

## Helpsheet

# APOSTROPHES

### Use this sheet to help you:

- use apostrophes correctly to show ownership and omission

## 5 minute self test

### Add apostrophes to the following text

Whose is it? Its not ours. Its not theirs. It could be anybody's. Maybe its the salesmans. He's been here recently. Or perhaps it belongs to one of our neighbours. Theyve dropped in in the last few days. If we cant find its owner, well have to advertise it, perhaps in Saturdays Advertisers personal column. And a rewards a possibility, isnt it? An owners usually grateful for the return of lost property.

(Edkins, 2005)

**Check your answers on Page 8**

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## Introduction

Apostrophes are important! They are used for two main reasons: 1. to show omission, and 2. to show possession. The rules for the use of possessive apostrophes, however, can be particularly complicated. This is the reason why many people, native speakers of English included, make mistakes when using them. This helpsheet attempts to clarify their use.

## Main uses

As noted, there are two main uses of apostrophes:

### 1. To show something has been left out (apostrophes of omission) e.g.

- *I am = I'm*
- *they would = they'd*
- *you will = you'll*
- *you are = you're*
- *you have = you've*

**Activity: continue the list yourself:**

- she will =
- he does not =
- they do not =
- we might not =
- I need not =
- he has not =

In formal academic writing, this use of apostrophes is generally avoided as contracting words is often seen as insufficiently formal.

### 2. To show possession (apostrophes of ownership) e.g.

- *Michael's essay*
- *The Government's wages offer*
- *The company's share price*

The apostrophe is put after the owner.

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Some suggest that apostrophes of possession are really cases of apostrophes of omission which have evolved from the use of language.

There are basic rules for the use of apostrophes and advanced rules. Both are provided in this helpsheet. The basic rules are enough for most people.

## Basic rules

In general, using possessive apostrophes is a several-step process.

1. Take the word you want to make possessive, e.g.,
  - *A dog*
2. Decide whether it is singular or plural (in this case, dog is singular).
3. If you need to show possession, do this by adding an ('s) e.g.,
  - *The dog's leash (the leash belonging to one dog)*
4. If already plural, just add ( ' ) ("Dogs" is plural):
  - *Dogs' leash (the leash belonging to many dogs)*
5. If the word is already plural but does not end in "s" you need to add ( 's)
  - *Children (already plural but no "s")*
  - *Children's game (the game belonging to many children)*

Thus, the use of apostrophes depends on the presence or absence of the final "s":

- If the word does not end in "s", e.g., dog or children, add an ('s), e.g., dog's leash, children's games.
- If the word already ends in "s", e.g., boys, eaves, just add ('), e.g., boys' books, eaves' structure.

As mentioned, the above rules are sufficient for most purposes. However, there are additional rules that are more complex (and can cause a lot of confusion!)

## Advanced rules

Warning! These are rules for those who want to be pedantic about the use of apostrophes!

### 1. Words ending in sibilant sounds

In his book *Right Words* (1990), Stephen Murray-Smith notes that the possessive of words ending in "s" or a "z" sounds (i.e., sibilant sounds) can either have the normal "s" ending or simply take the apostrophe without the additional "s", e.g., Jones'. According to him, both are acceptable.

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## 2. Words used in reverential, religious or poetic contexts

In H. W. Fowler's *Modern English Usage* (Oxford, 1980), the matter is more complicated. Fowler notes that it was formerly customary when words ended in an "s" to write the possessive with an apostrophe but no additional "s". This is still true, he notes, in reverential contexts and in poetry and verse: e.g., *Jesus' Robe*, *Achilles' Heel*, *Moses' tablet*, etc.

