



APOSTROPHES

The apostrophe seems to be a mysterious mark for writers. You probably learned about it in grade school but think of it as “that little floaty comma thing.” The apostrophe is not difficult to master. Let’s look at its two uses.

USE #1. Use the apostrophe to show omitted letters in CONTRACTIONS. Here are some easy examples:

isn’t = is not
don’t = do not
won’t = will not
couldn’t = could not
he’s = he is

USE #2. Use the apostrophe to show POSSESSION. This is a little trickier because some English words don’t have “normal” plural forms.

- ▶ Singular nouns are easy; just add **'s** to the word:

Mary’s coat
a businessman’s lunch
the secretary’s chair
today’s college students
the cat’s meow

Note: Singular nouns can also be made possessive with the word *of* preceding:

the poems of Keats
the music of Mozart
the work of a day
the novels of Hemingway

It is often better to use an *of* phrase to show ownership when referring to INANIMATE objects: the top of the desk.

- ▶ The possessives of plural nouns come in two types:

A. If the plural already ends in **s**, add **'** after the **s**:

three boys’ lunches
five students’ essays
English teachers’ classes
all computer operators’ skills

B. If the plural *does not* end in **s**, add **'s** to the word:

women’s purses
children’s toys
men’s hats
people’s habits

That's it for the basic rules. Be sure to watch your own writing for the following (often) troublesome areas, though:

DO NOT CONFUSE THE PLURAL WITH THE POSSESSIVE WORD. Remember it's the owner or possessor, not the object being possessed, that gets the apostrophe mark. For example:

the *cat's* claws NOT the cats *claw's*
the *players'* uniforms NOT the players *uniforms'*

IT'S IS NOT A POSSESSIVE; it's a contraction of it and is.

ITS IS THE POSSESSIVE PRONOUN; compare to *his* and *hers* and *theirs* (no apostrophes):

The dog gnawed *its* (possessive) bone.
I want a Porsche; *its* (possessive) styling is superb.
HOWEVER: *It's* (contraction of it+is) going to be a long day.

Some tricky stuff

(You knew it couldn't be *that* easy, didn't you?)

Some indefinite pronouns form the possessive in the same manner as singular nouns: another's, nobody's, one's, everybody's, and so on. Some indefinite pronouns can only be made possessive in the *of* form: of each, of all etc., NEVER each's or all's.

Compound Possessives: In "joint ownership" compound possessives, ONLY THE FINAL NAME takes the possessive form: Bradley, Beatty, and Long's anthology, Laurel and Hardy's comedies.

When a singular noun ends in an **s** sound, it is made possessive the same way as any other singular noun (Jones's, Keats's) BUT when a singular word has more than one syllable and ends with an **s** sound, the **s** after the ' is OPTIONAL:

Dickens's (3 syllables)	Dickens' (2 syllables)
Genesis's (4 syllables)	Genesis' (3 syllables)

Whether you add the extra **s** or not is up to you. Just be consistent throughout your writing.

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