

JOHNSON COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE APOSTROPHES

The apostrophe--considered a mark of punctuation by some and a mark of spelling by others--has three principal uses: **to show possession, to form contractions, and to form plurals of letters or numbers**. The apostrophe, in most of its uses, indicates that something has been omitted {Don't (do not), They're (they are), Children's books (books of or for children), Artist's paintings (paintings of or by the artist)}.

POSSESSION

An apostrophe is used to show possession.

Singular Nouns

The rule is applied directly to most singular nouns, but with an added twist: In forming the possessive of singular nouns, add an apostrophe plus an *s*.

John	John's	boy	boy's	Norma	Norma's
lady	lady's				

When a singular noun ends in *s* or an *s* sound, add an apostrophe and an *s* unless the additional *s* produces an unpleasant sound or results in the awkwardness of *s*'s followed by a word beginning with an *s*.

James	James's	goose	goose's	Hortense	Hortense's
horse	horse's				

If addition of an *s* after an apostrophe is undesirable because of sound or appearance, add only an apostrophe.

Hippocrates	Hippocrates' contributions
goodness	goodness' sake
Socrates	Socrates' sayings
Pleiades	Pleiades' six visible stars

(The awkwardness of *Hippocrates's*, *goodness's sake*, *Socrates's*, and *Pleiades's* is obvious, not to mention *Pleiades's six*.)

In general a noun or pronoun does not come immediately before another noun or pronoun: we do not write "children books" or "artist painting." When we do need to use a noun or pronoun before another noun or pronoun, we make the first one possessive by the use of the apostrophe. In a sense, we say that the first noun or pronoun has ownership of the second one.

parent's duty (duty of one parent)

parents' duty (duty of two or more parents)

everyone's duty (duty of everyone)

cave's entrance (entrance of or to the cave)

caves' entrance (entrance of or to the caves)

NOTE: The apostrophe is not needed for possessive pronouns--*his, hers, its, ours, yours, theirs, and whose*--or for plural nouns not in the possessive case.

Whose babies are these--yours or theirs?

Add the apostrophe and an *s* to a noun or indefinite pronoun to indicate the singular possessive case.

The boy's picture hung in the gallery's showroom.

One's questions often go unanswered.

OPTION: To form the possessive case of a singular noun that ends in *s*, or that has a *z* sound for its ending, add either the apostrophe and *s* or only the apostrophe.

Mars' terrain OR Mars's terrain

Columbus' ship OR Columbus's ship

Add the apostrophe and an *s* to the last word of compounds or word groups.

father-in-law's car

someone else's turn

secretary of state's position

Add the apostrophe and an *s* to each name to indicate individual ownership, but only to the final name to indicate joint ownership.

Sam's and Jane's schools were playing each other in basketball. (Sam and Jane attend different schools.)

Sam and Jane's school was playing in the tournament. (Sam and Jane attend the same school.)

The apostrophe indicates omissions in contracted words and numerals. Be careful to place the apostrophe exactly where the omission occurs.

The class of '77 (1977) can't (cannot) decide what to include in the time vault that's (that is) to be opened in the year 2007.

Practice Exercise A

Form the possessive of the bold singular nouns in the following sentences.

Examples: I went to **Henry** party. Henry's
Enos tail was caught in the door. Enos's

1. The entire group was satisfied with **Alice** performance as president of the club.
2. Our **city** record in public housing is far from outstanding.
3. One **hour** delay is about all we can take at this point.
4. Are you studying **Aristophanes** plays this semester?
5. **Luis** new hat is the envy of all the men in the neighborhood.
6. **Lois** approach to management solved most of our company problems.
7. A **moment** hesitation may be fatal in such situations.
8. Mr **Harris** old car will not survive the winter.
9. Have you ever read any of Gene **Hawes** books?
10. Please attend our meeting on Old **Timer** Day.

Plural Nouns

Add the apostrophe to all plural nouns that end in *s* to indicate the plural possessive case. Form the plural of the noun first; then add only the apostrophe if the noun ends in *s*.

boy (singular) gallery (singular)

boys (plural) galleries (plural)

The boys' pictures hung in several galleries' showrooms.

