

Apostrophes

Apostrophes are the ‘up-in-the-air’ commas that are used when putting two words together (contractions). An apostrophe takes the place of a missing letter or letters; e.g., *do not* becomes *don’t* by using an apostrophe. Another use of the apostrophe is when making nouns possessive, e.g., the *boy’s* toys. The correct use of this punctuation mark makes clear and concise sentences; however, the misuse of apostrophes causes confusion.

Contractions

Contractions commonly connect pronouns and nouns with verbs; therefore, *he is* = *he’s* and *John is* = *John’s*. The contractions ‘*d* and ‘*s* are ambiguous (have a double meaning) and must be determined by context. The ‘*d* can mean either *had* or *would*; therefore, we can understand the meaning by reading the sentence.

He’d been studying for an hour. = He had been studying for an hour.

He’d be better off staying in school. = He would be better off staying in school.

The ‘*s* contraction can mean either *is* or *has*; so again, it’s necessary to read the sentence in context to understand which contraction has been used.

She’s been married for five years. = She has been married for five years.

Mary’s a beautiful person. = Mary is a beautiful person.

One contraction that is particularly confusing is the difference between *it’s* and *its*. Of course, *it’s* is a contraction and means *it is*, while *its* is a possessive pronoun (my, his, her, its, your, their and our).

It’s essential to study hard if you want to get good grades.

It’s a wise dog that scratches its own fleas.

Another source of confusion is *lets* vs. *let’s*. The contraction *let’s* means *let us*, but *lets* is the present form of the verb *let*.

Let’s go to the movies tonight.

My neighbor lets her dog out every morning.

It’s also necessary to remember the difference between *you’re* and *your*. The first is a contraction of *you are* and the second is a possessive pronoun.

Be sure you’re in the correct building before you enter the classroom.

Your homework must be typed and submitted in Canvas.

Modals also can be made into contractions: *should/shouldn't should've, could/couldn't/could've, would/wouldn't/would've*. These three modals are often incorrectly written as *should of, could of* and *would of*. Be sure not to make this mistake! The modal *will* changes to *won't* as a negative contraction.

Bob should've studied harder for that exam.

The child wouldn't listen to his mother.

She'll be in class on Monday, but she won't be there on Thursday.

Everyone uses contractions in speaking because they make speech faster and easier. As a rule, contractions are often avoided in formal writing such as college papers, resumes and business correspondence. Using contractions in these situations signals informality. Some teachers do allow students to use some contractions in college papers, like *don't* and *can't*. It's a good idea to ask your teacher if some contractions are permissible in your writing. When quoting directly from a source where a contraction is used, the contraction must be written as is.

Possessives

Apostrophes are used to show possession. If a noun is singular, it takes an apostrophe + s whether or not it ends in an s or a with a letter other than s. Therefore, you would say "my boss's car" or "the cat's toys."

Two or more nouns that are joined together becomes trickier. If the possession is owned by both people, only the last person's name gets the apostrophe.

Bob and John both own the car: Bob and John's car is 10 years old.

However, if there are two or more nouns together and they have different ownership, add an apostrophe +s to each noun.

Bob and John each own a car: Bob's and John's cars are Toyotas.

Proper nouns are pluralized just like common nouns. A proper noun is a specific name for a particular person, place, or thing and is always capitalized in English, no matter where it falls in a sentence. When pluralizing proper nouns, add *es* for names ending in s or z and add only an s for all others (Jones = Joneses and Smith = Smiths).

For possessive proper nouns remember if the proper noun is plural, add an s + apostrophe. If the proper noun is singular, add an apostrophe + s. Where the apostrophe is placed determines whether the proper noun is singular or plural.

The Joneses' house is on the corner. (The Jones family lives there.)

Tom Jones's house is on the corner. (Only Tom Jones lives there.)

The case of proper nouns ending in s is debatable. Some grammarians insist on the apostrophe + s, while others prefer just the apostrophe, e.g., Thomas's vs. Thomas', Jesus's vs. Jesus',

James's vs. James'. It is important to be consistent; choose one way and stay with it throughout your paper.

Plural possessives are exactly as stated. According to grammar.yourdictionary.com, "The two key points to a plural possessive noun are that it represents more than one of itself and it shows ownership." To show ownership of a plural noun, you simply add an apostrophe to the end of the word. Examples: the monkeys' tails, the snakes' tongues, the nurses' uniforms

There are always exceptions to the rules, and this is true for irregular plural nouns, like children, women, men, etc. Since these nouns are already plural, it isn't necessary to add an s. We don't say two *childrens*; it's two *children*. When we want to make this plural noun possessive, we add an apostrophe s. *Women* becomes *women's* and *children* becomes *children's*.

The children go to school Monday through Friday. (plural noun)

The children's toys were scattered over the bedroom floor. (plural possessive noun)

The same is true for irregular plural nouns that don't end with an s, such as *mice* and *geese*. Thus, it's *mice's* hole and *geese's* feathers.

When a noun's singular and plural forms are the same, like with *sheep*, *moose* and *deer*, the position of the apostrophe tells us whether there is only one or more than one.

The deers' antlers were very large. (more than one deer)

The deer's eyes were brown. (one deer)

The trick to remembering where to place an apostrophe is asking yourself if the noun is possessive or just plural. Possessive nouns describe ownership of something, and because they precede and modify the noun they own, possessives function as adjectives. If you can remember this, you will get it right: a plural is a noun--it may be a subject or an object--whereas a possessive is an adjective.

The toys were scattered on the bedroom floor. (*Toys* is plural.)

The little girl's toys were scattered on the bedroom floor. (*Girl's* is possessive because it describes the toys that belong to the girl.)

Keeping this information in mind, you will immediately recognize an error on signs in shops or on company vehicles. *Bagel's are sold here*. What??