**The Apostrophe**

**Summary:**

This handout provides rules and examples for apostrophe usage.

**Contributors:**Purdue OWL  
**Last Edited:** 2013-02-22 07:53:18

The apostrophe has three uses:

1. To form possessives of nouns
2. To show the omission of letters
3. To indicate certain plurals of lowercase letters

**Forming Possessives of Nouns**

To see if you need to make a possessive, turn the phrase around and make it an "of the..." phrase. For example:

the boy's hat = the hat of the boy

three days' journey = journey of three days

If the noun after "of" is a building, an object, or a piece of furniture, then **no** apostrophe is needed!

room of the hotel = hotel room   
door of the car = car door   
leg of the table = table leg

Once you've determined whether you need to make a possessive, follow these rules to create one.

* **add 's to the singular form of the word (even if it ends in -s):**

the owner's car   
James's hat (James' hat is also acceptable. For plural, proper nouns that are possessive, use an apostrophe after the 's': "The Eggleses' presentation was good." The Eggleses are a husband and wife consultant team.)

* **add 's to the plural forms that do not end in -s:**

the children's game   
the geese's honking

* **add ' to the end of plural nouns that end in -s:**

two cats' toys  
three friends' letters  
the countries' laws

* **add 's to the end of compound words:**

my brother-in-law's money

* **add 's to the last noun to show joint possession of an object:**

Todd and Anne's apartment

**Showing omission of letters**

Apostrophes are used in contractions. A contraction is a word (or set of numbers) in which one or more letters (or numbers) have been omitted. The apostrophe shows this omission. Contractions are common in speaking and in informal writing. To use an apostrophe to create a contraction, place an apostrophe where the omitted letter(s) would go. Here are some examples:

**don't = do not   
I'm = I am   
he'll = he will   
who's = who is   
shouldn't = should not   
didn't = did not   
could've= could have (NOT "could of"!)   
'60 = 1960**

**Forming plurals of lowercase letters**

Apostrophes are used to form plurals of letters that appear in lowercase; here the rule appears to be more typographical than grammatical, e.g. "three ps" versus "three p's." To form the plural of a lowercase letter, place **'s** after the letter. There is no need for apostrophes indicating a plural on capitalized letters, numbers, and symbols (though keep in mind that some editors, teachers, and professors still prefer them). Here are some examples:

**p's and q's** = minding your p's and q's is a phrase believed to be taken from the early days of the printing press when letters were set in presses backwards so they would appear on the printed page correctly. Although the origins of this phrase are disputed, the expression was used commonly to mean, "Be careful, don't make a mistake." Today, the term also indicates maintaining politeness, possibly from "mind your pleases and thank-yous."

Nita's mother constantly stressed minding one's p's and q's.

**three Macintosh G4s = three of the Macintosh model G4**

There are three G4s currently used in the writing classroom.

**many &s = many ampersands**

That printed page has too many &s on it.

**the 1960s = the years in decade from 1960 to 1969**

The 1960s were a time of great social unrest.

The '60s were a time of great social unrest.

**Don't use apostrophes for personal pronouns, the relative pronoun *who*, or for noun plurals.**

Apostrophes should not be used with possessive pronouns because possessive pronouns already show possession—they don't need an apostrophe. His, her, its, my, yours, ours are all possessive pronouns. However, indefinite pronouns, such as one, anyone, other, no one, and anybody, can be made possessive. Here are some examples:

**INCORRECT**: **his'** book   
**CORRECT**: **his** book  
**CORRECT**: **one's** book  
**CORRECT**: **anybody's** book  
  
**INCORRECT**: **Who's** dog is this?  
**CORRECT**: **Whose** dog is this?  
  
**INCORRECT**: The group made **it's** decision.   
**CORRECT**: The group made **its** decision.

(Note: *Its* and *it's* are not the same thing. *It's* is a contraction for "it is" and *its* is a possessive pronoun meaning "belonging to it." It's raining out = it is raining out. A simple way to remember this rule is the fact that you don't use an apostrophe for the possessive his or hers, so don't do it with its!)

**INCORRECT**: a friend of **yours'**   
**CORRECT**: a friend of **yours**

**INCORRECT**: She waited for three **hours'** to get her ticket.   
**CORRECT**: She waited for three **hours** to get her ticket.

**Proofreading for apostrophes**

A good time to proofread is when you have finished writing the paper. Try the following strategies to proofread for apostrophes:

* If you tend to leave out apostrophes, check every word that ends in *-s* or *-es* to see if it needs an apostrophe.
* If you put in too many apostrophes, check every apostrophe to see if you can justify it with a rule for using apostrophes.