

RULES FOR FINDING AND FIXING APOSTROPHE ERRORS

Understand the problem.

Although the apostrophe might look like a *comma* defying gravity, this mark of punctuation has three distinct jobs: to show possession, make contractions, and form odd plurals.

Use the apostrophe to make words possessive.

You can show possession the long way or the short way. The long way requires a *phrase* using a word like *belong* or *own*. A *preposition* such as *of* will also do the trick.

The donut *belonging* to Vince

The hot sports car *owned* by Sylvia

The home *of* the Watsons

Showing possession with an apostrophe [and often an added *s*] reduces the word count:

Vince's donut

Sylvia's hot sports car

The *Watsons'* home

To use the apostrophe to show possession, follow the guidelines below.

NOUNS WITHOUT A FINAL S

For 25 of the 26 letters of the alphabet, the rule is simple: When a *noun* does not end in *s*, use **apostrophe + s**.

The lollipop belonging to Elena = *Elena's* lollipop

The dictionary owned by the grammar whiz = The grammar *whiz's* dictionary

The shoes of the children = The *children's* shoes

NOUNS WITH A FINAL S

Nouns that *do* end in **s** require more thought. If the noun is *plural*, just attach an apostrophe.

The leashes for the dogs = The *dogs'* leashes

The grades of the students = The *students'* grades

The wages earned by the workers = The *workers'* wages

The location of the apostrophe clues an educated reader about numbers. Take the noun *dog*, for example. If the apostrophe comes before the **s**, we know that *one* dog has *multiple* leashes:

The *dog's* leashes

But if the apostrophe comes after the **s**, we understand that *many* dogs have a *variety* of leashes:

The *dogs'* leashes

If the noun ending in **s** is singular, most sources recommend adding both the apostrophe and an additional **s**.

The bad luck that plagues Odysseus = *Odysseus's* bad luck

The strong tentacles of the octopus = The *octopus's* strong tentacles

The directive given by the boss = The *boss's* directive

In these cases, the **apostrophe + additional s** adds another syllable to the pronunciation. If the extra syllable sounds unnatural, add the apostrophe alone.

So you can write ...

Odysseus's bad luck

because Odysseus-ES sounds okay, but you just need...

Achilles' hot temper

because Achilles-EZ sounds weird.

Since "sounds natural" can be a matter of region or opinion, your best bet in these cases is to consult the textbook or handbook assigned to your class, the teacher or professor who will be evaluating your assignment, or your supervisor or the style manual that your industry uses. Then follow the advice that you get.

Use the apostrophe to make contractions.

The apostrophe indicates when a writer has combined two or more words into a single word. Here are some examples:

Can not = *Can't*

Does not = *Doesn't*

Let us = *Let's*

I am = *I'm*

It is = *It's*

We have = *We've*

They are = *They're*

He will = *He'll*

She has = *She's*

You had = *You'd*

They would have = *They'd've*

If you are writing for a very formal audience—a teacher, a boss, an editor, a snotty group of intellectuals—you might want to err on the side of stuffy and spell out the words rather than contract them:

~~We'd've~~ **We would have** arrived on time if our car ~~hadn't~~ **had not** gotten a flat tire.

Use the apostrophe to make odd plurals.

LETTERS

Whenever you have *plural* lower-case letters, use the **apostrophe + s** to make the letters plural.

Grandma prefers to sign birthday cards with *k's* and *h's* instead of *x's* and *o's*.

Do you remember how many *t's* are in the word *commitment*?

If you have *capital* letters, however, most writers use just the **s**.

David has two *BAs*—one in art history and the other in classical studies—but no job.

Sharon has two *DOBs*, the official one on her birth certificate and the one four months later when her great-aunt Matilda remembers to send a check.

Some writers will use **apostrophe + s** to make capital letters plural to avoid confusion.

Look at all of those *I's* in your project summary. You did have two other teammates, right?

Kevin earned only three *A's* this semester, missing a 4.0 because of one missed question on Dr. Grayson's final exam.

These apostrophes help you not confuse *I's* with the *verb Is* or *A's* with the *subordinate conjunction As*.

NUMBERS

To make numbers plural, most writers use only an **s**.

To escape the high *90s* in town, we drove to the beach to enjoy the cool ocean breeze.

If you give me all *20s*, my pocket will bulge with cash!

You will, however, see some writers use **apostrophe + s**.

To escape the high **90's** in town, we drove to the beach to enjoy the cool ocean breeze.

If you give me all **20's**, my pocket will bulge with cash!

What's best—**90s** or **90's**, **20s** or **20's**? Whatever your textbook, teacher, boss, or industry style guide recommends. Decide who is your intended audience, and then use what that person or group *expects*.

OTHER PARTS OF SPEECH USED AS NOUNS

Sometimes you will need to use another part of speech as if it were a noun. If the expression is common, use just an **s** to make it plural.

The **haves** opened their lunch bags and began munching in front of us **have-nots**.

My favorite reality shows focus on **befores** and **afters**.

But if you use another part of speech as a noun in a less familiar way, you can form the plural with **apostrophe + s**.

With her red pen, Dr. Pennington crossed through all of the **well's** I had used as transitions.

A chorus of **ah-ha's** filled the classroom as Prof. Warner finally solved the difficult equation on the board.

Remember that just because a word ends in **s** doesn't mean it must have an apostrophe.

Some people get so used to seeing apostrophes with **s's** that they think every word that ends in **s** requires an apostrophe. Don't make this mistake!

For example, singular present tense verbs end in **s** but do not need any punctuation.

Sheila ~~know's~~ **knows** that Daniel does not have enough color sense to buy the house paint unsupervised.

Most plural nouns end in **s**, but unless they are possessive, you don't include the apostrophe.

The ~~monkey's~~ **monkeys** wanted the students' juice boxes.

Common apostrophe abuse occurs with *possessive pronouns*. Yes, you usually indicate possession with an apostrophe. *Pronouns*, however, are the exception.

Do not touch that cupcake. It is ~~her's~~ *hers*.

Can we borrow some pencils? We forgot ~~our's~~ *ours*.

These are Frank's camping supplies. ~~Their's~~ *Theirs* are still in the trunk.



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