

Apostrophe Rules

The apostrophe is a type of punctuation used to indicate possession, mark contractions, and form certain plurals.

Rule 1: Use an apostrophe **to show possession or ownership**.

Test: if you are unsure about using an apostrophe to show possession, try the “of the” phrase. For example, *the tree’s branches = the branches of the tree*. If this test makes sense, then you know it is a possessive form of the noun and needs an apostrophe.

Examples: For **singular nouns**, add ‘s.

the dog’s bowl the flower’s petals the song’s lyrics the professor’s class

For singular nouns ending in –s, you have two options. Choose the one that is easiest to pronounce. Either is correct.

Chris’s car vs. Chris’ car the class’s assignment vs. the class’ assignments

- For **plural nouns** ending in –s, add only an apostrophe.

many students’ views both partners’ investments seven days’ paid vacation

For nouns that do not require –s to be plural (*children, women, geese, etc.*), add ‘s.

geese’s honking children’s toys women’s restroom men’s team

- For **indefinite pronouns** that end with –body or –one (*someone, anybody, etc.*), add ‘s.
anybody’s guess no one’s loss somebody’s lost dog

- For **compound nouns**, add ‘s to the last word.

sister-in-law’s attitude anyone else’s opinion Secretary of State’s position

- When two or more nouns express **joint ownership**, add ‘s to the last noun of the group.
Tom and Sue’s marriage Mom and Dad’s car the sheep, horse and cow’s barn

- To show **individual ownership** when several nouns are used, add ‘s to each noun.

Ben’s and Daniel’s bedrooms Lizzie’s and Joelle’s horses

Rule 2: Use an apostrophe **to indicate contractions**. A contraction occurs when two words are contracted or combined to make one word. The apostrophe stands in for the omitted letter or letters. In academic writing, the use of contractions is usually avoided.

Examples: I am = I’m would not = wouldn’t they are = they’re he is, he has = he’s
you are = you’re –Be especially careful not to confuse *you’re* with the possessive pronoun *your*.

- Some phrases can be contracted by replacing letters or numbers with apostrophes.

rock and roll = rock ‘n’ roll class of 1982 = class of ‘82

Rule 3: It is **optional** to use an apostrophe **to indicate certain types of plurals**, for example when referring to plural upper case letters, numerals, and terms. Either is correct. Whichever you choose, be consistent.

Examples: He usually gets A's and B's. **OR** He usually gets As and Bs.
The gymnast scored 8's and 9's. **OR** The gymnast scored 8s and 9s.
She liked playing Crazy Eight's. **OR** She liked playing Crazy Eights.
He was nostalgic for the 1950's. **OR** He was nostalgic for the 1950s.
She said five like's in one sentence. **OR** She said five *likes** in one sentence.

*When referring to words or terms, they are often italicized.

For lower case letters, it is best to use apostrophes to avoid confusion.

Examples: She is learning how to write as and is in cursive handwriting. (confusing)
She is learning how to write a's and i's in cursive handwriting. (better)

Rule 4: It is **optional** to use an apostrophe to indicate **plurals** with abbreviations or acronyms. Either is correct, however JCCC's Writing Center prefers the form without an apostrophe. Whichever you choose, be consistent.

Examples: POWs YMCAs PhDs CEOs DVDs JPEGs URLs UFOs (preferred)
POW's YMCA's PhD's CEO's DVD's JPEG's URL's UFO's (not preferred)

Rule 5: DO NOT use an apostrophe with the possessive pronouns *its, hers, his, ours, theirs, ours, whose, yours*. The apostrophe is not needed because the meaning of the word (pronoun) indicates possession.

Examples: The shiny new truck in the driveway is yours. (correct)
The shiny new truck in the driveway is your's. (incorrect)
She would like that cute, fluffy puppy to become hers. (correct)
She would like that cute, fluffy puppy to become her's. (incorrect)
Theirs is the most beautiful yard on the street. (correct)
Their's is the most beautiful yard on the street. (incorrect)

These are the basic apostrophe rules; for more complex rules, please see Writing Center staff or several handbooks available in the JCCC Writing Center.

For exercises to practice your apostrophe skills, please see Writing Center staff.