The Apostrophe

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The apostrophe (’) is used to show possession, omission, or certain plurals.*

Possession

- *Add apostrophe*+s *to singular nouns*—Jane’s car, one’s own, yesterday’s toys, nobody’s business, for pity’s sake, the boss’s desk, Lenz’s way, Marx’s theories, Malraux’s works—*or plural nouns not ending in an* s *or* z *sound*—women’s rights, men’s room, children’s books. (*Some proper names omit the apostrophe:* Harpers Ferry, Saint Johns River.)
- *Certain exceptions are made for euphony or tradition:* Sophocles’ plays, for appearance’ sake, Dickens’ novels, *New York Times’* ads, Jesus’ life, Moses’ laws, Xerxes’ kingdom. *Let your ear guide you and be consistent.*
- *To plural nouns ending in an* s *or* z *sound, add only the apostrophe:* two cents’ worth, ladies’ room, three days’ time, farmers’ market, Joneses’ house (house of the Joneses).
- *Treat closely linked nouns as a single unit:* my aunt and uncle’s family. *But:* my mother’s and father’s jobs.
- *Use roman type for the* s *applied to an italicized title:* the *Saturday Review’*s fiction, the *Washington Post’*s editorials.
- *Hyphenated possessives show the* s *at the end:* my brother-in-law’s car. (*Not after* the first word, *as in the plural* brothers-in-law, passers-by.)
- *Don’t use the apostrophe in the pronouns* his, hers, its, ours, yours, theirs, *or* whose. *Distinguish the possessive* its *from the contraction* it’s (it is *or* it has).

Omission

- *Use an apostrophe to mark the omission in a contraction:* can’t, couldn’t, didn’t, needn’t, shouldn’t, won’t, she’ll, he’d, who’s (who is), class of ’85, rock ’n’ roll, etc. *This applies to some omissions in dialect:* ’em, ’cause, s’pose, fixin’, *etc. But note:* gonna (*going to*), woulda (*would have*), outa (*out of*), *etc.*

Plurals

- *Use an apostrophe*+s *to form the plural or possessive of an abbreviation with periods*— Ph.D.’s, P.O.W.’s—*or the plural of a single letter or symbol*—dots his i’s and crosses his t’s, mind your p’s and q’s, the I’s have it.
- *A plural abbreviation, coinage, or number doesn’t take the apostrophe if the meaning is clear:* IOUs, his ABCs, her howdy-dos, the 1940s.
- *Don’t use an apostrophe to form the plural of a proper name:* the Bushes, two mild Aprils, ten Hail Marys; the two Dumas, Alexandre Dumas *père* and *fils*.

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*In Microsoft Word, the apostrophe is found as a symbol (Insert, Symbol, General Punctu-

ation) or as a mark on the keyboard. The keyboard result will be backward (‘) unless it immediately follows a symbol or letter. To write *’cause, ’em,* etc., type the full word, insert the apostrophe, and delete the unwanted part. Can apply also to quote marks.