

## Effective Writing Center – Student Resources

### APOSTROPHES

The purpose of this handout is to present an overview of rules for using apostrophes.

1. **Use an apostrophe to show that a noun is possessive.** Possessive nouns are nouns that show ownership. For example, *Bob's hat* or *Sue's desk* with the hat belonging to Bob and the desk belonging to Sue. Sometimes, however, the ownership is implied and a little harder to see, such as a *day's work* (with the work belonging to the day) or the *table's legs* (the legs belonging to the table). When you are unsure, try turning it into a phrase.

- Table's legs = the legs of the table
- a Day's work = the work of a day

To show possession for a singular noun, you add an apostrophe ['] and s.

**When to add –'s:** If a noun does not end in –s, add –'s.

- Susan pruned the tree's branches last week.
- Thank you for finding the children's bikes.

**When to add only an apostrophe:** If the noun is plural and already ends in –s, add just an apostrophe.

- Both students' papers were well-written.
- Both cars' tires were flat.

**How to shown joint possession:** To show that two or more nouns both have possession of the same thing, use –'s or –s' with the last noun only.

- Have you seen Trisha and Greg's new car, yet?
- Mary and James' tickets came in the mail today.

To show individual possession—that is, two different people each owning something separately--make all nouns possessive.

- Mary's and Michael's grades have been posted.

2. **Use an apostrophe and –s to show that an indefinite pronoun is possessive.**

- Someone's book has fallen into the snow.

3. **Use an apostrophe to show omissions in contractions and numbers.** In contractions, apostrophes take the place of the missing letters. For example *it's* stands for *it is*, and *can't* stands for *cannot*.

- It's terrible that James can't find his textbooks he lost last week.

Note that *it's*, with an apostrophe, is not possessive--*it's* stands for *it is*. When you want the possessive pronoun, you want to use *its*, with no apostrophe. If you are unsure whether you want to use *it's* or *its*, say it as *it is*. If it does not make sense as *it is*, then you want the possessive pronoun *its*.

In addition, an apostrophe can be used to show the omission of the first two digits of a year. For example, '95 stands for 1995.

- A similar situation happened in '95.

Note that when discussing something that happened during a particular time period, such as "during the 1990s," no apostrophe is needed.

4. An apostrophe is no longer used in plural numbers, plural letters, plural abbreviations, and words mentioned in a sentence as words. Here are the correct forms to follow:
  - She skated several figure 8s in a row.
  - Two large Ms were painted on both doors.
  - He collected two IOUs today.
  - I must have told him twenty nos today!

## RESOURCES

### **The Apostrophe at Purdue's OWL**

[http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g\\_apost.html](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g_apost.html)

### **Apostrophes from The Guide to Grammar and Writing**

<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/marks/apostrophe.htm>