

Intranet Posts to Improve English Proficiency in the Company

The following are five posts out of dozens that were published to a company's internal social media-like platform. These posts were very popular and helped improve English proficiency across many teams, especially among native Spanish speakers.

Log In or Login?

"Log in" (two words) is a verb, and it's the term we use most often. It usually means to authenticate a user and start a session. In the UI, for example, a button that you click to submit your username and password to access the system should say ✓ "Log in." In the online help system, we might tell users ✓ "You'll need to log in again after you verify your email address."

If you need to specify where a user is logging in, use "log in to" (three words): ✓ "To configure the integration, first log in to Google."

"Login" (one word) is a noun that refers to the act of logging in: ✓ "Your first login was on January 20." The page where you log in can be described as a ✓ "login page" too.

People sometimes use "login" as a noun to refer to an account or to a username and password combination, as in "if you forget your login, contact your administrator." However, in these cases, we recommend saying something more specific, like "user credentials" or "user account."

Interested in the details? "Log in" is a phrasal verb made up of the verb "log" and the preposition "in." Most dictionaries and style guides recommend "log in," so that's the verb we use at our company, but you may find different words in other platforms. Some people prefer "log on" (verb) and "logon" (noun), or "sign-on" (verb and noun). We don't use those words, except in the expression "single sign-on" (SSO), which is a standard industry term.

Can you name any sites or apps that use words other than "log in"?

Streamline Those Verbs!

When people in the same industry or profession work together for any length of time, they tend to develop their own style of communicating. Sometimes these styles even filter out and find a place in the larger society. This can be good because it helps people exchange information more effectively with each other, but it can sometimes get in the way of communication.

For example, you may have noticed that when a friend or coworker wants to say something important, they use certain structures that give their words a formal tone when their message could have been much clearer if they had said it simply and directly.

One common example is when people turn a verb into a noun phrase. It's not wrong to do this for marketing or creative types of writing. But for more straightforward texts like documentation or UI text writing, it's clearer to say, for example, "Adjust your settings for best performance" than to say "You can make an adjustment to the settings for best performance." Here are a few more examples:

- "Look at" [or "See"] instead of "Take a look at"
- "Investigate" instead of "Conduct an investigation"
- "Consider" instead of "Take into consideration"

It's not just about using fewer words, although that's a good goal too. It's more about avoiding unnecessarily wordy phrases that can hinder clarity. In our company we are in the business of creating intuitive software, and our customers appreciate uncomplicated UI texts, help articles, training materials, and more.

Collective Nouns – Singular vs Plural

There are some nouns that we can use to refer to groups of people, like team, company, government, band, etc. These words are called "collective nouns" because we can use them in singular form to refer to multiple individuals.

Regional Differences

In the United States and Canada, collective nouns are almost always used with singular verbs. In other words, the entire group is treated as a single entity. For example:

- My team is always happy to help.

- The company has developed a new solution I am very excited about.
- The staff is prepared and is looking forward to the conference.

However, in the United Kingdom, collective nouns are typically used with plural verbs. For example:

- My team are always happy to help.
- The company have developed a new solution I am very excited about.
- The staff are ready to go and they're looking forward to the conference.

Sometimes, proper nouns (the names of specific people or things) can function as collective nouns too, denoting a group of people. This means that the same rules and guidelines apply. For example:

- The State Department has released a statement. (US)
- The Foreign Office have released a statement. (UK)

How We Use Collective Nouns in Our Company

We follow the AP Stylebook, which states that collective nouns take singular verbs and pronouns, with very few exceptions. However, we are also a very diverse company, so you may see plural verbs too in internal communications such as emails, presentations, etc.

Exceptions

Some words are always used with singular verbs. For example: everyone, everybody, someone, somebody, no one, nobody.

- Everybody admits we need to address climate change. No one knows exactly how to do so.

There are also some words that always take plural verbs, even in the US.

- The police have been looking for the suspects for several days now.
- People use this feature all the time. They need adequate documentation.

Display vs. Appear

When we describe the platform's features, we often tell customers what they can expect to see during each step of the process. It's easy to write a quick sentence that says, ✕ "Click Email and the email composer will display." The problem? This isn't the correct use of the verb display.

Display means to show something, and it's an action-oriented verb that requires us to identify the actor (who or what) that is doing the displaying. Things cannot display themselves—someone or something else has to display them.

The verb appear means to come into view, or to materialize. This verb doesn't require an external actor to make the object visible to everyone. People or things can simply appear on their own: ✓ "The moment I picked up my beer, the police appeared.

