

Apostrophes

A free sample from "Editing and Proofreading"



Scribe Consulting

Tim North, Scribe Consulting

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5.7 Apostrophes (')

The most common use of an apostrophe is to indicate possession by a person or thing of some other person or thing; for example, *John's book* or *Europe's history*.

Another use of the apostrophe is to indicate the omission of letters in a contraction; for example, *isn't*, *doesn't* and *can't*.

Using apostrophes to indicate possession

A simple definition

A **NOUN** is a word that stands for a person, place or thing. Examples include *dogs*, *Tim*, *house*, *books*, *speaker*, *staff member* and *tables*.

Using an apostrophe to indicate possession is really quite straight forward, yet it is a frequent source of confusion. There are two separate cases to consider:

Shared possession

If a noun stands for more than one person or thing, we show *shared possession* by adding an apostrophe *after* the s. For example:

the CEOs' perks	(the perks shared by two or more CEOs)
the players' pride	(the pride shared by two or more players)
the programmers' books	(the books shared by two or more programmers)
the boys' games	(the games shared by two or more boys)

Guideline #39

Shared possession is indicated by adding an apostrophe *after* the s.

Solo possession

If a noun stands for a single person or thing we show *solo possession* by adding an apostrophe *before* the s. For example:

the girl's book	(the book belonging to the one girl)
Australia's economy	(the economy of the one Australia)
the dog's paw	(the paw of the one dog)
the dog's paws	(the paws of the one dog)

Notice from the last pair that it doesn't matter if there's one paw or four paws. The apostrophe comes *before* the s because there's only one dog, so it's a case of solo possession.

Guideline #40

Sole possession is indicated by adding an apostrophe *before* the *s*.

When a singular noun ends in an *s* or *z* sound, there is debate as to whether to add apostrophe–*s* (as above) or just the apostrophe. For example:

the princess's gown *or* the princess' gown

James's briefcase *or* James' briefcase

A reasonable convention here is 'write it the way you say it'. For example, you probably say *prin-cess-uhz* and *James-uhz*. If you say the extra *s* at the end of these words, it thus seems sensible to write it with the extra *s*, like so: *princess's*, *James's*.

An exception

As with many rules, there is an exception. This one concerns nouns that form their plural without adding an *s*. For example: woman/women, man/men, person/people, sheep/sheep and child/children.

Words that change spelling like this take the apostrophe *before* the *s* in both forms. For example:

the woman's idea (the idea belonging to the one woman)

the women's idea (the idea shared by two or more women)

the child's gift (the gift belonging to the one child)

the children's gift (the gift shared by two or more children)

Guideline #41

Nouns that form their plural without adding an *s* (for example, woman/women) are made possessive by adding an apostrophe *before* the *s* in both forms.

Using apostrophes to indicate omitted letters

The second use for apostrophes is to indicate the omission of letters when two or more words have been contracted by popular usage. For example:

Table 5.2: Apostrophes replace omitted letters

Shortened form	Full form
can't	cannot
isn't	is not
don't	do not
I'll	I will
there's	there is
let's	let us

Note that although it is commonly omitted in contemporary writing, *let's* (being short for *let us*) has traditionally had an apostrophe to indicate the omitted letter.

Common errors

A frequently seen error is the unnecessary use of an apostrophe:

The boy's were arguing. *Wrong*
 The boys were arguing. *Correct*

An apostrophe here would be wrong because we are not indicating that the boys own anything.

A closely related error is the use of an apostrophe to make an upper-case word plural; for example:

We bought two new PC's. *Poor*
 We bought two new PCs. *Better*

There is no need for the apostrophe here as it is not indicating possession or omitted letters.

Finally, take note of the common confusion between *its* and *it's*. The first means *belonging to it*; the second is short for *it is*. For example:

What is its publication date? (What is the publication date belonging to it?)
 It's clear to me. (It is clear to me.)

Guideline #42

Don't use an apostrophe to make a word plural.

 **Exercises**

Correct these sentences:

1. Boss, its such a beautiful day that Ive decided to take a sickie!
2. Didnt he say when he would arrive at Karens house?
3. Dont you know? Hes leaving tomorrow.
4. I find myself constantly putting two cs in word processor.
5. My address has three 7s, and Mikes phone number has four 2s.
6. Our neighbours car is an old Ford, and its just about to fall apart.
7. The dog had its paw caught.
8. The dogs bark was far worse than its bite.
9. Theyre not afraid to go ahead with the plans, though the choice is not theirs.
10. Whos the partys candidate for member this year?

5.8 En dashes (–) and em dashes (—)

En and em dashes seem to be one of the little known secrets of good writing. The table below shows the difference between hyphens, en dashes and em dashes. It also explains and how to type them from within Microsoft Word on a PC.²²

Table 5.3: Hyphens and dashes

Symbol	Name	Within Microsoft Word (PC)
-	hyphen	minus or numeric minus ²³
–	en dash	Ctrl–numeric-minus
—	em dash	Ctrl–Alt–numeric-minus

Guideline #43

Hyphens (-), en dashes (–) and em dashes (—) all have distinct uses and should be used appropriately.

²² Windows users can obtain an en dash in some other applications by holding down the ALT key while pressing the numeric keys 0, 1, 5 and 0 then releasing the ALT key. An em dash can be obtained by using the sequence 0, 1, 5, 1.

²³ The numeric minus key is the minus key at the top-right corner of the keyboard's numeric keypad. Alternatively, in Microsoft Word, you can get en and em dashes by selecting the *Symbol* command from the *Insert* menu then clicking on the *Special Characters* tab.

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