

Writing Centre

APOSTROPHES

The apostrophe may be the most frequently misused mark of punctuation in English, but the proper use of apostrophes in writing is important to maintain the writer's precise meaning. The apostrophe is used 1) to indicate contractions or 2) to show possession.

GUIDE FOR USING APOSTROPHES

1. Use the apostrophe with contractions. When two words are contracted by omitting letters, an apostrophe indicates the omission. (**Tip:** Generally, contractions are reserved for informal language.)

Examples:

- *hasn't = has not*
- *can't = can not*
- *there's = there is*
- *mustn't = must not*
- *I'm = I am*
- *It's = it is*

2. Use the apostrophe to show possession. Place the apostrophe before the *s* to show singular possession.

Examples:

1. *Columbia's coffee exports have risen steadily over the past decade.*
2. *Those are Mr. Jones's golf clubs.*
3. *The girl's dress was purple. (singular, referring to only one girl)*



A simple rule to follow is to turn the phrase in the sentence around using an "of the..." phrase:

"the dress of the girl". If the final word does not end in an "s," then add 's' to that word in the sentence. (e.g. girl's)

3. To show plural possession, make the noun plural first, then immediately use the apostrophe.

Example: *All the girls' dresses were purple.* ["The dresses of all the girls" were purple.]

4. Do not use an apostrophe for the plural of a name.

Example: *The Johnsons have sold their home.*

6. With a singular compound noun, show possession with an 's' at the end of the word.

Example: *My mother-in-law's cat*

7. If the compound noun is plural, form the plural first and then use the apostrophe.

Example: *My two brothers-in-law's cars*

8. Use the apostrophe and s after the second name only if two people possess the same item.

Examples:

- *Cesar and Maribel's home is made of redwood.*
- *Cesar's and Maribel's job contracts will be renewed next year (Indicates separate ownership)*
- *Cesar and Maribel's job contracts will be renewed next year. (Indicates joint ownership of more than one contract)*

Do not use an apostrophe with possessive pronouns: yours, his, hers, its [see below], ours, theirs, whose because they already show ownership, it's* not necessary to add an apostrophe.

Example: This project is yours, not his.

However, we do add an apostrophe plus *-s* to form the possessive of some indefinite pronouns:

- *anybody's guess*
- *one's personal responsibility*
- *somebody's wallet*

9. The only time an apostrophe is used for *it's* is when it is a contraction for *it is* or *it has*.

Examples: *It's a nice day.*

It's your right to refuse the invitation.

It's been great getting to know you.

10. The plurals for capital letters and numbers used as nouns are not formed with apostrophes.

Examples:

She consulted with three M.D.s.

She went to three M.D.s' offices [plural possessive].

She learned her ABCs.

11. Use the possessive case in front of a gerund (-ing word).

Example: *Juan's cooking is delicious!*

Reference: Apostrophes. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://grammarbook.com/punctuation/apostro.asp>

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