Returning to the first example, saying ✗ "...the email composer will display" is essentially an incomplete sentence. It implies that the email composer is in fact the actor that is about to display... something else. But we don't know what that something else might be because the sentence doesn't finish.

To use the verb display here, we need to identify an actor, such as the platform: ✓ "Click Email and the platform displays the email composer." Or, by switching to the infinitive, we can imply that the reader of the sentence is the actor: ✓ "Click Email to display the email composer." And if it's not important to identify the actor at all, we can just use the verb appear: ✓ "Click Email and the email composer appears."

We had good feedback to the short quiz we included in a previous post, so here's another one to test your understanding of when to use display versus appear!

- A. When the Users Report _____, you'll see a table and a pie chart.
- B. The brave girl _____ no fear as she stood up to the bully.
- C. Cedric always _____ when someone else agrees to pay for the food.
- E. I shared my laptop's screen through Zoom to _____ the presentation to the group.

Like many English words, display and appear can be used in other ways. Appear can also be a synonym for "seem," i.e., to give an impression. To use it this way, we combine appear with a that-clause or follow it with an infinitive verb (that contains to).

- ✓ It appears increasingly likely that interest rates will rise.
- ✓ Jeff appears to be very experienced. Let's hire him.

Display can also be used in the idiom "on display," which means to put something somewhere for everyone to see.

- ✓ The museum is opening its new Egyptian exhibit, but only a few artifacts will go on display.
- ✓ I admitted to the class that I failed the test, putting my lack of preparation on display for everyone.

Is English a Null-Subject Language?

Previous posts discussed how language transfer is the tendency to apply the familiar grammar or vocabulary conventions from one's own language to another language. Most

of our examples focused on specific words that do not always mean the same thing in English as they do in Spanish. For example, “doubt” is not the same as “question,” and “massively” is not a good translation for the word “masivamente.”

Today we'll focus more on the grammar side and talk about the common mistake of leaving out subjects from English in certain situations.

Of the thousands of languages around the world, linguists refer to those that allow you to leave out an explicit subject as null-subject languages. Some languages achieve this through grammar rules, like Japanese which allows people to omit subjects that are clear from the context of the conversation. Other languages, like Spanish, achieve this through robust verb conjugation. As you may have guessed, English is not a null-subject language. It requires the writer or speaker to identify the subject in almost all cases.

Let's say we're talking (in Spanish) about our friend Sebastián and I say, “Me dijo que está trabajando un montón.” Since it's clear who we're talking about and the two verbs in that sentence are conjugated in the third person, I don't need to specify the subject by including the pronoun “él.” But in English verb conjugations are less precise, so I cannot say ✗ “Told me has been working a lot.” Even if we've been talking about Sebastián for 15 minutes and the context is very clear, I still need to include pronouns that identify him: ✓ “He told me that he has been working a lot.”

Another example of this is the common usage of “impersonal verbs” in English. This refers to verb constructions where we use the words “it” or “there” because the subject of a sentence doesn't have a name (or would be too time-consuming to fully describe).

Most of us have studied English for a long time and are well aware that we must take extra care to identify the subject in our sentences. But that's the sneaky thing about language transfer: it can still slip in even when we're trying hard not to do it. Here are some examples that show how we might forget to identify the subject. Post a comment if you can think of others!

✗ “Is necessary to shower before entering the swimming pool.” [An impersonal verb construction is required at the beginning: ✓ “It is necessary....”]

✗ “Will add a toggle to enable and disable this feature.” [A pronoun is necessary at the beginning: ✓ “We will add....”]

✗ “Therefore, is important to show the user who was the last person to modify that record.” [An impersonal verb construction is needed at the beginning: ✓ “...it is important....”]

✗ "Displays an error message." [Requires that we name the subject or use an impersonal verb construction: ✓ "It {or 'the application'} displays..."]

One thing we also have learned while studying English is that there are always exceptions! One of the only places where English speakers are allowed to omit the subject is when using the imperative. (However, the subject still must be identified very close by, in either the previous or following sentence.)

✓ "I asked you to have dinner ready by 8 PM. Go! Start cooking!" [It's not recommended to say ✗ "You go! You start cooking!"]

✓ "Forget I just told you that." [We don't need to say, ✗ "You forget...."]

Finally, when writing in English in a business setting, it's common to omit the subject in bullet lists. But this is only allowed if the subject for each bullet is the same AND it is clearly stated in the introductory sentence. For example, instead of including "we" "the company" at the beginning of each bullet below, we include it in the lead-in sentence.

In version 9.38, we redesigned the action bar, as follows:

- Renamed some actions.
- Grouped communication-related actions under the Send menu.
- Grouped calendar-related actions under the Calendar menu.