

Apostrophes

Often misunderstood, apostrophes are the small marks that are sometimes (but not always) found before or after 's' or other letters at the ends of words. They are used in two different ways:

1. To show **contraction** of a word, e.g. don't = do not (omission), and
2. To show **possession** or a relationship of belonging or ownership, e.g., Samuel's coat (possession).

The second kind of apostrophe is particularly troublesome for many people. (NB: It's - as used in the previous sentence - is an apostrophe of omission, *not* possession. It means "It is" so cannot be used to show ownership, e.g., 'The company put **it's** offices on the market'. The correct phrase is: 'The company put **its** offices on the market'. This is a very common mistake.)

Apostrophe of omission

English speakers are familiar with words such as these:

- I'm = I am
- He's = He is
- Can't = Can not
- Won't = Will not
- You'll = You will ...
- Let's = Let us
- They'd = They would ...
- And so on...

This use of apostrophes indicate that letters have been left out of a word - omitted. There are several types of apostrophe of omission:

1. Verbs contracting **not**: *aren't (are not), don't (do not), wasn't (was not), can't (can not), couldn't (could not), doesn't (does not)*...
2. Pronouns contracting **will**: *I'll (I will), you'll (you will), she'll (she will), they'll (they will)* ...
3. Pronouns and nouns contracting the verb **to be**: *I'm (I am), you're (you are), who's (who is), he's (he is), it's (it is), they're (they are)*.
4. Pronouns contracting the verb **to have**: *I've (I have), they've (they have), we've (we have)* ...
Pronouns contracting **would** or **had**: *I'd (I had/would), they'd (they had/would), you'd (you had/would), she'd (she had/would)*

Source: The English Plus website, at: <http://englishplus.com/grammar/00000136.htm>

As a general rule, if two words can be made from of a word with an apostrophe, then it is an apostrophe of omission. Often used in informal writing, this type should be avoided in the formal writing used at university.

Apostrophe of possession

This is where things get a bit tricky. It's [apostrophe of omission!] best to think of the rules in terms of simple rules and advanced rules. The simple rules are enough to get most people out of trouble.

Simple rules

1. Start with the word for which you want to show possession or ownership, e.g., cabin
2. Decide if the word is singular or plural ("cabin" is singular)
3. Add an ('s) to the end of the word to show possession: e.g., the cabin's windows
4. If the word is already plural, e.g., cabins, just add an (') at the end of the word to show possession:
 - o the cabins' windows (the windows of many cabins)
5. If the word is plural but does not end in (s) add ('s), for example (see overleaf):

- women (plural, does not end in “s”) = women’s cabin* (the cabin belongs to many women)
- sheep (plural, does not end in “s”) = sheep’s water trough* (the trough belongs to many sheep)
- children (plural but does not end in ‘s) = children’s playground (the playground used by many children)

*While correct, these examples can read as clumsy, so it is sometimes better to rephrase, for example:

- The sheep drank from their water trough. The women left quickly for their cabin. (See ‘Advanced rules’ below)

Summary: If a word is singular and does not end in (s), add (’s) to make it possessive; but if it does end in (s) because it is plural, add (’) after the (s) to make the word possessive. If a word is plural and already ends in (s) add (’s) to make it possessive. Easy, right?

Advanced rules

The advanced rules are for grammatical pedants, but they should be mentioned.

1. If a word ends in a sibilant sound (/z/ or /s/) the possessive can be formed either with (’s) or (’) after the terminal (s), e.g., Tom Jones can be Tom Jones’s car or Tom Jones’ car. Both are acceptable.
2. According to Fowler’s Modern English Usage, when referring to Biblical figures or in other reverential contexts, it is convention to just use (’) without the (s): Jesus’ cloak; Moses’ tablet. (Jesus’s and Moses’s also sounds ugly and is best avoided (see Rule 3).
3. When the word ends in (es) or (e...s), e.g., (ets) or (ers), and you wish to make a plural possessive, it is best to avoid the clumsiness of adding an (es’s) or (s’s), so just use (’). For example, a car belonging to Mr Rogers would be Rogers’s or Rogers’ car [Rule 1], but if the car belonged to the Rogers family it would be the Rogeres’s car. This is not elegant, so the Rogers’ car is used.
4. To use an apostrophe of possession, the word showing ownership must be a real English word. A ladie is not a real word, so ladie’s is not correct; a lady is a real word, so the lady’s bag is correct.

Common mistakes

Errors include using apostrophes of possession when there is no relationship of ownership. There are many examples of these and there are websites devoted to exposing them. Actual examples:

1. CD’s for sale
2. Hot potatoe’s available
3. Regular pizza’s at \$5.00
4. Ladie’s handbags for sale
5. I have made bad choice’s in life
6. All type’s of garden tool’s sharpened here
7. Cake’s for all occasion’s: wedding’s, birthday’s, anniversary’s, christening’s
8. I got all A’s for the exams
9. In the 1950’s there was a move to make drugs illegal

The first seven examples above are **not** instances of ownership. Hence, despite being in common use, they are *all wrong*. The last two are a matter of dispute, as differences exist between US and UK English. Australia and the UK avoid the use of (’) as there is no relationship of possession. “Agreement” in this context does not refer to having similar views with someone else about a topic. It refers to a concept in English grammar.

Other helpsheets available

- Capitalisation
- Punctuation
- Sentence Structure
- Writing in an Academic Style