

Apostrophes

Making Sense of Contractions and Possession



The apostrophe (the little comma-like mark that goes at the top instead of the bottom) is an important part of the English language. In fact, it sets English apart from many languages in that it provides an easy way to show possession and shorten words that would not otherwise be shortened. In many languages, for example, you would have to say, “the jacket of Ashley” to show that a jacket belongs to Ashley, but in English, thanks to the apostrophe, you can simply say, “Ashley’s jacket” instead.

The apostrophe also has arguably the simplest rules of any English punctuation. Knowing these rules is very important, however, because using an apostrophe where it doesn’t belong is one of the most distracting errors possible. Similarly, missing apostrophes can make even the best papers seem careless. Apostrophes are mainly used for two things:

- Shortening words into contractions
- Making nouns possessive

Contractions: Making Words Shorter

In speaking and informal writing, words are sometimes shortened to improve the flow and make the verbiage sound a little more natural. These shortened words are known as **contractions**, and they are indicated by apostrophes in the place of the missing letter or letters.

For example, the word **don’t** is a contraction of **do not**. Because the contraction eliminates the **O** from between the **N** and **T** of **not**, that is where an apostrophe is placed, producing **don’t**. A common error with contractions is using apostrophes in the wrong place. For instance, the contracted form of **you all** is **y’all** (with the apostrophe after the **Y** because that’s where letters of **you** have been removed), not “ya’ll” (there are no letters missing between the **A** and the two **Ls**, so it is wrong to put an apostrophe there).

Some contractions are irregular, too. For example, **won’t** is actually a contraction of **will not**, but it reverts back to much older forms of English that more closely resemble German, but which flow much better. The *logical* contraction would be “willn’t,” but this would be clumsy to pronounce because of the connected consonant sounds, and since the entire reason for using contractions is to improve flow, this would defeat the whole purpose.

It’s important to note that contractions should not be used in a formal essay; they are, by nature, conversational and informal, and because contractions are shortened forms of longer words, there are no cases in which the contraction *must* be used. It is always possible to write the full words instead of using the contraction forms, and in an academic essay, you should always do so unless your instructor has stated otherwise.

“Your” versus “You’re”

A commonly misused pair of words is formed by the pronoun **your** and the contraction **you’re**. The pronoun **your** is used to show ownership – that is, something that *belongs to you* (for example, “Do **your** homework”). The contraction **you’re**, on the other hand, is the shortened form of **you are**. In other words, if you are replying to someone who gives you thanks, it is *not* correct to say, “Your welcome.” That is the wrong word. The correct response is, “You’re welcome,” as in, “You are welcome.”

“Their,” “There,” and “They’re”

Another group of confusing words that writers frequently encounter is **their**, **there**, and **they’re**. These words all sound the same, but are used in different ways. The word **their** is a possessive pronoun, just like “your.” It means that something *belongs to them* (for instance, “The musicians packed **their** instruments into cases”). Similarly, **they’re** is a contraction of **they are** (as in, “The band members announced that **they’re** going on tour next month”). Finally, **there** is a word used to indicate location (as in, “I left my book over **there** on the dresser”) or a syntactic expletive (as in, “**There** are several steps to changing the oil in a car”).

Possession: Showing Ownership

The main use for apostrophes is to show ownership. Basically, it’s used with a noun to show that that noun *owns* something. For instance, “The dog’s bowl” has an apostrophe and an **s** with **dog** to show that the bowl *belongs to* the dog. If you want to show ownership for a plural noun, put the apostrophe *after* the **s**, as in, “The dogs’ bowls,” which describes bowls belonging to *more than one dog*. If you’re not showing possession, however, there should be no apostrophe at all. It would be **incorrect** to write, “The artist’s sat on the riverbank for the painting class.” This is wrong because there is nothing here that needs to have ownership displayed. The **correct** way is to write it with no apostrophe: “The artists sat on the riverbank for their painting class.”

Common Mistakes: Avoiding Unnecessary Apostrophes

Unnecessary apostrophes should be avoided at all costs. They are one of the most glaring errors possible in writing and can make an otherwise good paper look sloppy and careless. There are a few instances where it can be tempting to use apostrophes, but remember, they are used *only* to form contractions and the possessive forms of *nouns* (and only nouns).

- Apostrophes **do not** make nouns plural. For most nouns, adding **-s** or **-es** will form the plural. Apostrophes are not needed except for possessives.
 - WRONG: The **scientist’s** closely studied the new species they had discovered.
 - RIGHT: The **scientists** closely studied the new species they had discovered.
- The same is true for numbers, letters, and abbreviations.
 - WRONG: NASA has been studying data from Voyager since the **1970’s**.
 - RIGHT: NASA has been studying data from Voyager since the **1970s**.
 - WRONG: I learned my **ABC’s** in kindergarten.
 - RIGHT: I learned my **ABCs** in kindergarten.
- The only time you should use apostrophes to form plurals is if *not* doing so would cause the word to be misread.

- WRONG: *There are two **Us** in the word "vacuum."*
 - This causes the plural *U* to look like the pronoun "us."
- RIGHT: *There are two **U's** in the word "vacuum."*
- Apostrophes are **never** used with possessive pronouns – only with nouns.
 - WRONG: *The explorers said the boat was **their's**.*
 - RIGHT: *The explorers said the boat was **theirs**.*
 - WRONG: *The team team was ready to begin **it's** training.*
 - **It's** is always a contraction of **it is** or **it has**. If **it is** or **it has** don't fit into the sentence, then no apostrophe should be used.
 - RIGHT: *The team was ready to begin **its** training.*

Further Reading

- The Punctuation Guide: Apostrophe (Jordan Penn, UCLA):
<http://www.thepunctuationguide.com/apostrophe.html>