When a plural ends in *s*, only an apostrophe is added.

actors actors' lines the Fords the Fords' old house

artists artists' easels two minutes two minutes' silence

Add the apostrophe and an *s* to all plural nouns not ending in *s* to indicate the plural possessive case. Again, form the plural of the noun first; then add the apostrophe and an *s* to show the possessive case.

Man (singular) woman (singular)

men (plural) women (plural)

Men's and women's shoes were reduced for the sale.

When a plural noun does not end in *s*, add an apostrophe plus an *s* to show possession.

women women's alumni alumni's

firemen firemen's bacteria bacteria's

The apostrophe and an *s* are used to form the plural of lower-case letters. If needed to prevent confusion, the apostrophe and an *s* are sometimes used to form the plural of figures, symbols, abbreviations, and words referred to as words, but frequently only an *s* is added.

final k's
V.F.W.'s OR V.F.W.s

the 1970's OR the 1970s
and's OR ands

Practice Exercise B

Form the possessive of the bold plural nouns in the following sentences.

Examples:

Men clothing is becoming more colorful than **women**. Men's women's

All the algae vanished into the geese stomachs. geese's

1. Have you noticed the color of the **Thomases** house?
2. I always enjoy a good reading of **children** stories.
3. The **mothers** conversation always turned to their children behavior at home and their progress in school.
4. Three **hours** interruption of electrical service is not enough to thaw food in a good home freezer.
5. The **alumnae** annual reunion is seldom lively.
6. Urban **workers** problems have been growing worse with the passing of the years.
7. I look forward each year to three **weeks** stay in the country.
8. His six months in the penitentiary will have the same effect as ten **years** absence from home.
9. **Physicians** malpractice insurance adds considerably to their operating costs and their **patients** bills.
10. The **guards** uniforms are even more dismal than they have to be.

Indefinite Pronouns

Certain indefinite pronouns can show possession. This is done by adding an apostrophe and an *s*.

anyone	anyone's	each one	each one's	somebody
somebody's	someone	someone's		

Practice Exercise C

Form the possessive of the bold indefinite pronouns in the following sentences.

Examples:

Everybody paper was returned ungraded. Everybody's

She finds **nobody** work satisfactory. nobody's

1. She would rather eat **anybody** cooking than her own.
2. They were surprised when **no one** painting won first prize.
3. **Somebody** hat has been stolen.
4. **Everybody** desks must be cleared by quitting time.
5. **Each one** turn will come soon.

Compound Constructions

In compound constructions, such as *mother-in-law* and *someone else*, the possessive is formed by adding an apostrophe and an *s*, where appropriate, to the last word in the compound: mother-in-law's room, mothers-in-law's rights, someone else's happiness.

Practice Exercise D

Form the possessive of the bold compounds in the following sentences.

Examples:

Everyone else privileges are observed. Everyone else's

He hopes to find a copy of the **Surgeon General** report. Surgeon General's

1. They were always doing **one another** work.
2. They found **each other** papers just before the deadline for submittal at the end of the term.
3. My **brother-in-law** art gallery will soon close.
4. The **sergeant-at-arms** request for silence was ignored.
5. The **Chief Justice** opinion was beautifully phrased.

Joint Possession

To indicate joint possession by two or more nouns, the apostrophe and an *s* are added, where appropriate, only to the last noun.

Have you a copy of Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*? (The book was written by both men.)

Stay out of the mare and goat's stall if you want to stay healthy. (The mare and goat share a common stall.)

Mary and John's party was the best I have ever attended. (One party given by two people)

Practice Exercise E

Form the possessive of the bold nouns in the following sentences to show joint possession.

Examples:

They decided to look for **Burton and Taylor** old house. Burton and Taylor's

Anne and Paul marriage did not last long.

Anne and Paul's

1. Have you ever been a client of **Wodehouse, Clark, and Peal** law firm?
2. **Puerto Rico and Haiti** fishing agreement was violated.
3. **Colgate and Skidmore** joint program will be terminated if registration does not improve.
4. **Wentworth and Flexner** book on slang is almost a classic.
5. **Maria and Jose** relationship has lasted a long time.

