The apostrophe seems to be a mysterious mark for writers. You probably learned about it in grade school but may think of it as “that little floaty comma thing.” The apostrophe is not difficult to master. Let’s look at its two uses.

USE #1. Use the apostrophe to show omitted letters in CONTRACTIONS. Here are some easy examples:

- isn’t = is not
- don’t = do not
- won’t = will not
- couldn’t = could not
- he’s = he is

USE #2. Use the apostrophe to show POSSESSION. This is a little trickier because some English words don’t have “normal” plural forms.

- Singular nouns are easy; just add ’s to the word:
  
  - Mary’s coat
  - a businessman’s lunch
  - the secretary’s chair
  - today’s college students
  - the cat’s meow

  **Note:** Singular nouns can also be made possessive with the word of preceding:
  
  - the poems of Keats
  - the music of Mozart
  - the work of a day
  - the novels of Hemingway

  It is often better to use an of phrase to show ownership when referring to INANIMATE objects: the top of the desk.

- The possessives of plural nouns come in two types:
  
  A. If the plural already ends in s, add ’ after the s:
  
  - three boys’ lunches
  - five students’ essays
  - English teachers’ classes
  - all computer operators’ skills

  B. If the plural does not end in s, add ’s to the word:
  
  - women’s purses
  - children’s toys
  - men’s hats
  - people’s habits
That’s it for the basic rules. Be sure to watch your own writing for the following (often) troublesome areas, though:

**DO NOT CONFUSE THE PLURAL WITH THE POSSESSIVE WORD.** Remember it’s the owner or possessor, not the object being possessed, that gets the apostrophe mark. For example:

- the cat’s claws NOT the cats claw’s
- the players’ uniforms NOT the players uniforms’

**IT’S IS NOT A POSSESSIVE:** it’s a contraction of *it* and *is*.

**IT’S IS THE POSSESSIVE PRONOUN:** compare to *his* and *hers* and *theirs* (no apostrophes):

- The dog gnawed *its* (possessive) bone.
- I want a Porsche; *its* (possessive) styling is superb.
- HOWEVER: *It’s* (contraction of *it*+*is*) going to be a long day.

### Some tricky stuff

**Indefinite Pronouns:** Some indefinite pronouns form the possessive in the same manner as singular nouns: another’s, nobody’s, one’s, everybody’s, and so on. Some indefinite pronouns can be made possessive only in the of form: the future of each, the opinions of all, etc., NEVER each’s or all’s.

**Compound Possessives:** In "joint ownership" compound possessives, ONLY THE FINAL NAME takes the possessive form: Bradley, Beatty, and Long’s anthology, Laurel and Hardy’s comedies. If the ownership is separate, BOTH NAMES take the possessive form: Dave’s and Jim’s cameras.

**Singular Nouns:** If a singular noun ends with an *s*, it is made possessive the same way as any other singular noun:

- Mr. Jones’s new car
- the boss’s daughter
- the business’s customers
- the campus’s location

However, when a singular noun has more than one syllable, ends with an *s*, and would be **difficult to pronounce** with the additional *s*, the *s* after the ’ is **OPTIONAL**:

- the scissors’ handles
- Dickens’ novels

Whether you add the extra *s* or not is up to you. Just be consistent throughout your writing.

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