Avoiding Common UI Mistakes

This article is an excerpt from *Newton User Interface Guidelines*, published by Addiison-Wesley and summarizes what you should do to avoid the top 20 user interface mistakes. The book provides detailed discussions of the correct approach you should use for each of the situations described here.

Info Button

Use the Info button—with the "i" icon—and its picker for information options such as Help, About, and Prefs. Always place the Info button at the far left end of the status bar unless your application includes an Analog Clock, which is optional.

New and Show Buttons

If users can create new items or display different views of information in your application, include a New button and a Show button like the ones in the built-in applications. Put the New button near the left end of the status bar next to the Info button (if present), and put the Show button to the right of the New button.

Screen Size

Design your application to handle any screen size and aspect ratio. If your application can't scale its views small enough or can't rearrange view contents to fit the aspect ratio, notify the user before closing your application.

Tapping v. Writing

Tapping is faster than writing, so for data input favor pickers, scrolling lists and tables, radio buttons, sliders, and so forth over written input.

Picker Placement and Alignment

Align the top of a picker with the top of its button or label. Make exceptions for overview pickers, for other very wide or very tall pickers, or for small screens.

Display a picker so its button or label is at least partially visible, and keep the button or label highlighted while the picker is open. (An overview picker can cover the label or button that makes it appear.)

Field Alignment

Be consistent in how you align field values with field labels (including picker labels). Generally you should line up a field's label with the field's displayed value, not with the dotted line (if present) on which a user edits the field value. In a view that has several fields in a column, line up the labels at their left edges to insure a neat, orderly appearance for your application.

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Close Box Size

Use a regular (small) Close box in a view where there are no adjacent buttons. Use a large Close box only where there are adjacent text buttons or standard-height picture buttons.

Button Location

Put buttons that affect an entire view at the bottom of the view, and put buttons that only affect part of the view elsewhere. Group buttons that affect content and appearance at the bottom left of a view, and put buttons that control or initiate action at the bottom right.

Button Spacing

Space adjacent buttons three pixels apart, and leave four pixels between buttons and the border of the view they're in.

Button Size

Make every text button 13 pixels high and center the button's name vertically. Make the button just wide enough that with the button's name horizontally centered there are three or four pixels between the name and the button's left and right borders.

Capitalization

Capitalize the following items like sentences: checkboxes, field labels, and picker items. Capitalize the following items like book titles: view titles, text button names, and radio buttons. In some contexts it makes sense to capitalize differently, but your should be consistent within an application.

Picker Icons

Think twice before including icons in pickers. They're hard to design and have limited benefit.

Dismissing a Slip

If dismissing a slip does not cause an action to take place (other than accepting changes made to data in the slip), use a Close box for putting away the slip. In this context the Close box means "close" or "put away." Use a take-action button and a Close box if users have a choice when dismissing the slip of initiating an action or canceling. In this context the Close box means "cancel."

Take-Action Button

Name a slip's take-action button with a specific verb such as Print, Fax, or File. Only use vaguely affirmative names such as OK and Yes where you want to force

users to scan other parts of the slip to verify what action the button initiates.

Fonts

Use fonts carefully. For the voice of the system and application use the bold style of the System font in 9- or 10-point sizes. For values a user can change use Casual 10- and 12-point. (Those are the fonts that are preset by the system protos.)

Keyboard Button

If your application includes a Keyboard button on the status bar or at the bottom of a slip, use the larger-size button (as in the Notepad) unless space on the status bar is constrained (as in the Date Book).

Punctuation to Avoid

Don't use ellipses (...) in button names, picker labels, or list-picker items.

Do put an ellipsis at the end of the title or the message text in a status slip, but use three periods rather than an ellipsis character. Also use an ellipsis to accommodate an item whose text is too long to fit on a line in the space available for it (for example, in overviews).

Don't use a colon at the end of a title, a heading, or a field label.

Extras Drawer Icons

To avoid overlapping icons in the Extras Drawer, make yours no more than 29 pixels tall and wide. Leaving a little space helps separate icons.

Limit the length of an Extras Drawer icon's name to between 9 and 11 characters per line. Put a blank space in the name where you want it to break and wrap onto another line.

Make a Newton icon more distinctive and easier to identify by giving it a distinctive silhouette rather than a boxy shape.

Storage

Allow users to move your application's data between storage locations with the Filing button in the Extras Drawer's status bar. This is the method used by the built-in applications.

Date and Time Input

To input dates and times use the specially designed Newton pickers.