

Proofreading Skills Tutorial

Tutorial 8: Use of Apostrophes with Possessives and Contractions

**Using Apostrophes with Possessives
Using Apostrophes with Contractions
Avoiding the Misuse of Apostrophes**

This Tutorial includes two files:

- **Lesson (8a_Use_of_Apostrophes_Lesson)**

In order to learn the material presented in this tutorial more effectively, as you read you should take notes in a place that you can reference later. If it is convenient, you could print the tutorial and annotate it so you can keep it for future reference.

- **Exercises (8b_Use_of_Apostrophes_Exercises** – located in the same area as the lesson)

- It has highlighted areas for you to answer the exercises using an application such as Adobe Acrobat Reader.
- Download and save this file as your own; you will share it with an instructor after you complete the lesson and exercises.

Please contact the Writing Center with any questions or difficulties:

csmtwc@smccd.edu or 650-574-6436.

Apostrophes

Apostrophes have two main functions: to show possession and to form contractions. This tutorial will demonstrate strategies for:

1. **using apostrophes with possessives**
2. **using apostrophes with contractions**
3. **avoiding the misuse of apostrophes.**

As you do this tutorial and learn about the different ways that we use apostrophes, try to think about the kinds of apostrophe errors that your classroom instructor may have pointed out in your writing. If you know what types of errors to look for in your own essays, you will be able to proofread more effectively.

Part One: Apostrophes with Possessives

Consider these two groups of phrases:

Group 1: the key that belongs to **Bianca**
 the essay of the **student**
 the policy of the **school**

Group 2: **Bianca's** key
 the **student's** essay
 the **school's** policy

Both groups of phrases are correctly written, but one group may be more effective. Which one seems better? In your notes, explain why.

As you may have noticed, if you do not use an apostrophe, your writing may become too wordy. By shortening each of the phrases below, the apostrophe reduces the phrase from five or six words to merely three.

8. Use of Apostrophes

As you can see in **Group 1** and **Group 2**, an apostrophe can be used to show ownership or possession. To change a noun into a possessive, you add an apostrophe + “s” to **the person or thing that possesses or owns**:

the key that belongs to Bianca	<i>or</i>	Bianca’s key (Bianca possesses the key.)
the essay of the student	<i>or</i>	the student’s essay (The student owns the essay.)
the policy of the school	<i>or</i>	the school’s policy (The school possesses the policy.)

Principle I. To form the possessive of a noun that does not already end in “s,” add the apostrophe + “s.” Remember to add the “s” to the person or thing that possesses or owns.

The books of the children	<i>or</i>	the children’s books
the circulation of the newspaper	<i>or</i>	the newspaper’s circulation

We added an apostrophe + “s” to “children” to show that the children possess or own the books. And we added an apostrophe + “s” to “newspaper” to show that the newspaper possesses or owns the circulation.

Sometimes adding “s” to a word that already ends in “s” is correct, but it is *always* correct to add an apostrophe *after* the “s.” If a singular proper noun such as a person’s name or the name of a city or state ends in “s,” you may decide to add the apostrophe + “s” although most writers prefer using the apostrophe alone. Consider these examples, which are *all* correct:

Tom Hanks’s films	<i>or</i>	Tom Hanks’ films
Arkansas’s population	<i>or</i>	Arkansas’ population

Principle II. If the possessive noun already ends in “s,” add the apostrophe *after* the “s.”

Here are more examples:

the rules of the parents	<i>or</i>	the parents’ rules
the lyrics of the rappers	<i>or</i>	the rappers’ lyrics
the car belonging to Chris	<i>or</i>	Chris’ car

Please open your 8b exercises file and complete Exercise 1.

Individual and Shared Possession

The present perfect is not only used to show that an action began at a specific time in the past and continues in the present. It has another function, as well.

Principle III. To show individual possession, add an apostrophe + “s” to *each* possessive noun.

Consider these examples, which are *both* correct:

- the careers that Lady Gaga and Taylor Swift have *or* Lady Gaga’s and Taylor Swift’s musical careers
(Lady Gaga and Taylor Swift have not both had the same musical careers. They *each* possess separate, *individual* careers.)
- the cell phones of Lily and Benny *or* Lily’s and Benny’s cell phones
(Lily and Benny *each* possess their own *individual* cell phones.)

Principle IV. To show shared possession, add an apostrophe + “s” *only* to the last noun.

- The anniversary party of Ben and Jennifer *or* Ben and Jennifer’s anniversary party was memorable.
(Ben and Jennifer *share* the same wedding anniversary, which they celebrated at their party.)
- The wine of Martini and Ross was *or* Martini and Ross’s wine was delicious.
(Martini and Ross *share* ownership of the same winery.)
- The concert of Jay Z and Timberlake *or* Jay Z and Timberlake’s concert was fantastic.
(Jay Z and Timberlake are on tour, appearing in concerts together.)

Please open your 8b exercises file and complete Exercises 2 and 3.

Part Two: Apostrophes with Contractions

In addition to using apostrophes to show possession, writers use apostrophes with contractions. In a contraction, two words are combined, and the apostrophe shows where one or more letters are missing. For example, when the words **are** and **not** are combined into the contraction **aren't**, we use an apostrophe to show *where* the letter “o” is missing. Some of the most common contractions are listed below.

