

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 businessperson’s lunch
the librarian’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 Mary Oliver
the music of Raphael Saadiq
the work of a day
the novels of Amy Tan

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 books
children’s toys
men’s phones
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*.

***ITS* IS THE POSSESSIVE PRONOUN;** compare to *theirs* and *hers* and *his* (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: Peron, Lugo, and Nguyen's anthology. If the ownership is separate, BOTH NAMES take the possessive form: Dakota's and Erin'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 business's customers
the girl's bike 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 Bill Withers' songs

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