

Apostrophes

The apostrophe (') is a punctuation mark that primarily serves to indicate **possession**. Possession is a grammatical concept that shows ownership; a possessive noun, therefore, is a noun that owns another noun.

Examples: Sadie's dress, the boy's candy, my cousin's computer

In these examples, Sadie owns the dress, the boy owns candy, and my cousin owns a computer. However, possession can also show relationships between nouns similar to but not quite the same as ownership.

Examples: the cat's bowl, the room's temperature, Dr. Green's class

In these examples, the relationship between the possessive noun and the other noun is not really one of ownership: the cat probably does not own its bowl, the room does not own its temperature, and Dr. Green does not own his class. Therefore, possession can also illustrate relationships such as purpose (to feed the cat), qualities (temperature), and authority (I run the class).

Using Apostrophes to Indicate Possession

In English, possession is formed by adding the apostrophe + s to the end of the possessive noun. Notice that this holds true for **proper nouns** (the names of specific people, places, organizations, products, etc.).

Examples: Sadie's dress, the cat's bowl, Dr. Green's class

However, the rules change if the possessive noun is plural. In that case, place the apostrophe *after* the s.

Examples: the two students' desks, the Backstreet Boys' new album

The exception to this rule is if you are dealing with an irregular plural noun, a noun whose entire form changes from the singular to the plural. Examples of such nouns include:

woman → women	mouse → mice	tooth → teeth
child → children	person → people	foot → feet

When dealing with these nouns, revert to the first rule and place the apostrophe + s.

Examples: the women's books, the children's voices, the people's choice

What if you have a singular noun that already ends in s, such as Jesus, cactus, or Ulysses? You have two options, either of which is correct: you can either (1) add the apostrophe + s as you normally would or (2) simply add an apostrophe after the s that is already there.

Examples: Jesus's teachings OR Jesus' teachings, Ulysses's travels OR Ulysses' travels

Finally, be aware that possessive pronouns (e.g., my, your, her, his, its, our, their) are exceptions to all of these rules and do not use an apostrophe at all. Be especially careful not to confuse "it's" with "its": "it's" is a contraction that means "it is," whereas "its" is the possessive pronoun.

Examples: our homework, my pencil, their chairs

Using Apostrophes to Form Contractions

The next most common use for apostrophes is to form **contractions**, which are shortened versions of common two-word expressions. Here are some examples of contractions:

does not → doesn't	will not → won't	cannot → can't
could not → couldn't	should not → shouldn't	did not → didn't

Note: Be aware that contractions are markers of an informal tone, so they will not always be appropriate in your writing. Consider your purpose and audience, as well as the genre of your writing. For example, contractions are generally fine in informal genres like texts to your friends, but they would be inappropriate in formal genres like a college research paper.

Other Uses for Apostrophes

Other uses for apostrophes are quite rare in English, though you might occasionally encounter them.

You may sometimes see apostrophes used to omit certain letters (typically the g at the end of –ing words) to convey a dialect. **Example: I'm thinkin' about runnin' for president.** Be aware that this is very informal and should typically only be used when quoting someone directly or writing fictional dialogue.

You may also occasionally see apostrophes used to form certain plural nouns. This is only done for nouns that would cause confusion or ambiguity when pluralized by adding only an s.

Example: I earned three A's this semester.

Without the apostrophe, this could be read as “I earned three as this semester,” resulting in ambiguity. Therefore, the apostrophe is added to make it clearer to readers that this is a plural of the singular “A.”