

# JAI

## JOURNAL *of* ACADEMIC INQUIRY

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Addressing Racial and Economic Inequality: The Role of Social Entrepreneurship  
Reviving US Budget Airlines: Lessons from the European Low-Cost Model  
Stuttering and Performance Anxiety in Adolescents: Understanding Social Stress and Confidence Growth in Students with Speech Impediments  
Neurodevelopmental Disorders in Childhood: The Imperative of Early Screening for ADHD and Dyslexia  
Tariffs, Trade, and Turbulence: Analyzing the Link Between U.S. Policy and Market Volatility in 2025  
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**Volume 2**

**Fall 2025**

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## Digital Literacy for Older Learners Through Specialized Teaching Tools

Liam Newton

**Abstract:** Many older adults struggle to learn new technology because digital tools appear complex and inaccessible. Instructional content is often delivered digitally itself at a rapid speed which requires users to possess technical skills before they can even start to handle information. To address this, I created *Silver Tech* as a print-based workbook which teaches smartphone basics through step-by-step learning to assist older adults. I then co-led a one hour in-person class at Laguna Woods Retirement Community where we taught seniors how to use Apple Mail using a printed handout entitled *Email Tips*. Both printed and in-person teaching methods used senior-friendly approaches such as large text, step-by-step visuals and a slow, thoughtful pace.

The study used pre and post-class surveys to examine how participation by seniors in the Apple Mail class would impact their digital competence, confidence, and feelings of social connection. The results showed a positive effect of the class, with a 3.05 point increase in their competence in how to unsend emails and a 2.30 point increase in confidence in their troubleshooting abilities. These findings suggest that teaching methods using analog approaches with materials specifically designed for seniors are effective in increasing their digital abilities, independence, and connectivity.

**Keywords:** Older adults, digital literacy, digital divide, technology education, community-based learning, senior confidence

### Introduction

Quickly swiping through apps comes naturally to younger iPhone users but the basic operations of digital technology can create significant challenges for many senior citizens. This gap between people who have

adequate access to information and communication technology and those who do not is commonly referred to as the “digital divide,” which can widen social inequalities by limiting opportunities for education, communication, and participation in society (Soomro et al., 2020). In 2017, a

Pew Research Center survey found that only 26% of senior internet users felt very confident when using smartphones and computers, while roughly one-third of the participants had either limited or no confidence when performing essential online tasks. Oftentimes, the tutorials and resources available to seniors fail to meet their needs because they operate at rapid speeds not suited to their learning pace. The technology classes offered at Apple, for example, often face comments from seniors (including my own grandparents) that the instructors move too fast. Paradoxically, many of the educational resources designed to teach digital skills to seniors use digital platforms themselves. Recent research shows that older adults demonstrate lower digital proficiency and face more challenges with basic tasks compared to younger users (Nicosia et al., 2022).

Because of this I published *Silver Tech*, a printed workbook designed specifically for older adults. I designed the book with specific design features such as large print text, clear visual aids and step-by-step instructions that guide users through basic iPhone operations. To complement the book, I also co-taught one-hour in person group classes using the same senior-friendly teaching approach that included deliberate pacing and personalized assistance. Together the workbook and live sessions create a community-based, analog learning system for digital technology. To study the impact of a specialized learning approach in real-time, I conducted a survey after teaching a one hour class on Apple Mail. During the class I used a one-page

front and back worksheet on Apple Mail which followed the same design strategies as *Silver Tech* with large fonts, arrows, screenshots and simple, repeatable instructions. The worksheet used the same teaching method as *Silver Tech*, making the material accessible to seniors. The intent of this tailored approach combining a specifically designed user interface with in-person support is to overcome digital hurdles for older adults, which in turn can help maintain their independence and social connections.

This leads to the core research question of this study: Can a one-hour group skills class that intentionally prioritizes teaching methods specific to seniors improve their digital literacy, confidence, and sense of social connection?

