

Apostrophes

There are three uses of apostrophes:

1. Forming the possessive case
2. Indicating omissions in contractions
3. Forming certain plurals

Forming Possessive Case:

One way to tell if you need to make a possessive is to turn the phrase around and make it an “of the” phrase. For example:

the boy’s hat = the hat of the boy
 the clock’s hands = the hands of the clock

(1) Singular Nouns and Indefinite Pronouns: add ‘s.

Examples:

This land is considered everyone’s property.
 “The Monk’s Tale” is one of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*.

(2) Singular Nouns Ending in –s: add ‘ or ‘s.

In this case, it is also acceptable to add only an apostrophe to the end. The decision should be made on the pronunciation.

Examples:

James’ idea of fun is a day spent outdoors.
 Maris’s mother has a birthday coming up.

(3) Plural Nouns Ending in –s: add ‘.

Examples:

Laid-off employees received two weeks’ severance pay.
 The three girls’ father bought them a puppy.

(4) Plural Nouns Not Ending in –s: add ‘s.

Examples:

The children’s books written by Dr. Seuss are the most popular.
 The geese’s honking was quite a nuisance.

(5) Compound Nouns: add ‘s.

Examples:

My brother-in-law’s business is doing well.
 The secretary of state’s resignation was announced this morning.

(6) Two or More Items: add ‘s.

To show joint ownership, add ‘s to the last noun. To show individual ownership, add ‘s to each noun.

Examples:

We studied Lewis and Clark’s expedition. (joint ownership)
 Hemingway’s and Stein’s writing styles have some similarities. (individual ownership)

Indicating Omissions in Contractions:

Apostrophes replace omitted letters in contractions that combine two words. However, contractions are not generally used in formal academic writing.

Frequently Used Contractions:

It's (it is)

Isn't (is not)

They're (they are)

I'm (I am)

Let's (let us)

Who's (who is, has)

Wouldn't (would not)

Don't (do not)

We've (we have)

You'd (you would)

We'll (we will)

Won't (will not)

Forming Plurals:

In a few situations, add 's to form plurals. Add 's when referring to plurals of letters and plurals of words referred to as words.

- Examples:
The Italian language has no *j*'s or *k*'s.
My supervisor will accept no *if*'s, *and*'s, or *but*'s.
My son made four A's and two B's on his report card.
Except for a few *um*'s, his speech was nice.
- Use an apostrophe to represent the century in a year: Class of '03, the 60's. However, in formal academic writing, write out the number in full: Class of 2003, the 1960s. (note that an apostrophe is not used when writing out the year in full.)