



Possessives

An apostrophe is used to indicate that a noun (person, place, or thing) owns or possesses something.

Examples:

Renee's hair
the girl's bicycle

In other words, an apostrophe provides a shorter way to say this:

the hair of Renee
the bicycle of the girl

Most **singular** words take an **'s**.

Examples:

Wrong: The dogs paw hurt. **Right:** The dog's paw is hurt.

Wrong: Someones backpack **Right:** Someone's backpack

In cases where punctuation would be awkward by adding **'s**, it is acceptable to use an apostrophe only.

Example:

Wrong: Lois's shirt is teal. **Right:** Lewis' shoes are wet.

Plural nouns that end in **-s** take an apostrophe.

Examples:

Both students' books got ruined.
The cats' tails wagged.

Plural nouns that do not end in -s take an -'s.

Example:

The children's toys are clean.
The mice's nest was in the barn.

To show **joint possession**, use -'s with the last noun only.

Example:

Mack and Charlotte's new car

Possessive pronouns, such as his or theirs, do **not** take an apostrophe because ownership is implied. For **compound nouns**, use -'s with the last element only.

Example:

The attorney general's toupee

Contractions

In contractions, the apostrophe takes the place of missing letters. "It's" for example, stands for "it is."

Example:

Why can't we go back?

Tip: Avoid using contractions in formal papers because they sound too conversational and informal.

Letter and Number Plurals

Use an apostrophe to form the plurals of lowercase letters (and only lowercase letters) and to mark the omission of the first two digits of a year.

Examples of Letters and Numbers with apostrophes:

Wrong: Spaghetlios have lots of O's. **Right:** paghettios have lots of o's.

Wrong: I love 80's music. **Right:** I love '80s music.

Proofreading Strategies

There are three common apostrophe problems:

- Using apostrophes when they are not needed.
- Neglecting to use apostrophes when they are needed.
- Adding too many apostrophes.

If you have a tendency to use apostrophes when they are not needed or you use too many, type **'s** into the FIND function (under the Edit menu) in Microsoft Word. For every case the computer finds, check if the apostrophe indicates possession or not.

Tip: If the word after the apostrophe is a verb (action), take out the apostrophe.

If you have a tendency to leave out apostrophes when you write, look for every word that ends in **-s**. If the word is a noun and it appears right before another noun, it needs an apostrophe.