Individual Possession

To indicate individual possession by two or more nouns, the apostrophe and an *s* are added, where appropriate, to each noun.

May's and June's receipts were higher than expected. (Each of the months had individual receipts.)

The advanced course deals with Maurois' and Proust's literary works. (Each author had his own literary works.)

Every minute's, hour's, and day's output was carefully measured. (The output was measured individually by the minute, hour, and day.)

Practice Exercise F

Form the possessive of the bold nouns in the following sentences to show individual possession.

Examples:

Sophie and Elaine engagements did not last long. Sophie's and Elaine's

Pittsburgh and Kansas City baseball teams have become stronger in recent years. Pittsburgh's and Kansas City's

1. **Janet and John** tennis rackets need restringing.
2. **Frank and Anne** intellectual interests are similar.

3. One of my chores was to prepare **Pooch, Willy, and Louie** dinners before sitting down to my own.
4. Who can tell where **Plato and Socrates** ideas diverged?
5. **April, July, and October** gross profits were the lowest by far in that year.

CONTRACTIONS

An apostrophe is used to indicate the omission of letters and numbers in a contraction. A contraction is a shortened form of a word or group of words: *won't* for *will not*, *she's* for *she is*, '76 for 1776 or any other year for which this contraction would be understood. The apostrophe substitutes for the missing letters or numbers.

Will-o'-the-wisp is the common name for *ignis fatuus*, the light sometimes seen over marshy ground and now taken to represent anything deluding that we chase in vain. (Will-o'-the-wisp is the contraction of will-of-the-wisp.)

The word *ain't* is a variant form of *aren't*, a contraction of *am not*. (Here we have two contractions of the same original expression.)

"She goin' back no more." (In writing dialogue some fiction writers attempt to reproduce the sounds of the dialect characteristic of their characters. The apostrophe in contracted forms assists readers in understanding the speech represented.)

Practice Exercise G

Change the bold expressions in the following sentences to contractions.

Examples:

Do you recall the desperate situation of many Wall Street speculators in **1929**? '29

Carolyn **could not** understand the laziness shown by some of her friends in the office.

couldn't

1. They **have not** been home in nine months.
2. We **would have** given you what you wanted if you had been more polite in asking.
3. They **cannot** do any more than **they have** already done.

4. The class of **1980** will find itself more readily employable than the class of **1977**.
5. I **shall not** be home when you call.

Its and It's

Unfortunate individuals--numbering in the millions in the United States alone--confuse the rules governing use of the apostrophe when dealing with the pronoun *it* as the contraction *it's* and as the possessive *its*.

It may help to remember that possessive pronouns ending in *s* do not take an apostrophe: *his home, this is hers, its broken leg, the mistake is ours, those are yours, we lost theirs*. Other possessive pronouns, such as *my* and *our*, do not take an apostrophe.

The cat lost its way. (Possessive form of *it*)

Rain damaged its binding. (Possessive form of *it*)

The party interpreted its victory as a mandate to plunder the treasury. (Possessive form of *it*)

It may also help to remember that the contraction of *it is* is *it's*.

It's much earlier than you think. (Contraction of *it is*)

I think it's improper to demand so much of the young. (Contraction of *it is*)

She thinks it's an acceptable way to proceed. (Contraction of *it is*)

Practice Exercise H

Supply either *its* or *it's* where indicated in the following sentences.

Examples:

I find ____ too much for me to do in one day. it's

I found ____ solution far too difficult for me. its

1. Three of ____ puppies went on to win major prizes at the show.
2. ____ more than a day's journey, I think.
3. The agent advised us to clean up the house in order to ensure ____ prompt sale.

4. I could tell that yesterday was going to be a long day from _____ beginning.
5. The cat spent an hour chasing _____ tail.
6. You can tell a book from _____ cover.
7. If we only had known of _____ tendency to break down in hot weather, we would have bought another automobile.
8. Do you think _____ too late to look for a solution?
9. He hopes _____ going to turn out all right.
10. Most of those who still say _____ a mistake to go ahead with the project are probably thinking only of their own needs.

