

Apostrophes

Definition of apostrophes: Apostrophes are used to show that letters or numbers are missing, and to show possession. However, because we cannot hear apostrophes, we may erroneously omit them.

Examples of apostrophes to show that letters or numbers are missing:

- Did not can be changed to didn't. Because the o is missing, you must put an apostrophe in its place. [This change results in a contraction.]
- 1942 can be changed to '42. Because the 19 is missing, you must put an apostrophe in its place.
- It is can be changed to it's. Because the i is missing, you must put an apostrophe in its place. (Its = the possessive form of it, as in "its motor needs adjusting.")

Examples of apostrophes to show possession:

- The shoe belongs to Rudy. It is Rudy's shoe. [With a singular noun that does not end in s, add an 's.]
- The inheritance goes to the three dogs. It is the dogs' house. [With nouns that you have made plural by adding an s, add only the '. The s is already there.]
- The toys belong to the children. They are the children's toys. [Here the noun is already plural without adding an s. In such cases, you do not add an s.; you do add 's .]
- It is the society of today. It is today's society. [Even though society doesn't literally belong to today, you still must add an 's in order to show the link between the two words. Also, because you add an s to a noun either to show possession or to make it plural, you want to clarify that you are not trying to make today plural.]

Example of the omission of apostrophes when using possessive pronouns:

- It is her car. The car is hers. [Possessive pronouns never require apostrophes to show possession. Its, hers, theirs, yours correctly show possession without apostrophes. In fact, it's = it is.]

Detection of apostrophe errors: The difficulty with apostrophes is that we can't hear them. Thus, although we naturally add an s to make an item possessive, we forget to add the apostrophe as well. If you recognize that you have trouble with apostrophes, then it might be worth your effort to highlight every noun in your essay that ends with an s. You would then ask yourself why you added the s. Did you need to make the noun plural? Did you need to show that the noun that follows is possessed by the first noun? Did you need to do both--make the item plural and show possession? Highlighting these nouns will force you to consider WHY you added the s and will lead you to punctuating the word properly. For example, I have included the following sentence in an essay:

My cats meow is a startling sound.

After highlighting the word cats, I would ask myself why I added the s. Did I wish to speak of

more than one of my cats or did I wish to refer to the meow of my one cat? (If I wanted to refer to the meows of more than one of my cats, I would need to make meow plural and replace is with are.) Obviously I wanted to discuss my cat's meow and how it is a startling sound. So through this exercise I have caught an apostrophe error that I might have overlooked otherwise.

Apostrophe Practice: Add, move, or delete apostrophes as needed in the paragraph below.

My aunts house is always really enjoyable to visit in the summer. She doesnt live near any towns or cities, but thats just great because your time is your's. This place of her's is actually great because its so isolated. Back in the 40's, the house served as a childrens' home; in the'60's, it functioned as a summer home for Jerry Lewis family. Now its just the place for me and my aunt to escape from the worlds hectic pace.

For more assistance with apostrophes, or with any stage of the writing process, stop by The Writing Center or visit www.writingcenter.txstate.edu to make an appointment.

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