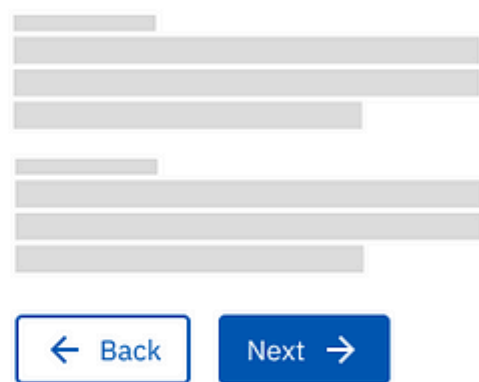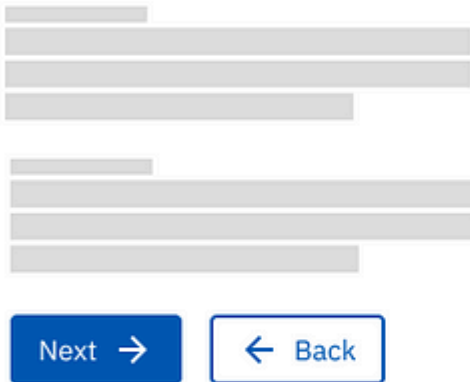# On which side do we put the primary button?

Revisiting: button placements.

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UX Collective a11y-light ~8 min read · May 17, 2024 (Updated: May 17, 2024) · Free: No

In an earlier article written about "Why 'OK' buttons work better on the right", I touched upon the placements of buttons. As of today, I'm still not sure which placement is the best. But here's another take on it.

There are many of sublime articles about the order of buttons in UX and web design and where primary buttons should be placed. I'll list some of the ones I've read and find very helpful, while researching for this article:

- Where to put the primary button? by Oscar Gonzalez, WAS

- ~~Designing A Better Back Button UX~~ by Vitaly Friedman
- [Button Ambiguity: Alignment & Order](#) by [Jon Lehman](#)

This article is a discussion and view on a current problem that a government run design system is having and how we go about trying to solve it.

The Danish National Design System

In Denmark we have a national design system — which we just call "*The Public Design System*". It's a government run design system, just like the ones in the UK ([GOV.UK](#)) and US ([USWDS](#)). It's run and made by *the Agency for Digital Government* and *the Danish Business Authority*. I'm a part of the project that run, optimize and design new components for the Danish design system.

This design system is made for all public-facing self-service forms, for citizens and businesses in Denmark. Meaning that it's a design system that has a specific focus, to aid and help create the best forms for self-service solutions. Which means that we have quite big accessibility requirements when we design components for the design system. We have to adhere to [WCAG 2.1](#). Due the projects size and the high accessibility requirements set; we focus on only releasing new components that are 100 % accessible (or as close to as possible). Therefore, our research and development phases are slightly longer, compared to other web development projects. But when there are issues that affect the accessibility raised either by our community of users or found by ourselves, these have the absolute highest priority. Therefore, when this issue with our buttons and what is the "optimal" placement of these was raised, we dove back into it and took a look at it.

What's the problem?

The issue is that when having buttons that indicates progression (i.e. "*Next*", "*Forward*" etc.) and therefore often also need buttons to indicate how the user can return back to the previous page (i.e. "*Back*"). It's important that the placements of these buttons are intuitive and easy to find and use for the user.

always logical or practical. Our design system relies heavily on a hard left alignment of the main content and elements. That means that unless it is a pattern that dictates that different elements can be grouped together horizontally, we rarely allow for elements in this arrangement (side-by-side). Our design system relies also on the F-shape reading pattern to guide the user to the next actions.

The "Designsystem"'s reading pattern guidelines.

The design of our buttons, is not one of our issues here. It's how we place them and in which order, for the user to have a seamless experience when tapping through a digital self-service form.

No side have been chosen... Yet!

In our design system we don't "allow" for components to be grouped together horizontally if they aren't within a pattern. So, for a long time we have struggled with the "*correct*" placement of our navigation buttons in a form. Next, is easy — should come as one of the first things you see when you get to the bottom of the page, and are ready to progress.

So, how have we managed to overcome this issue. Actually, for a long time we just tried to steer away from this issue, and tried to solve it with placing the back-button in another place. For easier convenient use.

