

# Apostrophes

Apostrophe mistakes are amongst the commonest punctuation errors in academic essays.

Apostrophes are used in two completely unrelated situations: for **contractions**, signifying missing letters; and to indicate **possession** of something.

**The contraction rule:** use an apostrophe to stand for missing letters when two words are joined together. Note that contractions are usually informal, so are not often found in academic writing.

*do not* ► *don't*

*it is* ► *it's*

*she has* ► *she's*

*could not* ► *couldn't*

*fish and chips* ► *fish 'n' chips*

*in the 1990s* ► *in the '90s*

**The possession rule:** add apostrophe + s (or sometimes just an apostrophe) to the end of the word that possesses something.

When the person or entity that possesses something is singular, add apostrophe + s:

*The dog's breakfast* (the breakfast belongs to one dog)

*The car's headlights* (the headlights belong to one car).

When the person or entity that possesses something is plural, add just an apostrophe:

*The babies' prams* (the prams belonging to two or more babies)

*The students' grades* (the grades of two or more students)

*Four weeks' holiday.* (holiday of four weeks; an apostrophe before the s makes it, incorrectly, 'of four week'.)

When the name of a person ends in s, the apostrophe + s is still expected in most formal writing: *Dickens's novels*

However, there are exceptions to this rule, for example, *St. Thomas' Hospital, London*.

Usually classical names do not have the final s: *Plautus' plays*.

When the plural of a word is not formed by adding s, such as *children*, add apostrophe + s to the plural form:

*The children's books*

*The people's charter.*

## The pronoun exception

- Possessive pronouns (hers, its, theirs) do not have apostrophes:

*The car failed its test; That brush is hers.*

## Apostrophe for plurals

- With words that end in s but are not possessive, including plurals, you do not need an apostrophe:

*The gross mass of animals in all seas and on all lands totals billions of kilograms.*

- An exception is when an apostrophe prevents plural single letters being confused with a word:

*I like CDs from the mid-1990s; Most fonts have very similar p's and q's ; A's are worth celebrating.*

Note the difference between *its* and *it's*:  
*Listen to that lamb: it's lost its mother.*