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Let's go!

## Button labels: is "OK" ok?

Buttons are amongst the most important interactive design elements, so here is a quick guide to labelling them correctly.



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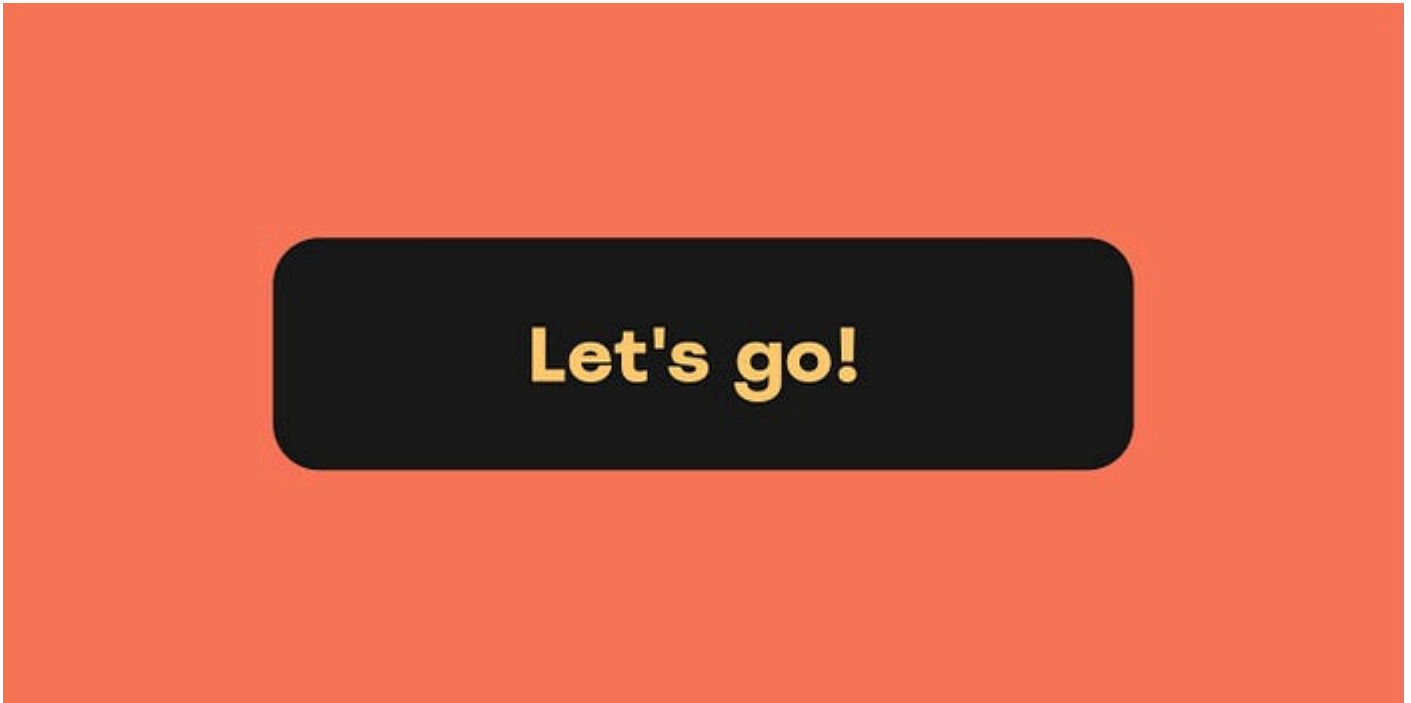
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**Buttons are amongst the most important interactive design elements that allow users to manipulate the interface. There are many great articles dedicated to their appearance, yet surprisingly little guidance on their content — labels.**

I'd like to preface this article with a note that the following principles should be used as **guidelines, not rules**. Language changes in response to its context and evolves over time, so trust your instincts, stay consistent and test extensively!

### Light, camera, action!

A button is an interactive element that changes the state of the interface (if it doesn't, it should likely be a link). For this reason, its label should include a verb that clearly describes the action it performs.



Rule of thumb: a button label should include a verb.