## 3. Syllables and possessives

Fowler also makes the point that when the number of the syllables in the word being made possessive is more than the number of syllables in the subjective case or root form of the word, then one uses the "s's" ending. Thus, we keep *Jesus'*, and *Achilles'*, but we write *Charles's* and *Pythagoras's* because the number of syllables in "Charles's" etc is more than in "Charles" (i.e., we say: "Char-les-ses" when we make "Charles" possessive). This is not the case in *Jesus'* which, if you pronounce it correctly, retains two syllables, and does not have three (i.e., we say: "Je-sus" not "Je-sus-es"). We always add the extra "s" when the word is monosyllabic and preferably when the word is longer.

That is, if the word has only syllable, always add the "'s":

- *hat's feather*
- *book's cover, etc*

If the word has more than one syllable, add the extra " 's" except when we pronounce the word with more syllables than the root word, then only add: (" ' ")

## 4. Plural proper names

When we have to make plural proper names possessive (in names that already end in "s"), e.g., the *Rogers* (i.e., the family), we form possessives in the usual way as we would make other plural word forms possessive. Normally words are made possessive by adding "es". So we say, *the Rogerses' House*, *the Joneses' car*.

## 5. Real words and their use

R. L. Trask in *Mind the Gaffe* (Penguin, 2001) notes the following rules for use of apostrophes:

- a. The word that comes before the apostrophe must be a real English word (you can't write "Ladie's shoes" because there is no such a thing as a "ladie")
- b. It must be the right word for the occasion (so we say "Ladies' shoes" and "that lady's shoes" depending on the occasion).
- c. The word being made possessive must match what we say in speech. (We don't say: "an actress' performance", so we must write "an actress's performance"). This point is consistent with Fowler's point about syllables in the word being critical. In enunciating "an actress' performance" we articulate three syllables not two ("ac-tre-ses"), so the rule is to add the extra "s".

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To summarise these points simply, we can express them as advanced rules as follows:

## Advanced rules overview

1. When a word ends in a "s" or "z" sound, the word could either have a " 's" ending or just take the apostrophe without the " 's" ending.

- *Hams's documents, or*
- *Hams' documents (either is correct)*

2. When the word you want to make possessive is used in a reverential context (e.g., referring to Jesus or Moses or some other important figure) or if used in poetry then omit the final "s".

- *Moses' tablet*
- *Jesus' cloak*

3. When the number of the syllables in the word being made possessive is more than the number of syllables in the subjective case or root form of the word, then use "s's"

- *Dr Davies's essay (we say "Da-vi-ses" in plural possessive form but only "Da-vies" in the subjective case)*
- *Dr Rogers's car (we say "Ro-ge-ses" as opposed to "Ro-gers")*

4. When using plural proper names add the "es" in the normal way as you would when making a singular word plural. Then add the apostrophe to make it possessive. "Box" in plural form becomes "boxes", so:

- *The Davies family have a new car (the family), becomes:*
- *The Davieses' car*

(For reasons of elegance it is common to avoid this use and to use the first form instead.)

5. The word before the " 's" must be a real English word. If in doubt remove the " 's" and ask yourself if it is, i.e.,

- *Rabbit's lair ("Rabbit" is a real word)*
- *Ladie's handbags for sale ("ladie" is not a real word)*

6. In addition, note the following common mistakes. Some real words are not made possessive because they are simply not possessive forms. They are already real words. To be made possessive a sense of ownership is required. For example:

- *CD's for sale*

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This is wrong not for any reason given earlier. "CD" = "Compact Disc". But "CD's for sale" is not an example of possession or ownership. "For sale" does not belong to, or is not owned by, the CDs. Therefore write:

- *CDs for sale*

Similarly note the following (a sign on a dress shop window):

- *Alteration's and addition's made here*

Neither are examples of possession. They are already complete words. Ask yourself if there is ownership involved. If not, there is no apostrophe needed. Warning: don't look at shop windows for examples of good punctuation!

