



Apostrophes

Apostrophes are a stumbling block for many people. Even in professional signs and ads, apostrophes are frequently misused. There are three correct uses for the apostrophe and a few incorrect ones you must avoid.

Correct uses of apostrophes

Do use an apostrophe to indicate contractions (omitted letters):

We've (for we have)
They're (for they are)

can't (for cannot)
you're (for you are)

won't (for will not)
it's (for it is)

Be careful: don't confuse the contractions *they're*, *you're*, and *it's* with the possessives *their*, *your*, and *its*.

Do use an apostrophe to indicate possessives (ownership):

- Singular or plural nouns not ending in –s take an apostrophe and –s.

a **child's** drawing
the **children's** books
the **women's** luncheon

- Singular nouns ending in the sounds (s) or (z) or (sh) take an apostrophe and –s.

Alice's restaurant
Mr. Davis's house

Marx's writings
the **fish's** habitat

- However, the following exceptions to the above rule prevent awkward pronunciation:

Jesus' teachings
Odysseus' wanderings

Socrates' wisdom
Moses' laws

- Plural nouns ending in the sounds (s) or (z) take only an apostrophe.

four **years'** delay
ladies' shoes
my **parents'** anniversary

- For joint ownership of one item, only the last noun takes the possessive form.

Joe, Tom, and **Liz's** house

- For multiple separate ownership, each noun takes the possessive form.

the **girls'** and **boys'** bathrooms

Do use an apostrophe to make plurals of single letters (to prevent confusion):

Last semester he earned all **A's**, and she earned **C's** and **D's** (not As, Cs, and Ds).
Dot your **i's** and cross your **t's** (not is and ts).

Incorrect uses of apostrophes

Do not use an apostrophe with possessive personal pronouns ending in –s:

Hers	his	ours
Theirs	yours	its

Be careful: don't confuse the possessives *their*, *your*, and *its* with the contractions *they're*, *you're*, and *it's*.

Do not use an apostrophe with singular nouns that are not possessive and end in the sound (s):

The **Bates** family lives on Oasis Lane.
The **house** paint is sold on aisle ten.

Do not use an apostrophe to form plurals:

one shoe, two **shoes**
one puppy, two **puppies**
one leaf, two **leaves**

Do not use an apostrophe in plural numbers and abbreviations:

She was dealt a king, two **8s**, and two **3s**.
My grandfather was born in the **1800s**.
The Nobel laureate held two **PhDs**.

Once you've learned these simple rules for forming contractions, possessives, and plurals, you'll be able to use apostrophes correctly. Remember that the spell-check feature on your computer will not always catch and correct an apostrophe error, so pay particular attention to them when you're proofreading your papers. Avoid the embarrassment of referring to *all the toy's on sale* or *the dog chased it's ball*. Correct apostrophe use will help indicate your excellent command of English writing skills.

Contributed by Karen Trefzger



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