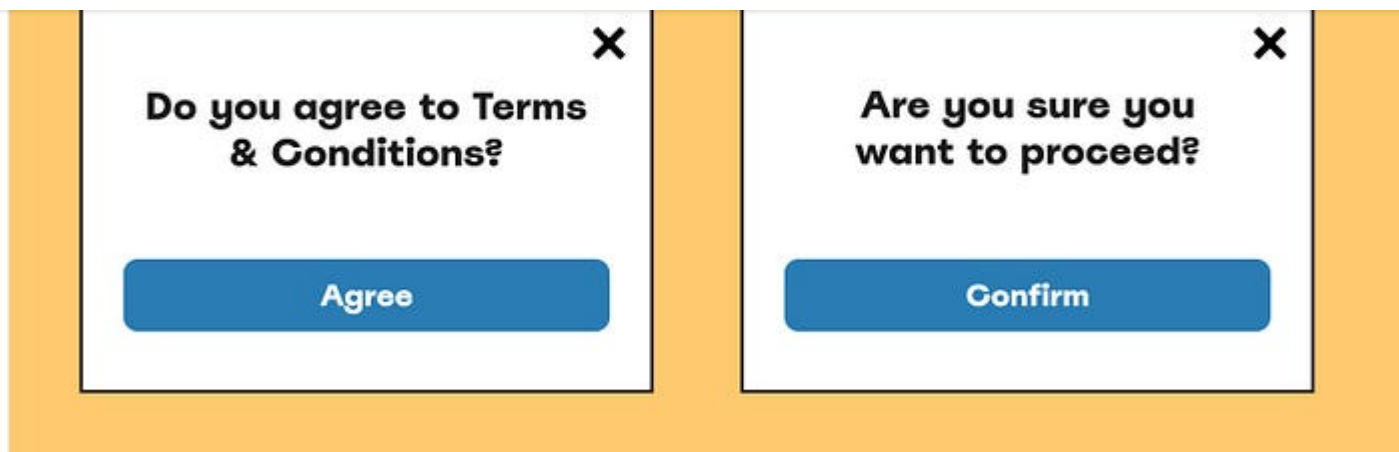
Let's now look at some of the most common actions and the best button labels for them.

### Confirmation

By clicking the button, the user confirms that they familiarised themselves with the information and accept its message. The most common labels for this are:

- Accept
- Agree
- Confirm

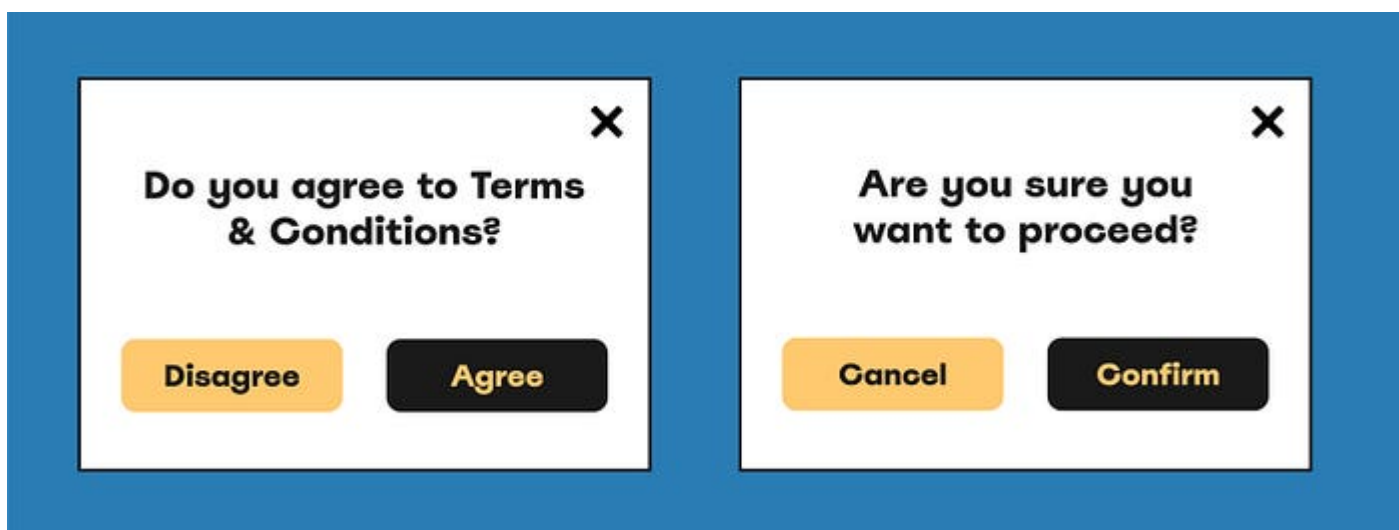
The choice will depend on your tone of voice, as well as the formality of the agreement.