7. The most common mistake is to confuse apostrophes of possession with apostrophes of omission. The most common instance of this is to confuse "it's" with "its":

- *The theory needs to have it's key terms defined.*

This is wrong because "it's" is an example of an apostrophe of omission. "It's" means "it is". The meaning intended is that the key terms belonging to the theory need defining (apostrophe of possession not apostrophe of omission). Similarly:

- *Porter's five forces theory is an important tool for analysis. Its used widely in Management.*

This is wrong as here you mean "it is", not "Its" (apostrophe of omission not apostrophe of possession). Note however, that as mentioned earlier, in formal academic writing, apostrophes of omission are best avoided.

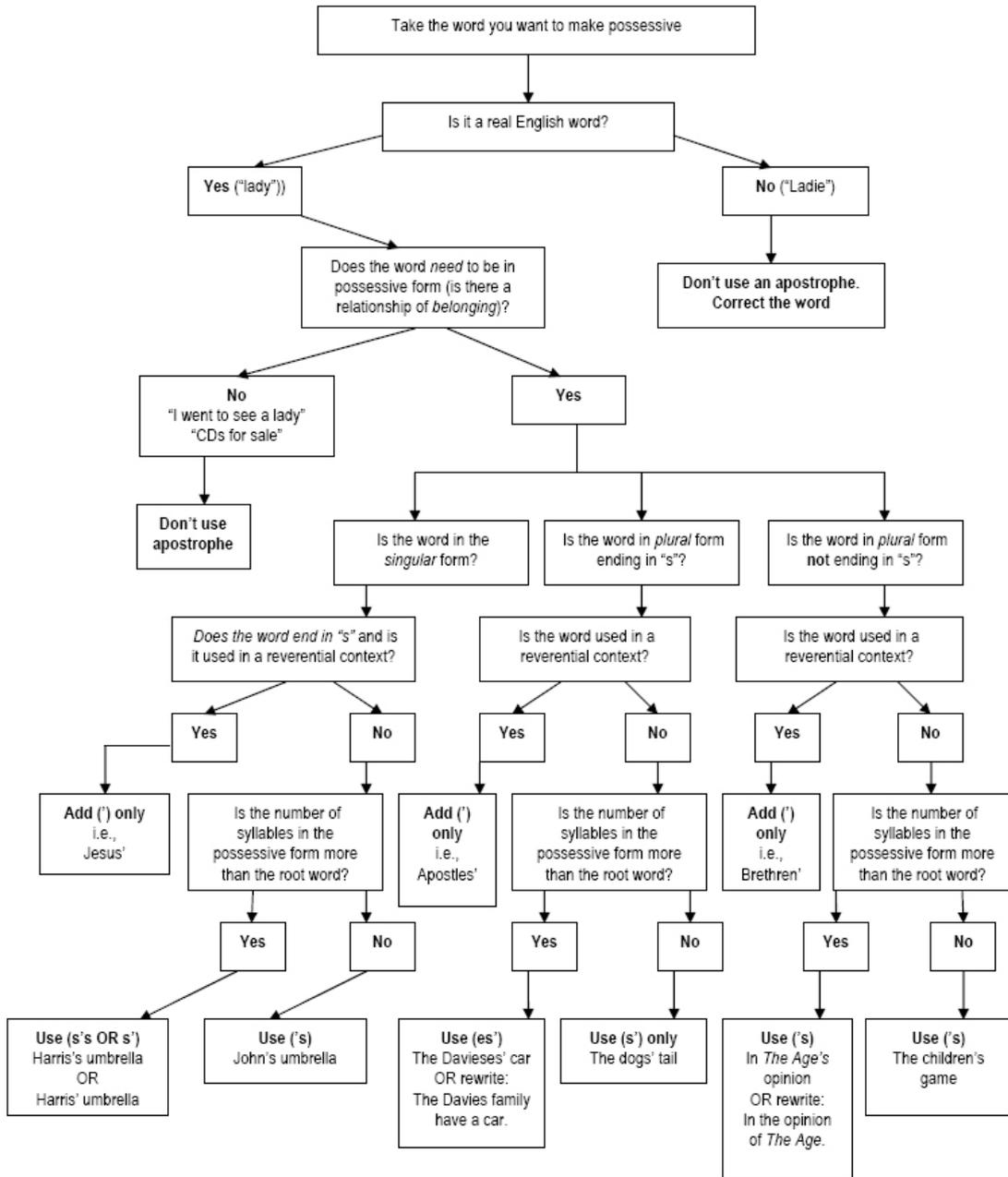
8. Finally note that in some texts (usually American) some expressions are given an apostrophe which is neither an example of possession or omission, but simply to clarify. e.g.,