## **Methods**

### ***Study Design***

The workbook introduces seniors to essential iPhone functions such as texting, calling, using apps, adjusting settings, and more. Each chapter is designed to highlight specific skills and then breaks them into small, manageable steps that can be easily reproduced and practiced. Specific techniques such as large 20-point font, clear large visuals and arrows are used to avoid visual clutter. The explanations use plain language and avoid technical jargon, while the pacing is intentionally gradual so it is not overwhelming. The workbook contains 11 chapters which focus on practical high-use daily activities. These chapters include:

- Chapter 1: Getting to Know Your iPad/iPhone
- Chapter 2: Connecting to Wi-Fi and Setting Up Accounts
- Chapter 3: Managing Contacts
- Chapter 4: Using FaceTime
- Chapter 5: Sharing Files with AirDrop
- Chapter 6: Organizing and Managing Photos
- Chapter 7: Setting Up and Using Medical ID
- Chapter 8: Managing Notifications and Privacy Settings
- Chapter 9: Troubleshooting and FAQs
- Chapter 10: Staying Safe Online
- Chapter 11: Fun with Apps

In order to collect data on the effectiveness of these strategies, I helped co-teach a one-hour technology class at Laguna Woods Retirement Community.

For this session, we focused on teaching skills related to the Apple Mail app which expands on the “Connecting to Wi-Fi and Setting Up Accounts” chapter in *SilverTech*. These email setup skills are illustrated in the *Email Tips* handout, authored by Gene Hallaway, providing clear visual guidance on everyday email tasks. The two-sided handout shared many of the same senior-friendly design features such as large font, full-color screenshots, clear arrows, and simple step-by-step instructions. The format of the handout was geared towards a one-hour session and used the same teaching approach of slow pacing and minimal technical jargon.

To provide visual context, sample pages from both the *Silver Tech* workbook

and the *Email Tips* handout are included in the Appendix. Both resources use a similar layout, formatting choices, and instructional design principles which are highlighted in the images.

### ***Procedure***

The class was taught using a two-page handout titled *Email Tips*, which covered six key Apple Mail features. Participants were encouraged to take notes and mark-up the handout as needed so they would have the material available at home. Like *Silver Tech*, the handout was designed using the same principles including large font size, clear arrows, and full-color screenshots to walk participants through each step. Topics included previewing messages, using swipe actions, organizing emails, and changing Mail settings. The class was taught through a combination of live demonstration, printed visuals, and one-on-one support. As instructors mirrored iPhone actions on large wall monitors, participants followed along on their personal devices and practiced each task in real time. Common questions included how to avoid accidentally deleting messages, how to manage a cluttered inbox, and how to recognize spam emails.

### ***Data collection***

Each participant completed a short, anonymous paper survey before and after the session. Both surveys used a five-point Likert scale to measure comfort, skill awareness, and perceived ability in using Apple Mail. Topics included previewing email, using swipe gestures, changing

settings, general confidence with the app, and social connectivity. The post-class version also included an open-ended question asking participants to comment on anything specific they now feel more confident doing. Survey instruments are included in Appendix C, capturing both quantitative Likert-scale responses and qualitative feedback.

### ***Setting and Participants***

After developing *Silver Tech*, I partnered with the Mac Lab at Laguna Woods Retirement Community to lead a one-hour class using a printed handout. The handout, titled *Email Tips*, reflected the same design principles of *Silver Tech*. Both were designed with large fonts, clear visuals, and step-by-step instructions tailored to older adults. The handout offered a condensed version of the material, making it suitable for a one-hour session while maintaining the same senior-friendly approach found in the full workbook.

The Mac Lab is located on the third floor of the administrative building at Laguna Woods. The room is set up for both individual and group instruction. It includes four Mac desktop computers for hands-on use and a classroom area with seating for up to 40 adults. Two oversized wall-mounted monitors and a podium are used during instruction. Monitors mirrored instructor iPhone and Mac screens, allowing participants to follow in real time. This setup supports both guided teaching and peer discussion, and it is used regularly for technology support classes open to residents.

