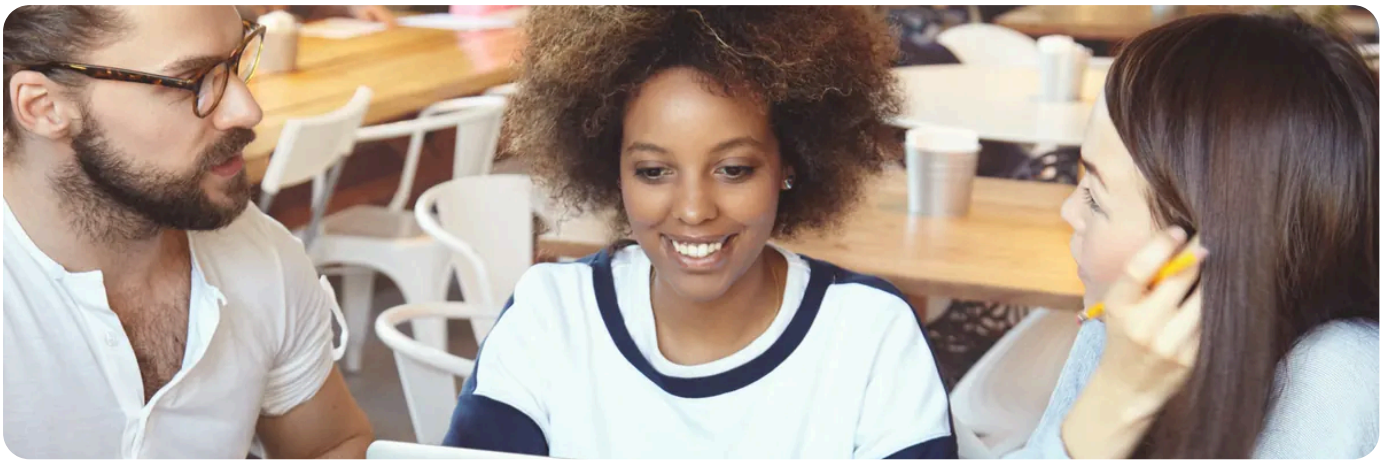
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Sending e-mail from PHP: mail() or SMTP

PHP & Development Created on **October 10, 2026** 2 min read



Use **SMTP with a real mailbox on your domain**. The `mail()` function is fine for a quick test, but it returns "sent" only because the local mail program accepted the message, not because it arrived. With SMTP there is authentication, there are errors you can read, and the messages are far less likely to end up in spam.

The two ways, side by side

	mail()	SMTP
How it leaves	Handed to the server's mail program, with no authentication.	Your code logs in to a mailbox with a user and password and sends through it.
When it fails	PHP says "true" anyway. You learn nothing.	There are clear errors: wrong password, wrong port, sender refused.
Spam	Sender and server rarely match, which filters notice.	The sender is a mailbox on your domain, which has SPF and DKIM on its side.
Set-up	None in the code.	Server, port, user, password and encryption.

Moving to SMTP

1. **Create a mailbox just for the site's sending**, for example `site@your-domain`. See **creating an e-mail account in cPanel**.

2. **Look up that mailbox's settings** under **Email Accounts** in cPanel: the outgoing server, the port and the encryption. SMTP with SSL uses port **465**. The user is the full address.

3. **Use a library** rather than speaking the protocol by hand. PHPMailer takes a few lines: see **sending e-mail with PHPMailer**. In WordPress, **making WordPress send e-mail properly, with SMTP**.

4 **Set the From address equal to the mailbox** that logs in, or to the same domain. A sender from a domain that is not yours (a Gmail address, say) is the quickest way to the spam folder.

5 **Send a test message** to an address of yours at another provider and see whether it reached the inbox or the spam folder.

An open form is a spam cannon.

If your script lets whoever uses it choose the recipient, the sender or the subject without checking, someone will use it to send spam through your account, and the server ends up on a blocklist. Validate what comes from the form, and fix the recipient in the code. If it has already happened, see **your server IP on a blocklist**.

Even with the right SMTP, the domain has to be set up properly.

Without SPF, DKIM and DMARC messages look suspicious: see **SPF, DKIM and DMARC**. There are sending limits per hour and behaviour rules: **writing an e-mail that does not land in spam**. And cPanel has **Track Delivery**, where you see where each message went.

NEED A HAND?

The form says “sent” and the message never arrives? Tell us the sending address, the destination and the time.

Open a support ticket →

SEE ALSO

- **Sending e-mail from your own code with PHPMailer** →
- **A contact form that actually reaches your inbox** →
- **Why your e-mail is not sending or receiving** →
- **SPF, DKIM and DMARC: why your e-mail lands in spam** →

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