

Campus Academic Resource Program

Apostrophes

This handout will:

- Define apostrophes.
- Providing specific instances when apostrophes are used.
- Discussing grammatical and stylistic choices made as a writer.
- Clarifying specific circumstances when apostrophes are not used for the possessive.

Apostrophes are punctuation marks used to indicate the:

1. **Possessive**
2. **Plural Possessive**
3. **Plurals of Letters, Figures, and Years**
4. **Omissions of Figures**
5. **Contractions**
6. **Special Circumstances: Whose/Who's and Its/It's**

1. **Possessive:** Use this form when something belongs to someone.

EX:

INCORRECT

Beckys dog



CORRECT

Becky's dog
Becky is the owner of the dog.

Tip! If you are unable to decide whether or not there is an owner, try reversing the phrase and input “of the” or “of.”

Becky's dog = The dog *of* Becky

If the “of” phrase works, then you are accurate in the possessive form!

Have a word that ends in an –s? It is a stylistic choice to either place an apostrophe after the name and add an –s (’s), or an apostrophe after the –s (s’) in the name. This rule is greatly debated. It is best to ask your professor about his/her preference.

Odysseus’ dog loved to play with the Frisbee.

Odysseus’s cat was always in a bad mood.

Whichever route you take, make sure to stay consistent throughout your paper.

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2. **Plural Possessive:** Plural indicates more than one; therefore, **plural possessive** indicates that plural nouns own something(s).

EX:

INCORRECT

The girls outfits were filthy after playing in the mud all day.



CORRECT

The girls' outfits were filthy after playing in the mud all day.

The first sentence is incorrect because the speaker is describing the outfits of all the girls. An apostrophe is needed to indicate the possession of the outfits. The second sentence is correct because the apostrophe indicates collective (or, plural) possession of the outfits. Remember the “of” rule: “The outfits *of* the girls were filthy after playing in the mud all day.”

3. **Plurals of Letters, Figures, and Years:** The rules vary, so read on!

a. **Letters**

RULE

Upper-case letters are a stylistic choice. You may use an apostrophe but it is not required.*



EXAMPLE

As, Bs, and Cs
OR
A's, B's, and C's

RULE

Lower-case letters need an apostrophe, so that the plural of the letters is not confusing.



EXAMPLE

d's
e's
f's

The difference between using an apostrophe for upper and lower-case letters is because the “s” following the apostrophe is lower-case. Therefore, it can be a stylistic choice for upper-case, because there is already a differentiation in the letters. It cannot be a stylistic choice for lower-case letters because there is no differentiation in the letters.

b. **Figures**

RULE

Figures are a stylistic choice, you may use an apostrophe but it is not required.*



EXAMPLE

1s, 2s, and 3s
OR
She did several figure 8's on the ice.

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c. Years

RULE

Years in a four digit sequence do not require any apostrophes.

EXAMPLE

1900s, 1960s, 2000s
OR
I wonder what a typical school day will be like in the 3000s.

*Because some of the rules are stylistic and choice driven, always make to maintain one style throughout the paper. Consistency is vital to a strong and succinct paper! Never hesitate to check with your professor and ask her/his preferences.

4. **Omission of Figures:** When using the last two digits of a year, place an apostrophe prior to the last two digits so the reader understands that it is a year and not random numbers.

EX:

The class of 2012	→	Class of '12
The 1980s	→	The '80s
1964	→	'64

5. **Contractions:** This form is used when you use an apostrophe to omit letters.

EX:

I am= I'm
Is not = Isn't
Cannot = Can't
Do not= Don't
Of the clock= O'clock
That is= That's
She is= She's
You are= You're

Would have = Would've → A common error in writing is mistaking "would've" for "would of."
"Would of" is grammatically incorrect.

Tip! Contractions are not suggested for use in a formal paper.

6. **Special Circumstances: Whose/Who's, Its/It's**

RULE

"Who's" with an apostrophe is the contraction form of "who is" or "who has."
"Whose" is the possessive form of "who."

EXAMPLE

Who's up for a late night study party?
Whose jeans are these?

RULE

"It's" with an apostrophe is a contraction, meaning "it is" or "it has."
"Its" without an apostrophe is possessive, comparable to "his" or "her" as a form of possessor.

EXAMPLE

It's cold outside, and I forgot my jacket today.
The cheetah is known for its incredible speed.

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Exercise: There are six words missing an apostrophe in the following paragraph. Identify the six errors and insert the missing apostrophe where needed.

Have you seen Lauras bird today? He mustve flown away while she was cleaning his cage. Hes a beautiful yellow and white parrot. I could just imagine him in the sky, doing little birdy figure 8's. She has had that bird for ages, at least since the 80s. Its incredible to think about how long she has had him. I wonder whose bird he was before she got him. All of the trees leaves are dying, so winter must be coming. I hope she finds her majestic bird soon!

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

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Answer Key:

1. Laura's (Possessive)
2. Must've (Contraction)
3. He's (Contraction)
4. '80s (Omission of Figures-Year)
5. It's incredible...(Contraction)
6. Trees' (Plural Possessive)

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Works Cited

College of Environmental Science and Forestry, “Tip Sheet: Apostrophes,” State University of New York, <http://www.esf.edu/writingprogram/tipsheets/apostrophe.htm> (Accessed November 13, 2013).

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Chicago Manual of Style Online, “Possessives and Attributives,” <http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/qanda/data/faq/topics/PossessivesandAttributives.html> (Accessed November 13, 2013).