"Accept", "Agree" and "Confirm" can often be used interchangeably, but the first two are more common in formal agreements.

Conversely, you may need to give the user an option to "Disagree" and label the button accordingly. However, since the progress often relies on the user agreeing to whatever information they are given, it is more common to pair the confirmation button with labels like:

- Cancel
- Dismiss
- Go back



If the user can't proceed without agreeing, it's better to use a label that clearly explains the consequences of their disagreements, such as "Cancel" or "Go back".

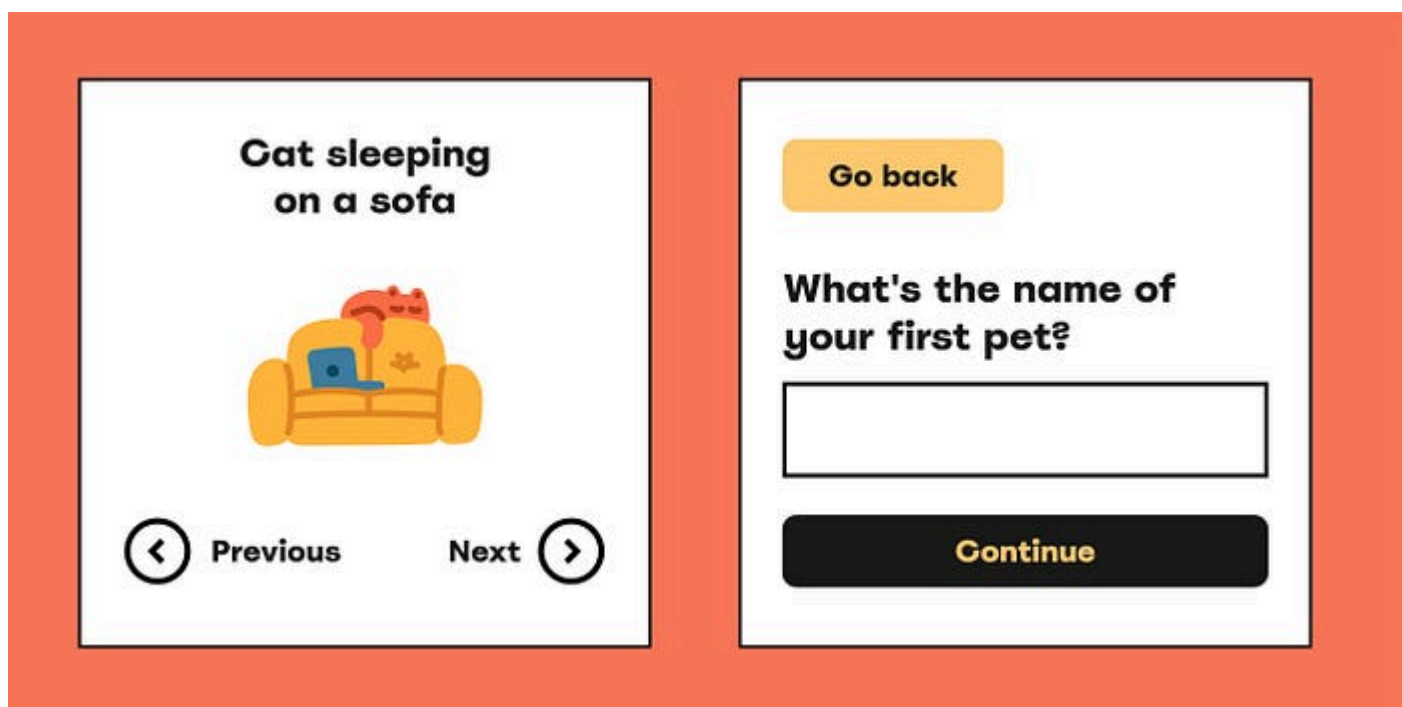
One notable exception is the "OK" button, which is often used to dismiss modals. This label is ambiguous, since it lacks an action word, so it's not always clear what the button does. If asking for explicit consent doesn't make sense in your

