Using the apostrophe

This guide has been written to give a simple explanation of the use of the apostrophe (’). It explains the main rules for its use, and gives examples of commonly encountered problems.

Other useful guides: Sentence structure, Using the comma, Using the semi-colon and colon

The apostrophe has two main uses

- It replaces missing letters when we join words e.g. I can’t swim.
  This is known as a contraction.
- It shows ownership e.g. this is John’s book.

Constructions

When contractions are used, the apostrophe replaces the letter or letters that were removed to make a shorter word:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original</th>
<th>Becomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>do not</td>
<td>don’t</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The apostrophe replaces the missing letter, in this case the o.

Further examples are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original</th>
<th>Becomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I will</td>
<td>I’ll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you are</td>
<td>you’re</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they are</td>
<td>they’re</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Whilst it is important to understand the function of contractions, their use is not usually appropriate in academic writing.

Ownership

Apostrophes are also used to show ownership – they make a word possessive. To make a word possessive follow the three simple rules given below.

1. If the word is singular add ’s:
   the student’s books – meaning the books belonging to the student.

Further examples are:

   the boss’s armchair; the government’s legislation.

2. If the word is a plural but does not end in s add ’s:
   women’s rights – meaning the rights of women.
Further examples are:

- *children’s playground* – meaning the playground for children;
- *men’s changing rooms* – meaning the changing rooms for men.

3. **If the word is plural and ends in *s* just add an apostrophe:**

   - *the students’ library books* – meaning the books belonging to the students.

Further examples are:

- *the ladies’ football league;*
- *the workers’ rights.

### Common problems in using apostrophes

The apostrophe is frequently misused. Words that cause particular problems are: *its / it’s* and *whose / who’s*.

#### Its / it’s

*Use* **its** when you want to show possession:

- *the government abandoned its policy.*

**Its** belongs to a group of words that are already possessive. Other examples are: *it is hers; it is yours.* These words are already possessive; they do not need apostrophes to indicate possession.

*Use* **it’s** when you want to shorten *it is*:

- *it’s a nice day.*

**It’s** is a contraction of *it is*. The apostrophe replaces the missing *i*.

#### Whose / who’s

*Use* **whose** when you want to show possession:

- *the student whose notes I borrowed.*

**Whose** belongs to the same group of possessive words as **its**. It does not need an apostrophe to denote possession.

*Use* **who’s** when you want to shorten who is:

- *the student who’s coming to visit.*

**Who’s** is a contraction of who is. The apostrophe replaces the missing *i*.

**REMEMBER**: just because a word ends in *s*, it does not mean it needs an apostrophe! An apostrophe is added to show **possession** or to replace a missing letter or letters in **contractions**. If you are unsure when to use an apostrophe, check your use of the apostrophe falls under one of the rules outlined in this guide.