The same self-service page, with the "back" button highlighted on the top of the page.

Back at the top

Placing our back button at the top is not the worst solution. But it does not solve every problem. When the user is faced with a very long page, and no longer can see the top of the page, naturally then will the "back"-button to not be visible anymore. And when faced with a self-service where you also don't have a step indicator, it means that you won't be able to use this as an alternative to the regular back button.

with inspiration from GOV.UK.

An example page of a form from the GOV.UK design system.

Furthermore, as a way of patching this issue before diving into a big redesign. We added a "back to top"-button.
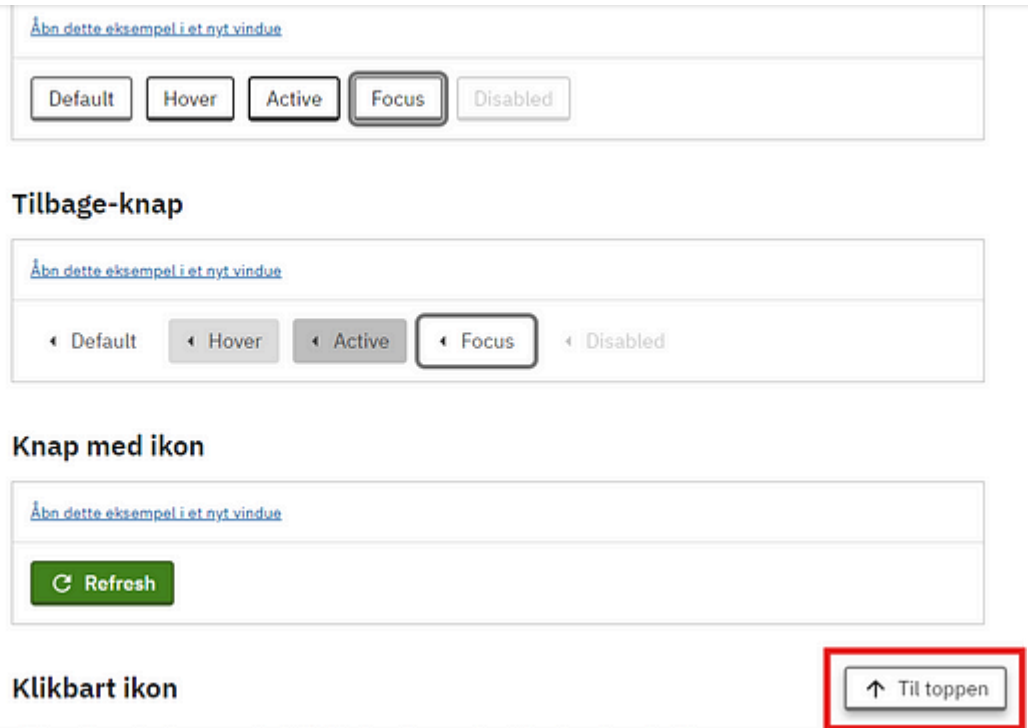
Screenshot from the Designsystem's webpage. Showcasing how a "Back to top"-button is placed on a page.

This would overcome the issue of having to choose where to place the "back" button. Because now we can just rely on only having one navigational button at the bottom of the page, and just send the user to the top of the page if they want to go back. It's not an ideal solution. And it also requires one click more from the user to actually go back in a form. Plus, it might not feel intuitive to the user that they need to go to the top of the page to go back.

What's left? Nothing right?

Considering that in our design system we rely heavily on components and content being left aligned, which mean that the focus is on providing the user with the information that is most important first (from left to right). That makes for a tricky question:

> Where do you place the "back" button, when you have this left align rule? Do you make a rule for this instance, and therefore break the rules?

Next button to the left, next button to the right?

I would say that there are valid arguments for both "sides".

Next — Back: *this is in line with the whole rule about left alignment and helps the user understand that the most important information is showcased first from left. But it is also counterintuitive that the back button is in the direction of travel when you want to move/progress forward in the self-service, this is not the place to look for the back button. And maybe the cause of clicks the user didn't intend for.*

Back — Next: *On this side we have the next button placed in the direction of travel and progression. This is where it could feel natural to look for the button when you want to move forward. But same argument as for the back-button here as for the next-button in the previous statement. The back button is not optimal placed here. It feels unnatural to have a back button as the first interaction option.*

Image from Adam Silver's blog post about "Where to put buttons on forms".