Participants in this class were primarily adults aged 65 and older. Class size typically ranges from 15 to 20 students depending on the topic. For this session, students were introduced to Apple Mail and followed printed materials as they practiced each skill at their own pace.

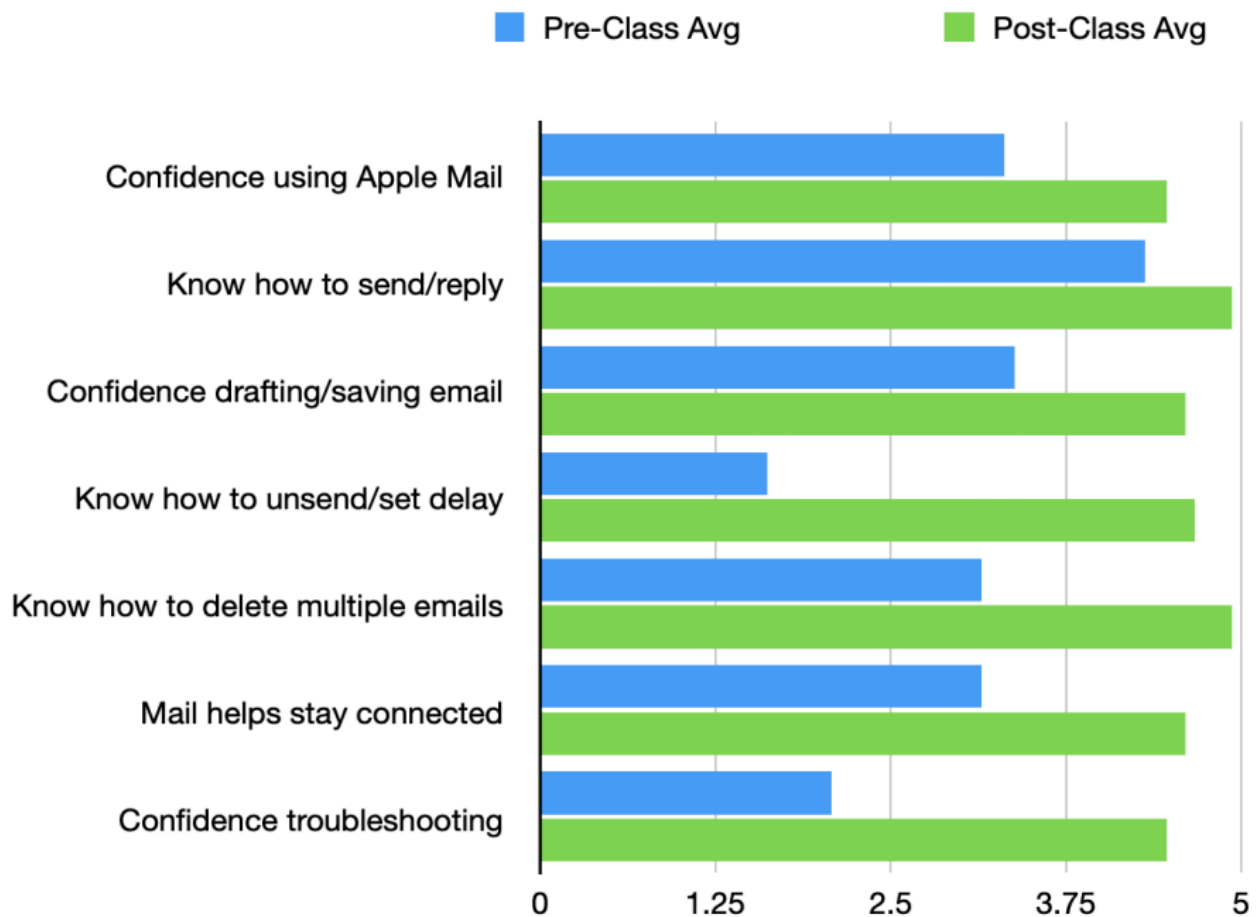
### **Results**

A total of 13 pre-class surveys and 15 post-class surveys were collected. Despite not all participants initially wanting to take the pre-class survey, by the end of the class, additional participants wanted to offer insight with the post-test survey. Each participant rated their agreement with seven statements using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated strong disagreement and 5 indicated strong agreement. Across all seven questions measured in the pre and post surveys, participants reported a significant increase after attending the one hour Apple Mail class.

