

Using the apostrophe

This guide has been written to give a simple explanation of the use of the apostrophe ('). It explains the main rules for its use, and gives examples of commonly encountered problems.

Other useful guides: *Sentence structure*, *Using the comma*, *Using the semi-colon and colon*

The apostrophe has two main uses

- It replaces missing letters when we join words e.g. I *can't* swim.
This is known as a **contraction**.
- It shows **ownership** e.g. this is *John's* book.

Contractions

When contractions are used, the apostrophe replaces the letter or letters that were removed to make a shorter word:

do not becomes *don't*.

The apostrophe replaces the missing letter, in this case the **o**.

Further examples are:

I will becomes *I'll*

you are becomes *you're*

they are becomes *they're*

Whilst it is important to understand the function of contractions, their use is not usually appropriate in academic writing.

Ownership

Apostrophes are also used to show ownership – they make a word **possessive**. To make a word possessive follow the three simple rules given below.

1. If the word is singular add 's :

the student's books – meaning the books belonging to the student.

Further examples are:

the boss's armchair; the government's legislation.

2. If the word is a plural but does not end in s add 's :

women's rights – meaning the rights of women.

Further examples are:

children's playground – meaning the playground for children;

men's changing rooms – meaning the changing rooms for men.

3. If the word is plural and ends in **s** just add an apostrophe:

the students' library books – meaning the books belonging to the students.

Further examples are:

the ladies' football league;

the workers' rights.

Common problems in using apostrophes

The apostrophe is frequently misused. Words that cause particular problems are: **its / it's** and **whose / who's** .

Its / it's

Use **its** when you want to show possession:

*the government abandoned **its** policy.*

Its belongs to a group of words that are already possessive. Other examples are: *it is **hers***; *it is **yours***. These words are already possessive; they do not need apostrophes to indicate possession.

Use **it's** when you want to shorten *it is*:

***it's** a nice day.*

It's is a contraction of *it is* . The apostrophe replaces the missing *i*.

Whose / who's

Use **whose** when you want to show possession:

*the student **whose** notes I borrowed.*

Whose belongs to the same group of possessive words as **its**. It does not need an apostrophe to denote possession.

Use **who's** when you want to shorten *who is*:

*the student **who's** coming to visit.*

Who's is a contraction of *who is*. The apostrophe replaces the missing *i*.

REMEMBER: just because a word ends in *s* , it does not mean it needs an apostrophe! An apostrophe is added to show **possession** or to replace a missing letter or letters in **contractions**. If you are unsure when to use an apostrophe, check your use of the apostrophe falls under one of the rules outlined in this guide.

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