So does that not make it any easier?

Not quite. Some suggestions we have gotten, has been, why not just stack the buttons like this:

Stacked buttons, with both secondary and tertiary button design.

This would solve the issue of not having the problem of choosing which side (left or right) to place the primary button. But it comes with the caveat of going

We would also have some accessibility issues with the order of the buttons. In WCAG there is the Focus Order section which "focus" on provide guideline on how a user navigates through information and that it is consistent with the context of the content.

> "... to ensure that when users navigate sequentially through content, they encounter information in an order that is consistent with the meaning of the content and can be operated from the keyboard. This reduces confusion by letting users form a consistent mental model of the content. There may be different orders that reflect logical relationships in the content." — from WCAG Focus Order — understanding SC 2.4.3
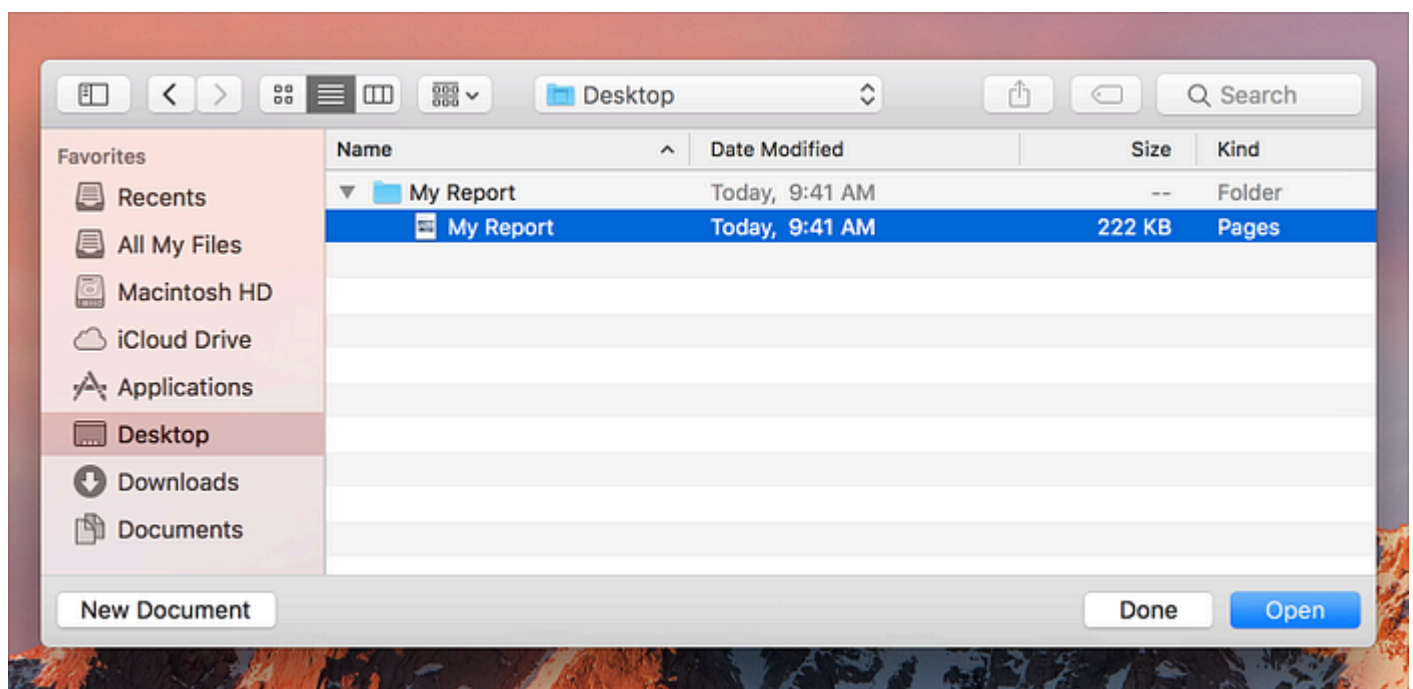
What's best practice?