The most substantial change was seen in Question 4, which measured knowledge of how to unsend an email or set a delay before sending. The average score for this question rose by 3.05 points, from 1.62 in the pre-survey to 4.67 in the post-survey. Confidence in troubleshooting issues independently also significantly improved, rising from 2.08 before the class to 4.47 after the class. All post-survey averages exceeded 4.47, indicating that participants felt confident in their ability to perform the email-related tasks addressed in the session. The results are graphed on the following page.

## Survey Results

Question	Pre-Class Avg	Post-Class Avg
<b>Confidence using Apple Mail</b>	3.31	4.47
<b>Know how to send/reply</b>	4.31	4.93
<b>Confidence drafting/saving email</b>	3.38	4.6
<b>Know how to unsend/set delay</b>	1.62	4.67
<b>Know how to delete multiple emails</b>	3.15	4.93
<b>Mail helps stay connected</b>	3.15	4.6
<b>Confidence troubleshooting</b>	2.08	4.47



## Discussion/Conclusion

### *Interpretation*

The results of this study indicate that even a brief, one-hour instructional class using senior-centered teaching strategies can lead to measurable improvements in digital confidence and skill. The post-class survey responses reflected increases across all seven measured areas. Most notably, knowledge of how to unsend an email or set a delay (Question 4) rose from a pre-class average of 1.62 to a post-class average of 4.67, an increase of 3.05 points. This demonstrates that when email functions are broken down into manageable steps, older adults can grasp and retain new information effectively within a short timeframe. Confidence with the Apple Mail app overall also increased by more than a full point, from 3.31 to 4.47.

A significant gain was also seen in troubleshooting confidence, which rose from 2.08 to 4.47. This suggests that beyond learning specific email functions, participants left the class with a greater sense of how to approach problems systematically. This type of problem-solving skill can help seniors become more independent technology users, as they learn to work through challenges using clear, repeatable steps. Several participants reflected this in their written responses. One person shared that they now understood “how to save email, pull it back up, then resend,” while another commented that “undo send was very, very helpful.” Others

noted that they better understood “new settings options” and “how to review an email with finger touch,” showing growth in both general and fine-motor digital navigation. One participant recognized the need to configure their email account properly, while another gained insight into broader phone functions like “do not disturb” and time selection. These comments reflect not just technical gains, but a shift toward more intentional and confident use of digital tools.

Several participants also described feeling better equipped to use email as a tool for staying in touch with others. While social connection was not directly measured in this study, improved digital literacy and confidence can enable older adults to communicate more easily with friends, family, and interest-based groups. One participant mentioned that they now felt ready to email their pickleball group, indicating that their new skills would help them stay engaged with social activities beyond the classroom. This supports the idea that even small gains in technical ability can remove barriers to connection and help seniors remain active in their communities.

These findings are consistent with the principles behind both the *Silver Tech* workbook and the *Email Tips* handout, which prioritize clarity, repetition, and print-based guidance. Both resources use large fonts, visual cues, and step-by-step instructions to present digital skills in a way that is approachable and easy to follow. The

success of this approach suggests that the methods used in both *Silver Tech* and the classroom setting are well-aligned with how seniors prefer to learn.

### ***Implications***

This study contributes to a growing body of work highlighting the importance of analog, community-based learning strategies for increasing digital literacy among older adults. As technology becomes increasingly integrated into daily life, the ability to access and use essential tools, like email, can directly impact seniors' independence, ability to stay in touch with family, and participation in community life. By using printed materials and in-person instruction, programs like *Silver Tech* and workshops modeled after it can help close the digital divide without relying on digital tools to teach digital skills.