Original Words	Contraction
are not	aren't
can not <i>or</i> cannot	can't
did not	didn't
do not	don't
does not	doesn't
he is	he's
I am	I'm
I had	I'd
I have	I've
is not	isn't
it has, it is	it's
let us	let's

Original Words	Contraction
she is	she's
should not	shouldn't
they are	they're
they would	they'd
they will	they'll
was not	wasn't
we are	we're
we have	we've
we will	we'll
who is, who has	who's
will not	won't

Principle V. A contraction is a combination of two words in which an apostrophe is added to show *where* one or more letters are missing.

Contractions in Informal and Academic Writing

We frequently use contractions when we speak. But since they are generally inappropriate in academic or formal writing, if in doubt, check with your instructor to see if she or he allows you to use contractions in your writing. While contractions might be acceptable in informal writing such as emails, text messages, and letters, many instructors find contractions inappropriate in essays.

Principle VI. Contractions are generally inappropriate in academic or formal writing.

Although contractions are usually words like *isn't*, *I've*, *we're* and *they're*, some contractions consist of places and names as show in the following examples. All the apostrophes in the sentence below are used to make contractions of a noun + the verb “*is*.” However, these kinds of contractions are always considered too informal and should never be used in academic writing.

Informal: School's almost over, and Yuri's returning to a full-time job as a paralegal in a law office, anxiously waiting for Friday's paycheck.

Academically Correct: School is almost over, and Yuri is returning to a full-time job as a paralegal in a law office, anxiously waiting for Friday's paycheck.

Please open your 8b exercises file and complete Exercise 4.

Part Three: The Misuse of Apostrophes

Possessive Pronouns

Sometimes apostrophes are misused. Consider these two groups of sentences:

Group 1: The dog is wagging it's tail.
That Prius in the parking lot is our's.
Lorena said that camera is her's.

Group 2: The dog is wagging *its* tail.
That Prius in the parking lot is *ours*.
Lorena said that diamond bracelet is *hers*.

Can you identify which group seems better? In your notes, explain why.

As you may have noticed, the sentences in Group 2 are correct. Not every word ending in “s” requires an apostrophe. In the case of the possessive pronouns in boldface above (**its**, **ours**, **hers**), apostrophes are incorrect and should *not* be added.

Be especially careful with *it’s* and *its*, * which are frequently confused.

- *It’s* stands for *it is* or *it has*.
For example: *It’s* cold in the Writing Center.
- *Its* is a personal pronoun showing possession.
For example: The cat licked *its* paw.

Principle VII. To form the possessive of a pronoun, do not add an apostrophe.

Plural Nouns and Verbs that End in “S”

There are other ways that apostrophes are misused. Consider the following groups of sentences.

Incorrect: He ordered three **smoothie’s**.

Correct: He ordered three **smoothies**.
plural noun

Incorrect: The San Francisco **Giants’** are playing the **Dodgers’** tonight.

Incorrect: The San Francisco **Giant’s** are playing the **Dodger’s** tonight.

Correct: The San Francisco **Giants** are playing the **Dodgers** tonight.
plural noun *plural noun*

Incorrect: The team **play’s** basketball.

Correct: The team **plays** basketball.
third-person singular verb

Note how none of the previous nouns or verbs require apostrophes since they do *not* show possession, and they are *not* contractions.

Principle VIII. Never add an apostrophe to a third-person singular verb (a verb that ends in “s”). When you make a noun plural, do *not* add an apostrophe. The only time plural nouns should have apostrophes is when they are possessive.

Consider these examples.

Correct: The Golden State **Warriors'** game with the Denver **Nuggets** is tonight.
possessive plural noun

Incorrect: The Golden State **Warrior's** are playing the Denver **Nuggets'** tonight.
plural noun

Please open your 8b exercises file and complete Exercise 5.

Proofreading for Apostrophes

Try the following strategies to proofread for apostrophes:

- If you tend to leave out apostrophes, check every word that ends in “s” or “es” to see if it needs an apostrophe.
- If you tend to put in too many apostrophes, underline all the words that contain apostrophes, and then check every one to see if you can justify it with a rule or principle in this tutorial.
- Read your work aloud; often you can hear an incorrect “s” ending or notice that an “s” ending is missing.
- Remember to check with your instructor to see if s/he allows you to use contractions in your essays.
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Final Activity

Instructions:

1. Review a classroom essay where your teacher has graded and marked your apostrophe errors. Are there any similarities in your errors? For example, are you adding apostrophes to plural nouns or verbs that end in “s”? Are you placing apostrophes in the wrong places in contractions? Or are you adding apostrophes to possessive pronouns? Knowing what to look for during proofreading can make it easier to find your apostrophe errors.
2. Make an appointment for a conference with an instructor working in the Writing Center. To make this appointment, sign up using the same method you use to make essay conference appointments. Be sure to include a comment or note that you are meeting about a tutorial.
3. During this appointment, the instructor will make sure you understand the concepts covered in this tutorial, answer any questions that you might have, review your answers to the exercises, and check to see if you can incorporate the skill into your writing.