Without going too much into the weeds, because there's so many great articles out there on button placements in web design and the UX behind it. That I don't what to just reiterate what have already been written. But I would highlight this absolute stunning and very thorough article by Artem Syzonenko; Buttons on the web: placement and order.

But it's clear just when you take a look at these two very classic examples on button placements from Windows and Mac OS. Very different approach to the placement and order of buttons.
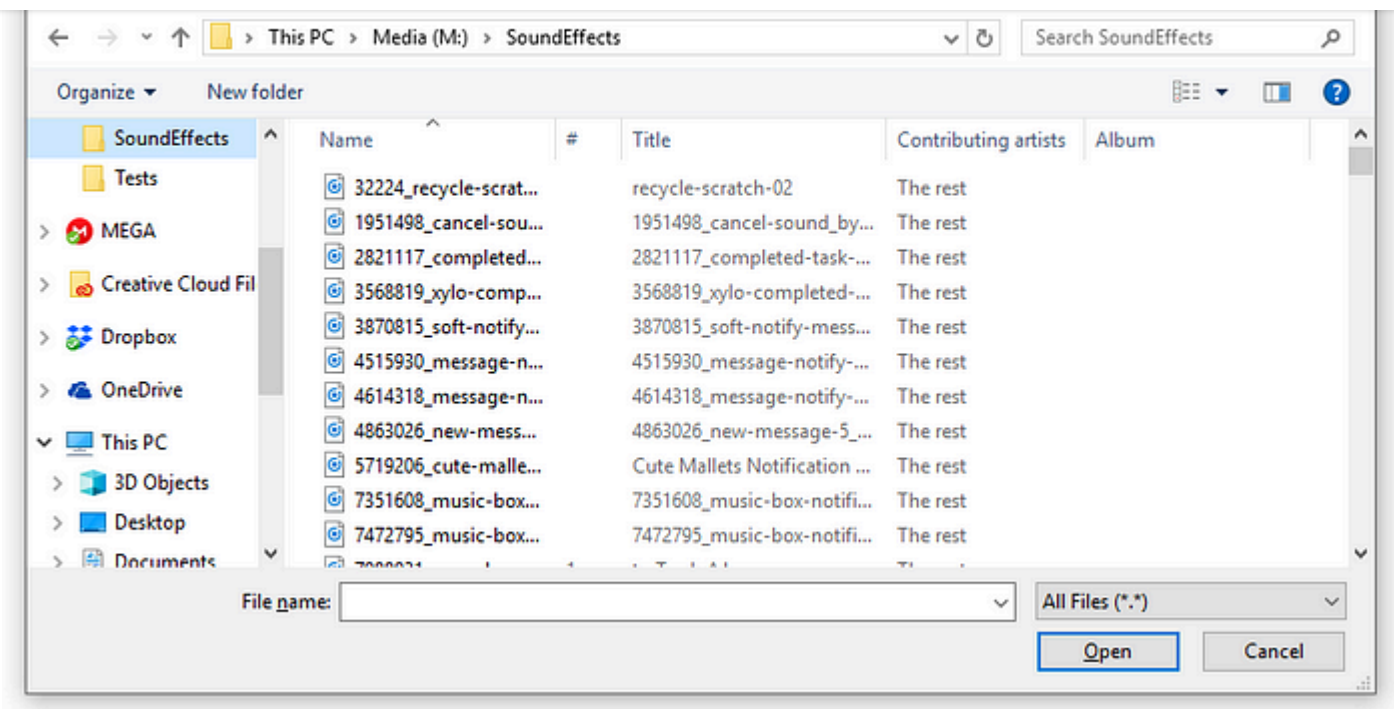
Images from Artem's article. Windows

Images from Artem's article. MacOS

In short, there's a lot of great examples on button placements and some best practices. But yeah, there's no *one best practice!*

Where to place it?

I don't have the answer. There is no holy grail to button placements. But a lot of great practices and design principles that should be thought about before one

Considering that what we do, in how we place our buttons will have a huge impact on all of our users, we are very hesitant to make huge breaking change that might change the mental model of how a user interact with a form designed with our design system. So that's why we have for a long time been looking for the smoking gun to tell us that *"this is the right way to do button placements"*. But considering this answer doesn't actually exist, we would have to make due with our best design on this and do a lot of usability tests on this before we make a final decision.

Thank you for making it this far.

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