### ***Limitations***

This study is based on a small sample of participants (13 pre-class surveys, 15 post-class surveys) from a single session held at one location. Because data were collected from a single class and participation was voluntary, the findings may not be universal to all senior learners. In addition, while the results are promising,

the short duration of the intervention makes it difficult to assess long-term retention of skills or confidence. Future studies could explore follow-up sessions, repeated exposure, or longitudinal tracking to assess sustained learning and confidence growth over time.

### ***Conclusion***

The findings from this project support the idea that community-based, print-focused instruction can significantly improve digital skills and confidence among older adults. Seniors who participated in a one-hour class using a targeted Apple Mail handout showed measurable gains across all survey categories. These improvements suggest that teaching strategies centered on pacing, clarity, and hands-on participation are especially effective for older adults. The results reinforce the importance of meeting seniors where they are, rather than expecting them to learn complex tools through unfamiliar platforms. In addition to building confidence and skill, these gains have the potential to improve social connection. As demonstrated through *Silver Tech* and the *Email Tips* workshop, small adjustments in teaching format can have a meaningful impact on older adults' ability to connect with technology and with others.

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## **Appendix A: Silver Tech Workbook Overview**

Silver Tech is a printed instructional workbook I authored specifically for older adults who are learning to use the iPhone. It features eleven chapters focused on high-use smartphone functions such as managing contacts, connecting to Wi-Fi, using FaceTime, sharing files with AirDrop, and organizing photos. Each chapter breaks down complex digital tasks into smaller, manageable steps using clear language, large visuals, and size 20 font throughout.

The content is organized to allow seniors to work at their own pace, with each page following a consistent visual format. Instructions are presented using a combination of screenshots, arrows, and written steps that do not assume prior experience with smartphones.

The Silver Tech workbook mirrors the instructional approach for the Apple Mail class. Sample pages from Silver Tech are included below to illustrate the design elements and pacing used throughout the workbook:

### Restarting Device

How to restart your device if it has a home button

1. Hold the power and home buttons until you see the apple logo on your screen.



2. Release the buttons when the Apple logo appears. Restart should start automatically.




12


### Restarting Device

How to restart your device if it does not have a home button

1. Hold the power button and volume up button until you see "slide to power off" appear on your screen.



2. Slide the slider to the right, and then let go.



13

### Restarting Device

How to restart your device if it does not have a home button

3. Wait 30 seconds for your phone to fully turn off.




4. After 30 seconds, hold the power button until you see the apple logo appear, then let go.



14

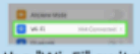
## CHAPTER 2:



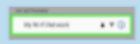
## CONNECTING TO WI-FI AND SETTING UP ACCOUNTS

## Connecting to Wi-Fi

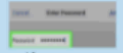
- Open the "Settings" app on your iPhone. This is represented by a gray gear icon.
- Tap on "Wi-Fi" at the top of the list.



- Make sure the "Wi-Fi" switch is turned on (the switch will be green). This will display a list of available Wi-Fi networks.
- Find your network in the list and tap on its name.



- If the network is password-protected, a box will appear asking for the password. Type in the Wi-Fi password using the on-screen keyboard.



- After entering the password, tap "Join" in the top-right corner of the keyboard. If the password is correct, your iPhone will connect to the Wi-Fi network.
- Once connected, a checkmark will appear next to the network name, indicating a successful connection.

## **Appendix B: Instructional Handout – Email Tips**

This handout was used as the primary teaching tool during the one-hour Apple Mail class at the Mac Lab. Created by Gene Hollaway, Email Tips is a two-page, double-sided, color document that explains six essential Apple Mail functions using large print, arrows, and full-screen visuals. Each feature is broken down into simple, sequential steps to support older adults who prefer print-based, self-paced instruction.

