

The Apostrophe



Apostrophes are used in two main situations: with possessives and with contractions. In order to understand how to use an apostrophe correctly, you must first understand what possessives and contractions are and the differences between the two.

I.) Possessives

- The word "possessive" indicates that there is ownership.
- A noun or a pronoun can "possess" something, whether it is a material thing or an abstract notion.

Examples:

The flower's petals glistened in the sun.	The 'flower' is the noun that <i>possesses</i> the 'petals'; therefore, it needs an apostrophe "s" at the end.
Suzanne's house was up for sale.	'Suzanne' is the noun and it is her house that is for sale.
Frank's luck was about to change.	'Frank' is the noun and it is his luck we are referring to. Therefore, Frank <i>possesses</i> the luck in this sentence.

If you are unsure of whether or not a certain word needs an apostrophe, look at the word or set of words after it to determine if it can be owned or possessed.

Examples

Sentence	Structure
Maria's house was on fire.	'House' is the noun that comes after the word 'Maria'; it can be possessed or owned.
The rain almost ruined the family's relaxing vacation.	The word 'relaxing' simply describes the noun 'vacation,' which is what the family in this sentence owns or possesses.

What I admired most was <i>Greg's</i> honesty.	'Honesty' is the noun that comes after 'Greg', and it is owned or possessed by him (i.e. <i>his</i> honesty).
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Other possessive situations

Possessives of plural nouns:

For plural nouns that end in -s, simply add an apostrophe.

The teams' scores were the same.	This years' Christmas party is on December 12 th .
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For plural nouns that do not end in -s, add an apostrophe "s" at the end.

The women's uniforms all looked the same.	Scientists were studying the geese's flight pattern.
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More than one noun in the same sentence:

To show ownership of something by more than one noun, put an apostrophe "s" only after the last noun.

Mike is Bob and Kim's only son.	Please park in the store and restaurant's parking lot.
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To show individual ownership of more than one noun in a sentence, put an apostrophe "s" after each noun.

The teacher handed back <i>George's</i> and <i>Maggie's</i> papers.	I like both <i>Hannaford's</i> and <i>Price Chopper's</i> meats.
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II.) Contractions

- Two words that are put together to omit sounds and make one word.

Examples:

Would not	Wouldn't
Will not	Won't
Have not	Haven't
You will	You'll
That is	That's
It is	It's
We will	We'll

Tips for common misuses of apostrophes:

- Remember that the words "it's" and "who's" are contractions. "It's" translates into "it is" and "who's" translates into "who is."
 - It's a shame you can't come to the party Saturday night.
 - Do you have a list of who's in the play?
- "Its" and "whose" are the possessive forms of these words.
 - The flower unfurled its petals.
 - The dog licked its paws.
 - I ran into a girl whose name I can't remember.
 - Whose jacket is lying on the chair?
- If you cannot remember which form of the word is correct, try reciting the sentence with the contraction in its original form to see if it still makes sense. For example, take the sentence "It's a shame you can't come to the party Saturday night" and put the contractions into their original form. It would then say "It is a shame you cannot come to the party Saturday night." In this case, the sentence still makes sense.
- If you wrote "The dog licked it's paws" and read it as "The dog licked it is paws," you can hear that it sounds incorrect.

The following resources were consulted in the design of this handout:

Harris, Muriel. *Prentice Hall Reference Guide*. 6th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2006.

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