

Guide to Good Error Messages

Errors are one of the most important things in our UI. They are shown to users when Okta is in danger of doing something that jeopardizes customer success. A successful error message helps the user to address the issue and saves the situation.

A user who is reading an error message may be stressed, frustrated, under pressure, or quite literally. Freaking. Out.



In this state, a person needs simplified and direct explanations, focused on the perspective they are actually seeing in front of them. Our goal is to tell them, as clearly and concisely as possible, what is happening and how to deal with it

Anatomy of a good error

1. Say what went wrong.
2. If not clearly implied by the error itself, tell them what they need to do to fix it.
3. If they might wonder whether their work will be lost, let them know whether this is a possibility and whether there is a way to avoid it.

Style and tone

- Be concise and get to the point. (Leave out words/phrases and details that do not aid someone in understanding what happened and how to fix it.)
- Be direct. (Don't be overly formal or overly polite.)
- Use the second person. ("You") (Some API or platform error messages may be in third person if the "you" is not clear. However, be careful not to use this in messages that might surface in the UI.)
- Speak from the perspective of the user, not the system.
 - To avoid confusion, use the same names and labels that are used in the UI. (For platform error messages, refer to the published, public API endpoints and properties.)
 - When explaining what went wrong and what action to take to fix it, speak in terms of UI elements, where possible.
 - When the action must be taken outside of Okta, still speak from the perspective of what the user will see and do.

Examples

DO	DONT	Why
The 'from' date is earlier than the 'to' date.	Error: Since until.	The backend field names are used instead of those shown in the UI. Also, there is no explanation of what is actually wrong with those fields.
Please log back in to Okta. To avoid losing your work, log in from a different browser tab.	Invalid session.	This explains the issue from the system's perspective rather than the user's. It doesn't give the user a clear action to take.
The value in the 'username' field must be a valid email address.	Form fails validation.	Not specific enough. (How do I fix it if I don't know where to look or why to look there?)
The certificate you've uploaded is expired.	Validation result: Invalid_expired	Not specific enough. (What thing is invalid/expired? What does that mean?)

References

[Apple's guidelines for error messages and alerts](#)
[Nielsen Norman Group's error guidelines](#)

[Worst error messages in history](#)
[Non-iconic bad error message examples](#)