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)}.

**POSSSESSION**

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*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>John</th>
<th>John's</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>boy</td>
<td>boy's</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norma</td>
<td>Norma's</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lady</td>
<td>lady's</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>James</th>
<th>James's</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>goose</td>
<td>goose's</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hortense</td>
<td>Hortense's</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>horse</td>
<td>horse's</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hippocrates</th>
<th>Hippocrates' contributions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>goodness</td>
<td>goodness' sake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socrates</td>
<td>Socrates' sayings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleiades</td>
<td>Pleiades' six visible stars</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(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's party. Henry's

Enos's tail was caught in the door.

1. The entire group was satisfied with Alice's performance as president of the club.

2. Our city's record in public housing is far from outstanding.

3. One hour's delay is about all we can take at this point.

4. Are you studying Aristophanes' plays this semester?

5. Luis's new hat is the envy of all the men in the neighborhood.

6. Lois's approach to management solved most of our company's problems.

7. A moment's hesitation may be fatal in such situations.

8. Mr Harris's old car will not survive the winter.

9. Have you ever read any of Gene Hawes's books?

10. Please attend our meeting on Old Timer's 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
- the 1970's OR the 1970s
- V.F.W.'s OR V.F.W.s
- 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's paper was returned ungraded.
- Everybody's
- She finds nobody's work satisfactory.
- nobody's

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

**Compound Constructions**

In compound constructions, such as *mother-in-law's room* and *someone else's happiness*, 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.

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**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 I**

Form the plurals of the bold numerals and letters in the following sentences. Follow the apostrophe rule as you work.

**Examples:**

The 1980 hold promise of being a decade of world peace if we do not ignore the lessons of the past. 

"Minding your p and q" is a cliché.

1. I do not know of a single formula that does not have more x and y than I can manage.
2. She made straight A in her first semester at school.
3. Do you have any 33 rpm around that you would care to swap for some of my records?
4. That furnace is rated at better than 1200 BTU an hour.
5. Will we still be around in the '90? -

**Practice Exercise J**

For each item below, insert apostrophes where they are needed. If no apostrophe is necessary, write C under the word.

1. its (it is) 2. your 3. wouldnt

4. childrens 5. shant 6. one hours rest

7. cannot 8. its (possessive) 9. oxens

10. whos 11. theirs 12. a pennys worth

13. youre 14. womens 15. mans

16. ten years wait 17. arent 18. theres

19. whose 20. father-in-laws
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 today's 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 we're heading."

5. "Science fiction," they say, "shows us what changes will occur and also suggests ways in which we should and shouldn't 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. Everyone's theory about philosophy may be equally valid, since no theory can be proved false.

8. However, Newton's 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