PLURALS OF LETTERS AND NUMERALS

An apostrophe and an *s* are used to form the plurals of letters and numbers. Businessmen, bureaucrats, and others have been influenced by military writing style, which omits the apostrophe. The rule for abbreviating letters and numerals still holds for formal prose, particularly scholarly writing, but you can anticipate that at some future time the apostrophe will no longer be required for this purpose. Both forms are shown in two of the following examples, but you are cautioned that the omission of the apostrophe may not be acceptable in school and college writing.

That child seems unable to learn his ABC's (ABCs).

If you learn that accommodate has two *c*'s and two *m*'s, you will have no trouble with it. (The apostrophes in this sentence will never disappear. Without them the sentence would be impossible to decipher: Two *cs* and two *ms*? Both *cs* and *ms* happen to be standard abbreviations for special terms.)

There were three 7's (7s) in the winning lottery number.

ATTENTION STUDENTS TAKING THE ENGLISH MICROLAB MASTERY TEST

Please note that the Microlab module on apostrophes applies the above rule as follows:

Abbreviations with periods – use the *apostrophe s* ('s) to show a plural.

The two M.D.'s agreed on the diagnosis.

Abbreviations without periods – do not use an *apostrophe s* to show a plural. Use *s* only.

Our IRAs are fully funded each year.

Practice Exercise K

Add all apostrophes needed in the following sentences. Be careful not to add needless apostrophes. If a sentence is correct, write *C* next to it.

Example: Science fiction's popularity has grown rapidly.

1. Earlier readers stereotype of science fiction as a story about a Bug-Eyed monster in pursuit of a scantily-clad girl is disappearing.
2. Readers now recognize that science fiction deals with one of todays most real concerns--the relationship between human beings and technology.
3. Some readers claim that no other literary type speaks as clearly to human beings problems.
4. "Its science fiction," they claim, "that shows us where were heading."
5. "Science fiction," they say, "shows us what changes will occur and also suggests ways in which we should and shouldnt respond to these changes."
6. Isaac Asimov argues that science fiction is "the *only* literature of relevant ideas" because its ideas are "firmly based on scientific thought."
7. Everyones theory about philosophy may be equally valid, since no theory can be proved false.
8. However, Newtons view of the universe has been proved, once and for all, false.
9. Likewise, many other scientists views of life and the universe have been proved true or false.
10. While philosophers and other intellectuals argue for centuries about truth, scientists eventually arrive at certain definite truths.

11. In addition, an experts argument about literature sometimes sounds no more convincing than a novices.
12. But any chemists lack of understanding of his or her field can be immediately ascertained by any bright teenagers in the audience.
13. Todays world demands that writers concern themselves with technology; yet most mainstream writers do not, Asimov contends.
14. In the 1940s, when the Nazis power was being extended everywhere, mainstream writers were still concerned with ancient generalizations about philosophy.
15. But in 1941 Robert A. Heinlein wrote that the war might be ended by the United States' development of a nuclear weapon.
16. In addition, his story went on to point out that the nations of the world would be thrown into a nuclear stalemate at the wars conclusion.
17. No generals or secretary-of-states views about a cold war were emerging in the early 1940s.
18. But science-fiction writers were already looking far beyond the problems of the 1940s.
19. For example, in 1939 Asimov pointed to the publics reaction against space travel in the 1970s.
20. The ABCs of survival in the 1980s and 90s will be spelled out, not by mainstream writers, but by science-fiction writers, Asimov feels.

Practice Exercises L

Rewrite the following word groups as a noun or a pronoun preceded by another noun or pronoun in the possessive case.

Examples:

a friend of everybody everybody's friend

the coats owned by the Davises the Davises' coats

1. the history of our country
2. the population of the United States
3. the income of their parents
4. a poem by Wallace Stevens
5. problems of today
6. tuition at the university
7. a party given by my sister-in-law
8. the toys of the babies
9. an address by the governor of Texas
10. the position of the women
11. a camper belonging to Sam and Calvin
12. a reunion at the Coopers
13. decisions made by one
14. the restaurant at the airport
15. the temple of Zeus
16. the riddle of the Sphinx
17. the column of the editor-in-chief
18. the cars of Kevin and Troy
19. the picture of Charles
20. the gills of the fish