- *I got all A's in my tests.*
- *People in their 50's plan for retirement.*
- *In the 1950's there was a rush to ...*
- *PhD's are long essays*

In British texts and many academic style guides, it is recommended that these uses are avoided and the apostrophe is omitted (i.e., write: As, 50s, 1950s and PhDs, respectively).

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## Apostrophe Flowchart



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## Activity: add apostrophes to this passage

This is Rebecca Sayers special exercise in apostrophes. She needs a little extra practice. While shes doing this, she should remember to look for both possessive and abbreviation apostrophes. Theres always a chance, too, that a few of Jills tricks may be thrown in. Examples of these are plural words that end in "s", but have no possession belonging to them.

In the school, the childrens attention was held by the teachers voice, as she told a story. In two minutes, the bell would go, but Mrs Johnstons spell was absolute.

The story of three wishes and three princesses was every childs perfect fantasy. The clocks ticking disturbed no-one. Its sound was ignored. The lunch monitors usual scuffle in the corridor went unheard. Would the princesses mother be changed into a frog? Would the princes arrive on their white horses in time? Would the worlds most handsome man marry the royal familys most adored offspring? Even little Ronalds mouth was still.

Later, when sandwiches had been eaten, tomatoes munched, carrots crunched, drinks drunk and the toilet visited, the class wisest members settled down to the days most important item of discussion. Thered be no more stories if the mess in the art room was discovered. Whose job was it to clean the benches? Whered they go for entertainment if Mrs Johnston refused to open that books cover again. Didnt the others realise how foolish yesterday afternoons activity had been? If things couldnt be fixed quickly, the futured be gloomy.

(Edkins, 2005)

## Conclusion

The rules for using apostrophes are complex. Many native speakers make mistakes using them. There are a number of excellent interactive exercises on apostrophes on the web, some of which are listed on the following page. Good luck!

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## Answers

### 5 minute self test

Whose is it? It's not ours. It's not theirs. It could be anybody's. Maybe it's the salesman's. He's been here recently. Or perhaps it belongs to one of our neighbours. They've dropped in in the last few days. If we can't find its owner, we'll have to advertise it, perhaps in Saturday's Advertiser's personal column. And a reward's a possibility, isn't it? An owner's usually grateful for the return of lost property.

(Edkins, 2005)

### Exercise

This is Rebecca Sayer's special exercise in apostrophes. She needs a little extra practice. While she's doing this, she should remember to look for both possessive and abbreviation apostrophes. There's always a chance, too, that a few of Jill's tricks may be thrown in. Examples of these are plural words that end in "s", but have no possession belonging to them.

In the school, the children's attention was held by the teacher's voice, as she told a story. In two minutes, the bell would go, but Mrs Johnston's spell was absolute.

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Later, when sandwiches had been eaten, tomatoes munched, carrots crunched, drinks drunk and the toilet visited, the class's wisest members settled down to the day's most important item of discussion. There'd be no more stories if the mess in the art room was discovered. Whose job was it to clean the benches? Where'd they go for entertainment if Mrs Johnston refused to open that book's cover again? Didn't the others realise how foolish yesterday afternoon's activity had been? If things couldn't be fixed quickly, the future'd be gloomy.

(Edkins, 2005)

## References

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