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# Apostrophes Made Easy

A free sample from *Editing and Proofreading*

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Scribe Consulting

[www.scribe.com.au](http://www.scribe.com.au)



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## 5.6 Apostrophes

The most common use of an apostrophe is to indicate possession by a person or thing of some other person or thing; for example, *John's book* or *Europe's history*.

Another use of the apostrophe is to indicate the omission of letters in a contraction; for example, *isn't*, *doesn't* and *can't*.

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### Using apostrophes to indicate possession

#### A simple definition

A **noun** is a word that stands for a person, place or thing.

Examples include *dogs*, *Tim*, *house*, *books*, *speaker*, *staff member* and *tables*.

Using an apostrophe to indicate possession is really quite straight forward, yet it is a frequent source of confusion. There are two separate cases to consider:

#### Shared possession

If a noun stands for more than one person or thing, we show *shared possession* by adding an apostrophe *after* the *s*. For example:

the CEOs' perks	(the perks shared by two or more CEOs)
the players' pride	(the pride shared by two or more players)
the programmers' books	(the books shared by two or more programmers)
the boys' games	(the games shared by two or more boys)

#### Tip #42

Shared possession is indicated by adding an apostrophe *after* the *s*.

### Solo possession

If a noun stands for a single person or thing we show *solo possession* by adding an apostrophe *before* the *s*. For example:

the girl's book	(the book belonging to the one girl)
Australia's economy	(the economy of the one Australia)
the dog's paw	(the paw of the one dog)
the dog's paws	(the paws of the one dog)

Notice from the last pair that it doesn't matter if there's one paw or four paws. The apostrophe comes *before* the *s* because there's only one dog, so it's a case of solo possession.

#### Tip #43

Sole possession is indicated by adding an apostrophe *before* the *s*.

When a singular noun ends in an *s* or *z* sound, there is debate as to whether to add apostrophe-*s* (as above) or just the apostrophe. For example:

the princess's gown	or	the princess' gown
James's briefcase	or	James' briefcase

A reasonable convention here is 'write it the way you say it'. For example, you probably say *prin-cess-uhz* and *James-uhz*. If you say the extra *s* at the end of these words, it thus seems sensible to write it with the extra *s*, like so: *princess's, James's*.

### An exception

As with many rules, there is an exception. This one concerns nouns that form their plural without adding an *s*. For example: woman/women, person/people, sheep/sheep and child/children.

Words that change spelling like this take the apostrophe *before* the *s* in both forms. For example:

the woman's idea	(the idea belonging to the one woman)
the women's idea	(the idea shared by two or more women)
the child's gift	(the gift belonging to the one child)
the children's gift	(the gift shared by two or more children)

#### Tip #44

Nouns that form their plural without adding an *s* (for example, woman/women) are made possessive by adding an apostrophe *before* the *s* in both forms.

## Using apostrophes to indicate Omitted letters

The second use for apostrophes is to indicate the omission of letters when two or more words have been contracted by popular usage. For example:

Table 6.2: Apostrophes replace omitted letters

Shortened form	Full form
can't	cannot
isn't	is not
don't	do not
I'll	I will
there's	there is
let's	let us

Note that although it is commonly omitted in contemporary writing, *let's* (being short for *let us*) has traditionally had an apostrophe to indicate the omitted letter.

## Common errors

A frequently seen error is the unnecessary use of an apostrophe:

The boy's were arguing.                      *Wrong*  
 The boys were arguing.                      *Correct*

An apostrophe here would be wrong because we are not indicating that the boys own anything.

A closely related error is the use of an apostrophe to make an upper-case word plural; for example:

We bought two new PC's.                      *Poor*  
 We bought two new PCs.                      *Better*

There is no need for the apostrophe here as it is not indicating possession or omitted letters.

Finally, take note of the common confusion between *its* and *it's*. The first means *belonging to it*; the second is short for *it is*. For example:

What is its publication date?                      (What is the publication date belonging to it?)  
 It's clear to me.                                      (It is clear to me.)

### Tip #45

Don't use an apostrophe to make a word plural.

# Full table of contents

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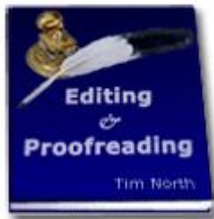
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