- Close
- Exit

### Progress

It's a common practice to break down complex processes into bite-size steps which are typically connected with either buttons or links. It's important to understand the difference to ensure these elements are labeled and styled correctly:

- Use **links** if the user can freely navigate between steps without changing the state of the interface. The most common solution is to use the "Previous" / "Next" pair, but elements like pagination or carousel slider can perform a similar function.
- Use **buttons** if you have a linear task flow and the user is expected to progress through the steps consecutively. This is especially important when the interface state changes with each step, e.g. inputs get saved. The best labels for these buttons are "Continue" and "Go back", but you can use "View previous / next" as an alternative.



Use "Previous" / "Next" links to allow the user freely navigate around the interface. Opt for buttons labeled "Go back" and "Continue" or similar to encourage linear progress where the state of the interface changes with each step.

be saved?). Since these aren't verbs, they also can't be easily paired with other actions, so you can use "Save and continue" but not "Save and next".

## Edit

This is typically a two-step process with different labels for each:

1. First, the user may need to enter the editing mode for a specific item or section of the interface. This is commonly done with a button labeled "Edit" or "Configure"
2. Once the edits have been made, the user needs to return to the default state, and the labels for this action will depend on the exact functionality of your interface. If the changes get saved right away, call the button "Save", but if the user can continue editing other items and discard all progress at the end, the conformation button here should be labeled "Apply". These should be countered with the opposite actions such as "Discard" or "Cancel", which will usually trigger a confirmation modal.

The image shows two side-by-side UI mockups on an orange background. The left mockup is titled "What's the name of your first pet?" and features a text input field. Below the field are two buttons: a yellow "Cancel" button and a dark grey "Save" button. The right mockup is titled "Select background colour." and features three colored squares (blue, red, and yellow). Below the squares are two buttons: a yellow "Discard" button and a dark grey "Apply" button.

Use "Save" if the changes get saved immediately and can't be undone without repeating the editing process. Use "Apply" if the user gets a preview of the changes they made, but has a choice to save or discard them in bulk later in the process.

## Delete

confirm the destructive action with an modal (and I suggest you label the confirmation button here "Delete" rather than "Confirm" to avoid any ambiguity!)

### Get in and out

The views on the best labels for these set of tasks are divided, and there are many articles and forums discussing pros and cons of each approach. The following two solutions are the most common:

- Use "Log in / out" to access the interface, paired with "Sign up" to join.
- Use "Sign in / out" to access the interface, paired with "Register" or "Create account" to join.

It's worth noting that "Log in/out" is more common for operating systems and "Sign in / out" — for the online world.

It's also important to remember that they are spelled together as verbs and separately as nouns, so you "log in to access the interface" but "create a login when you sign up" 😊