The handout closely mirrors the structure and design principles of the Silver Tech workbook. Both resources emphasize clarity, consistent formatting, and visual reinforcement to reduce cognitive load. During the class, each student received a printed copy of this handout and used it to follow along with live demonstrations.

A sample page is included to illustrate the layout and design approach.


# Email Tips - iPhone - iOS 18

## Preview email



- Mail is iPhone default app.
- All features may not be available in third party mail apps.

Mailbox with list of emails

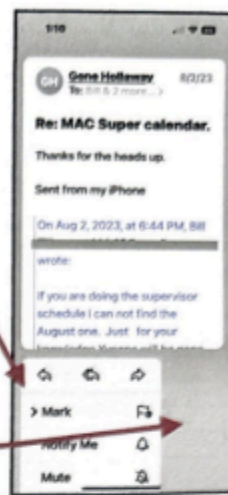


Long press an email to see a preview

## Preview email

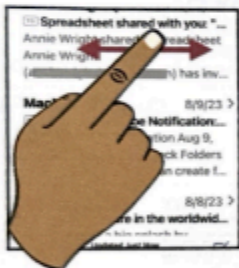
Actions

Tap blank area to close



## Swipe Options

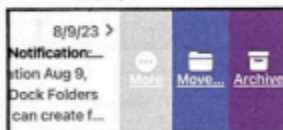
### Mailbox with list of emails



### Swipe Right



### Swipe Left



- Swipe slowly and tap desired option.
- Swipe quickly & outermost option is performed.
- The blue options can be changed in settings.

## Swipe Settings



Open Settings, scroll & tap Apps, then Mail.

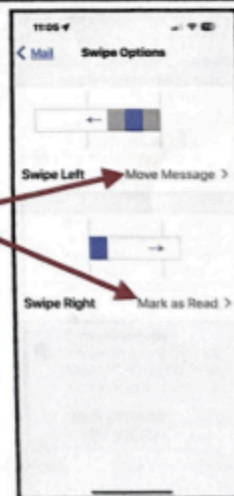
### Settings/Apps



### Mail Settings



Tap to change swipe options. Only the blue option is changed.



## **Appendix C: Survey Instruments**

The following pages contain the pre-class and post-class survey instruments used in the Apple Mail skills session. These surveys were administered in print format and collected anonymously.

# Apple Mail Skills - Pre-Class Survey

**Please circle the number that best describes your answer.**

1 = Lowest / Strongly Disagree      5 = Highest / Strongly Agree

**1. I feel confident using the Apple Mail app.**

1    2    3    4    5

**2. I know how to send and reply to an email.**

1    2    3    4    5

**3. I feel confident drafting an email and saving it before sending.**

1    2    3    4    5

**4. I know how to unsend an email or set a delay before it sends.**

1    2    3    4    5

**5. I know how to delete multiple emails at once.**

1    2    3    4    5

**6. I use Apple mail to help me stay connected to friends and family.**

1    2    3    4    5

**7. I feel confident troubleshooting problems with Apple Mail on my own or with minimal help.**

1    2    3    4    5

# Apple Mail Skills - Post-Class Survey

Please circle the number that best describes your answer.

1 = Lowest / Strongly Disagree      5 = Highest / Strongly Agree

**1. I feel more confident using the Apple Mail app than I did before the class.**

1    2    3    4    5

**2. I know how to send and reply to an email.**

1    2    3    4    5

**3. I feel confident drafting an email and saving it before sending**

1    2    3    4    5

**4. I know how to unsend an email or set a delay before it sends**

1    2    3    4    5

**5. I know how to delete multiple emails at once**

1    2    3    4    5

**6. I feel more confident using apple mail to help me stay connected to friends and family**

1    2    3    4    5

**7. I feel confident troubleshooting problems with Apple Mail on my own or with minimal help after this course**

1    2    3    4    5

**8. After taking this class, is there anything specific you now feel more confident doing with email? Do you think any of these new skills will help you stay in touch with family, friends, or your community? (please answer on back!)**

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