

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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