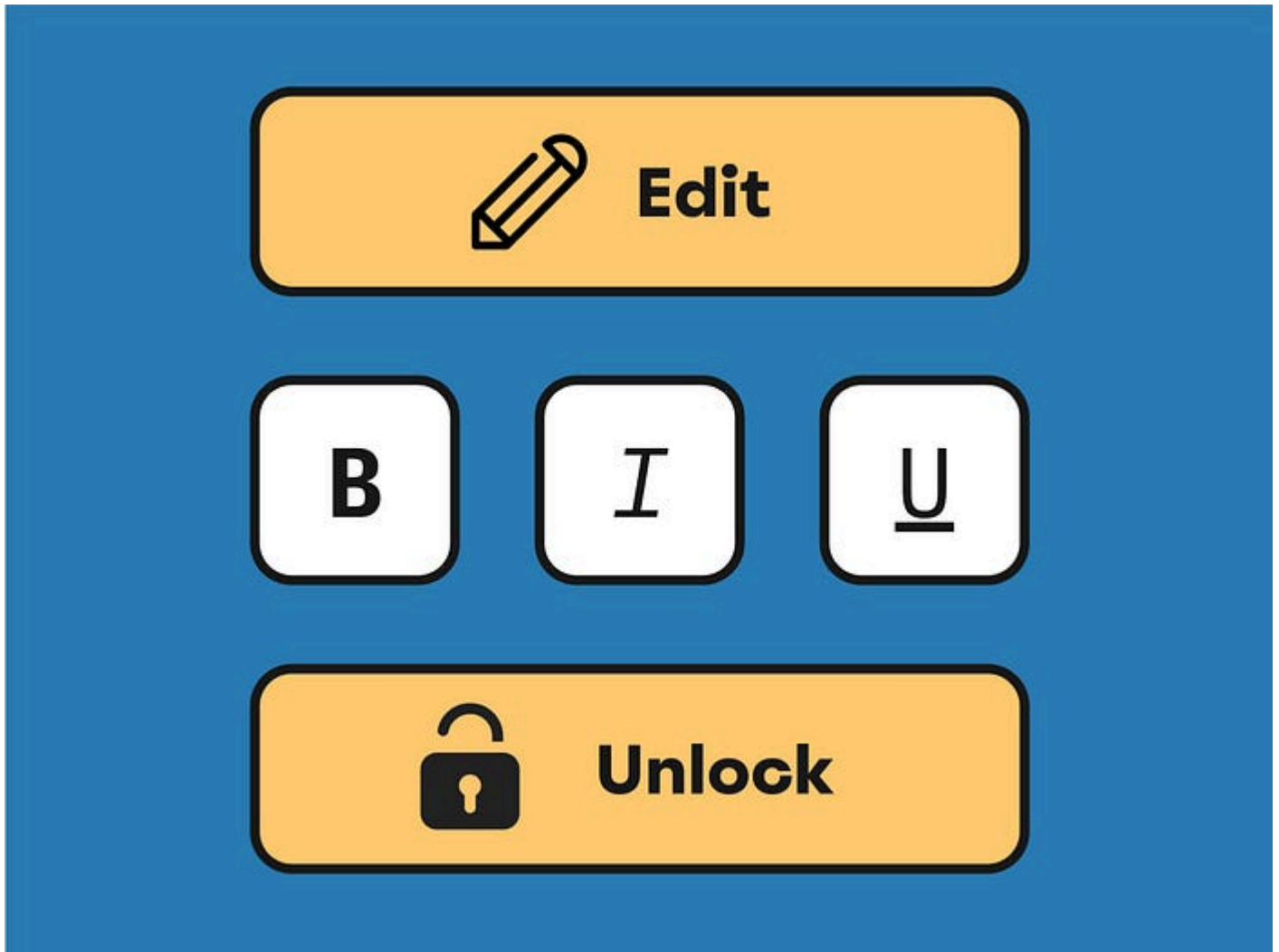
### End

To avoid creating dead ends, you need to give the user something to do / somewhere to go at the end of a process. It might be appropriate to serve some follow up content here, such as related resources, but there are also a few commonly-used buttons that help you wrap up a task:

- Return home
- View next item
- Configure settings
- Log out / sign out

### Make it visual

should only be used in rare cases and for well-established patterns.



Some icons commonly used instead or in addition to button labels are pencil for editing, lock for change of access permissions etc. These can help visually abled used to navigate around the interface quicker and easier, but should be used with caution!

## We come as a pair

Can a button have more than one label? Opinions vary, but I'm of the view that, if a button performs more than one action, it's best to be explicit about it. Some common examples of double-action buttons are:

- Apply and continue
- Agree and close
- Save and exit

## Conclusion

Content design isn't an exact science, but these guiding principles helped my team bring more clarity and consistency to our work, and I hope they can do the same for you. As always, I'd love to know what you think!

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