



The Dreaded Apostrophe

These guidelines are not definitive, but if you're unsure of a particular use, try to match your query with one of the examples provided.

To show ownership/possession

The placement of the apostrophe depends on whether there is one owner, or more than one owner. The word that describes the owner will be a noun.

Singular

Place the apostrophe before the 's' for one owner e.g.:

- The student's books are on the desk.
- The dog's kennel is in the backyard.

Plural

Often, nouns are made plural by adding an 's' at the end: if ownership is plural and that noun ends in 's' put the apostrophe on the end e.g.:

- The students' books are on their desks.
- The lions' water source has dried up.
- The wolves' howling kept me awake.
- The Jones' house is on the corner.

Sometimes the noun will be plural and will not end with an 's' (e.g., women, children, geese). In this case you need to add both an 's' and an apostrophe to the end of that noun e.g.:

- The women's dressing room.
- The children's toys.
- The geese's honking.

Contractions

The apostrophe takes the place of the letter that has been omitted e.g.:

- Do not *becomes* don't
- They are *becomes* they're
- It is *becomes* it's

However, watch out for words like potatoes, tomatoes and pizzas (which are not written as potato's, tomato's, pizza's). They are stand-alone plurals and no ownership or possession is involved.

Possessive pronouns

Do not use an apostrophe for possessive pronouns (e.g., ours, yours, hers, its, whose, theirs):

- Ours is the tidiest flat in the block.
- Hers is always untidy.
- Theirs is o.k.
- Whose book is it?

The case of “it’s” and “its”

It’s is a contraction of “it is”, or “it has”. Only use an apostrophe if it is a contraction e.g.:

- It’s terribly hot
- It’s been a good place to live.

Its (no apostrophe), indicates a possessive pronoun.

- The dog ran away with its tail between its legs.
- The lion has a thorn in its paw.

Examples of possessive compounds

- Her daughter-in-law’s gift; a friend of mine’s car.
- Moana’s and Rob’s new cars are in the parking lot. (Each of them has a new car and ownership is a separate matter.)
- Moana and Rob’s new car is in the parking lot. (They share ownership; the possessive belongs to the entire phrase.)
- Dawson and Clark’s study found that... (There was one study.)
- Dawson’s and Clark’s studies found that... (Each did a study.)

Quiz - make the necessary corrections:

1. The cat put it’s head in its bowl and its’ now stuck there!
2. My mothers been minding my sisters children because she says its a grandmother’s duty to baby-sit.
3. My father says that its his pleasure to fix the childrens toys when there broken.
4. Dunedins long winters’ cause Josh and Beths chilblains’ to ache.
5. Winters are a great time to order-in pizza’s, especially ones’ with anchovies on top.

Answers:

1. The cat put its head in its bowl and it’s now stuck there!
2. My mother’s been minding my sister’s (one sister)/sisters’ (more than one) children because she says it’s a grandmother’s duty to baby-sit.
3. My father says that it’s his pleasure to fix the children’s toys when they’re broken.
4. Dunedin’s long winters cause Josh’s and Beth’s chilblains to ache.
5. Winters are a great time to order-in pizzas, especially ones with anchovies on top.