APOSTROPHES

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: Spaghettios 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.