

Punctuating with Apostrophes

The apostrophe is an important piece of punctuation. The main uses of apostrophes are to show **ownership** (e.g., 'Charlie is Jenny's cat' means the cat named Charlie **belongs** to Jenny) and to show **missing letters in words** (e.g., it's = it is for it has; should've for should have). In academic writing, words that use apostrophes for missing letters (i.e., contractions and abbreviations) are considered informal language and should be avoided. It is important to know the rules for apostrophes as a misplaced apostrophe can change the meaning of a sentence (e.g., the teacher who lost the *students'* books—more than one student—is a lot more worried than the teacher who lost the *student's* books—one student). Apostrophes cause the most problems in:

1. Singular and plural words indicating ownership
2. Time or quantity
3. The plurals of words
4. The shortened forms of words



GRAMMAR CHECKERS will NOT help you much with your **apostrophes**. They can alert you about apostrophes for most contractions (e.g., don't) and about some possessive apostrophes (e.g., Jack's horse), BUT the alert may be incorrect or miss the error altogether. You will need to proofread your work yourself and apply the rules for using apostrophes correctly in your writing.

1. Singular and plural words indicating ownership

Rule 1: For **singular nouns**, indefinite pronouns (e.g., anybody, someone, nobody), and words already ending in **s**, place the apostrophe before the **s** when indicating ownership. Ownership is indicated if you could use the word 'of' (e.g., The essays of the student were impressive)

Examples

- ✓ The **student's** essays were impressive. (THE ESSAYS OF ONE STUDENT)
- ✓ **Someone's** books were left outside the library. (THE BOOKS OF ONE PERSON)
- ✓ **James's** assignment received a high distinction. (THE ASSIGNMENT OF ONE PERSON WHOSE NAME ENDS IN S)
(FOR SINGULAR NOUNS ALREADY ENDING IN S, ADD AN APOSTROPHE S)
- ✗ The ~~customers~~ complaints were ignored. (THE COMPLAINTS OF JUST ONE? OR MANY? CUSTOMERS)
(THE ~~CUSTOMER'S~~ COMPLAINTS—ONLY ONE CUSTOMER; THE ~~CUSTOMERS'~~ COMPLAINTS—MORE THAN ONE CUSTOMER)

Rule 2: For **plural nouns** ending in **s**, place the apostrophe after the **s** when indicating ownership.

Examples

- ✓ The students' essays were impressive. (THE ESSAYS OF MORE THAN ONE STUDENT)
- ✓ The customers' complaints were ignored. (THE COMPLAINTS OF MORE THAN ONE CUSTOMER)
- ✗ A union ~~member's~~ barbeque will be held on Sunday. (A BARBEQUE FOR JUST ONE MEMBER?)
(IF YOU USE AN APOSTROPHE S INCORRECTLY IN THIS SENTENCE, YOU WILL NOT KNOW THE ANSWER TO THIS.)

Rule 3: For **plural nouns not ending in an s** (e.g., people, women, men, children, data, criteria, media, radii), place the apostrophe before the **s** when indicating ownership.

Examples

- ✓ The people's decision will be final. (THE DECISION OF THE PEOPLE)
- ✓ The women's movement campaigned for equal pay. (THE MOVEMENT OF WOMEN)
- ✗ ~~Mens'~~ health was an issue in the federal election. (THE HEALTH OF MENS?)
(MEN IS ALREADY PLURAL, SO YOU ONLY NEED TO ADD AN APOSTROPHE BEFORE THE S.)

Rule 4: For **joint possession** and for **compound nouns**, use the apostrophe rules for singular/plural nouns on the last noun only.

Examples

- ✓ Peterson and Smith's journal article was well-received. (JOINT OWNERSHIP/BOTH WROTE THE ARTICLE)
- ✓ Peterson's and Smith's journal articles were well-received. (SINGLE OWNERSHIP OF DIFFERENT ARTICLES)
- ✓ My father-in-law's books won a prize. (SINGLE COMPOUND WORD)
- ✓ The Leaders of the Opposition's memoirs were published. (PLURAL COMPOUND WORD)
- ✗ The mother's-in-laws annual meeting was cancelled.
(THE APOSTROPHE SHOULD BE ON THE LAST NOUN—MOTHERS-IN-LAW'S ANNUAL MEETING ...)

2. Time or quantity

Apostrophes are used to indicate time and quantity expressions.

Examples

- ✓ It is an hour's walk from here. (TIME)
- ✓ Breaking a mirror is seven years' bad luck. (TIME. SEVEN YEARS OF BAD LUCK")
- ✓ I'll have three dollars' worth of..... (QUANTITY)

3. The plurals of words

Do not use apostrophes to form plurals unless there is ownership of someone or something (check using the 'of' test).

Examples

- ✗ plural words e.g., Please replace the ~~trolley's~~. (TROLLEYS)
- ✗ acronyms unless they are used for possession e.g., ~~DVD's~~ (DVDs) were issued to students.
(BUT IF THE ACRONYM IS A CONTRACTION OR SHOWS POSSESSION, USE AN APOSTROPHE S e.g. THE DVD'S BROKEN. THE DVD'S COVER IS MISSING)
- ✗ shortened forms of years e.g., After the ~~1980's~~ (1980s), interest rates varied greatly.

EXCEPTION

You use an apostrophe to avoid confusion when you use the plural of some words and letters but NOT numbers.

Examples

- ✓ Remember to dot your *i's* and cross your *t's*.
- ✓ There are too many *but's* and *and's* in this sentence.
(NOTE THAT THE LETTER OR WORD IS ITALICISED, BUT THE APOSTROPHE S IS NOT.)
- ✗ I am at ~~6's~~ (6s) and ~~9's~~ (9s) about whether to go to the concert.

4. The shortened forms of words

Use apostrophes to show missing letters in words. (Note: Do not use shortened forms of words in most academic writing as they are regarded as informal language.)

Examples

- ✓ contractions (e.g., it's=it is or it has; the '60s generation=the 1960s generation)
- ✓ colloquial language (e.g., Jack yelled, "Are ya' comin' to m' place for a barbie?")

EXCEPTION

DO NOT use an apostrophe to show left-out-letters in common **abbreviations**. Also do not use a full stop if the abbreviation contains the first and last letters of the word.

Examples

- ✓ Doctor Smith can be written as Dr Smith.
- ✓ The correct abbreviation for the Department of Education is Dept of Education.

DO NOT USE APOSTROPHES INCORRECTLY

- ✗ **DO NOT** put an apostrophe on any word that ends in **s** unless it is for missing letters or to show ownership.
- ✗ **DO NOT** use an apostrophe for possessive pronouns (e.g., its, whose, his, hers, ours, yours, theirs, yours) even though someone owns something. (e.g., That book is yours.)
- ✗ **NEVER** use **it's** in your writing unless you mean 'it is' or 'it has'.

- ✗ **DO NOT** use an apostrophe for institutional names, place names, street names, maps, and public signs (e.g., The Teachers Federation, Kings Cross, Smiths Road, Petersons Peak, Jacksons Park).
- ✗ **DO NOT** use an apostrophe if the word before a noun is more descriptive than possessive. (e.g., 'I have my drivers licence' (describing the kind of licence), but 'that driver's licence is lost' (referring a particular driving person's licence).