# Error Message and UI Help Style Guide

To ensure clarity and consistency across Vault Safety error messaging, this guide is written for Vault Safety team members who write or edit error messages and in-product help text.

## Vault Error Message Guidance

For more guidance, refer to the Error Message and System Notifications section of the Vault UI Terminology Guidelines

## Writing Style

### User-Oriented Language

Write error messages with the end-user in mind.  Write in clear and simple, yet descriptive, language. Describe the issue, why the issue occurred, and suggest the next step.

Be polite and avoid alarming or offending the end-user with harsh language or making them feel guilty for the issue.

Use positive language, such as reminding users of valid input options, rather than negative language, such as pointing out that the user has input an error.

Use "please" sparingly. However, it can be appropriate when there is an error and you must ask the user to repeat the action or if the error is due to a product limitation

| ✗ Before | ✓ After |
|---|---|
| You have exceeded the file import size limit. | The file exceeds the import size limit of 500MB. |
| The time range you have entered is invalid. | Please enter a valid time range. |

### Active Voice

Use the active voice wherever possible. The active voice is more direct and clearer than the passive voice. For error messages, use the passive voice to explain the condition that caused an error, especially when the user may feel blamed if you use the active voice.

| ✗ Before | ✓ After |
|---|---|
| An option must be selected before continuing to the next step. (passive) | You must select an option before continuing to the next step. (active) |

| You entered incorrect login information. (active) | The user name or password is incorrect. (passive) |

## Abbreviations

Avoid abbreviations unless you can be completely certain that any and all users are familiar with those abbreviations. Do not use periods between each letter in abbreviations.

## Capitalization

Use sentence-style capitalization for error messages. Do not use capitalization for emphasis. Avoid unnecessary or excessive capitalization; it is distracting for the user.

Capitalize on the following items:

- Proper nouns (Veeva Systems, Vault)
- Acronyms and abbreviations (FDA, EU)
- User types/security profiles/license types from the UI (System Admin, Document User, Vault Admin)
- Statuses/lifecycle states from the UI (Active, Draft)
- Role names (Approver, Owner)
- Terms that would be confusing otherwise

## Consistent Terminology

Use terminology that is consistent with the UI to avoid confusion.

## Exclamation Marks

Never use exclamation marks. End sentences with a period.

## Jargon

Avoid industry-specific terms and jargon unless you can be completely certain that any and all users are familiar with those terms.

## Lists

When listing up to three items, use a serial comma; a comma before the "and" or "or" in the list.

When listing more than three items, use a bulleted list.

## Second-Person

Address the reader directly by writing in the second-person ("you"). This style of writing creates a friendly and casual tone and is the clearest way to instruct the reader to do something.

| ✗ Before | ✓ After |
|---|---|
| The user does not have the correct permissions to view this document. | You do not have the correct permissions to view this document. |

## Sentence Structure

Write in short, simple sentences. Keep messages as concise as possible while providing users the information they need. Keep messages and notifications between one and three sentences.

## Tense

Use the present tense to describe a state that still exists. Use past tense to describe a distinct event that occurred in the past.

| ✗ Before | ✓ After |
|---|---|
| Could not open file. The file exceeded the space limit of 10 MB. | Cannot open file. The file exceeds the space limit of 10 MB. |

## Words to Avoid

### Bad

"Bad" implies judgment and may make the user feel at fault. Also, "bad" is usually not a clear way to describe an issue. Instead, use "invalid" or another more accurate word.

### Failed

"Failed" may raise alarm the user unnecessarily. Instead, use "cannot."

### Pick

Do not use "pick." Instead, use "select."

### Illegal

"Illegal" is a harsh word, like failed, that may alarm with the user. Illegal means a violation of the law, thus implying the user is a criminal. Instead, use "invalid." Or better yet, focus on the positive and explain what is valid.

### Unable

"Unable" is passive and unclear. Instead, use "cannot."

### Unknown

Rarely the cause of an error is "unknown." Instead, use "unrecognized."

## In-Product Help Text

Aim to keep help/tooltips as concise as possible. Remove unnecessary words and lead-ins where possible.

Consider the following example, where the lead-in "This data element is used to identify" does not add value in the context of hover-text in the UI.

| ✗ Before | ✓ After |
|---|---|
| C.1.8.2 This data element is used to identify the type of sender that created and transmitted the original electronic ICSR. | C.1.8.2 The type of sender that created and transmitted the original electronic ICSR. |