

*Proofreading Skills Tutorial:*

**Tutorial #8:**  
**Use of Apostrophes with**  
**Possessives and Contractions**

**Using Apostrophes with Possessives**

**Using Apostrophes with Contractions**

**Avoiding the Misuse of Apostrophes**

**Writing Center**  
**English 800 Center**

**All notes and exercises can be done on separate sheets of paper, which you should bring to your conference with an instructor in the center.**

**As you work through the tutorial, make sure to see an instructional aide at the front desk in the Writing Center or English 800 Center if you have any questions or difficulties.**

# Apostrophes

Apostrophes have two main functions: to show possession and to form contractions. This tutorial will demonstrate strategies for:

1. **using apostrophes with possessives**
2. **using apostrophes with contractions**
3. **avoiding the misuse of apostrophes.**

As you do this tutorial and learn about the different ways that we use apostrophes, try to think about the kinds of apostrophe errors that your classroom instructor may have pointed out in your writing. If you know what types of errors to look for in your own essays, you will be able to proofread more effectively.

## Part One: Apostrophes with Possessives

Consider these two groups of phrases:

**Group 1:** the key that belongs to **Bianca**  
the essay of the **student**  
the policy of the **school**

**Group 2:** **Bianca's** key  
the **student's** essay  
the **school's** policy

Both groups of phrases are correctly written, but one group may be more effective. Which one seems better? In your own words, explain why.

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As you may have noticed, if you do not use an apostrophe, your writing may become too wordy. By shortening each of the phrases below, the apostrophe reduces the phrase from five or six words to merely three.

As you can see in **Group 1** and **Group 2**, an apostrophe can be used to show ownership or possession. To change a noun into a possessive, you add an apostrophe + “s” to **the person or thing that possesses or owns**:

<del>the key that belongs to Bianca</del>	<i>or</i>	<b>Bianca’s</b> key (Bianca possesses the key.)
<del>the essay of the student</del>	<i>or</i>	the <b>student’s</b> essay (The student owns the essay.)
<del>the policy of the school</del>	<i>or</i>	the <b>school’s</b> policy (The school possesses the policy.)

**Principle I. To form the possessive of a noun that does not already end in “s,” add the apostrophe + “s.” Remember to add the “s” to the person or thing that possesses or owns.**

The books of the <b>children</b>	<i>or</i>	the <b>children’s</b> books
the circulation of the <b>newspaper</b>	<i>or</i>	the <b>newspaper’s</b> circulation

We added an apostrophe + “s” to “children” to show that the children possess or own the books. And we added an apostrophe + “s” to “newspaper” to show that the newspaper possesses or owns the circulation.

Sometimes adding “s” to a word that already ends in “s” is correct, but it is *always* correct to add an apostrophe *after* the “s.” If a singular proper noun such as a person’s name or the name of a city or state ends in “s,” you may decide to add the apostrophe + “s” although most writers prefer using the apostrophe alone. Consider these examples, which are *all* correct:

<b>Tom Hanks’s</b> films	<i>or</i>	<b>Tom Hanks’</b> films
<b>Arkansas’s</b> population	<i>or</i>	<b>Arkansas’</b> population

**Principle II. If the possessive noun already ends in “s,” add the apostrophe *after* the “s.”**

Here are more examples:

the rules of the <b>parents</b>	<i>or</i>	the <b>parents’</b> rules
the lyrics of the <b>rappers</b>	<i>or</i>	the <b>rappers’</b> lyrics
the car belonging to <b>Chris</b>	<i>or</i>	<b>Chris’</b> car

## Exercise 1

**Instructions:** Using Principles I and II, rewrite each underlined group of words, using apostrophes to show possession. The first sentence has been done for you.

Example: We like the brownies of her grandmother.      *Her grandmother's brownies*

1. The instructor read the poems written by the students.      *The students' poems*
2. Dominique renewed the lease of her apartment.
3. She liked the drawings of the children.
4. The crowd at the ballpark was surprised at the skill of the rookie player.
5. Enrique was angry about the voting records of the senators.
6. Raquel's new boyfriend disliked the attitudes of her parents.
7. The university was surprised with the test scores of the applicants.
8. I have already graded the essay that James wrote.

### Individual and Shared Possession

**Principle III.** To show individual possession, add an apostrophe + "s" to *each* possessive noun.

Consider these examples, which are *both* correct:

- the careers that Lady Gaga and Taylor Swift have      *or*  
Lady Gaga's and Taylor Swift's musical careers  
(Lady Gaga and Taylor Swift have not both had the same musical careers. They *each* possess separate, *individual* careers.)
- the cell phones of Lily and Benny      *or*      **Lily's and Benny's** cell phones  
(Lily and Benny *each* possess their own *individual* cell phones.)

**Principle IV. To show shared possession, add an apostrophe + “s” *only* to the last noun.**

- The anniversary party of Ben and Jennifer *or* Ben and Jennifer’s anniversary party was memorable.  
(Ben and Jennifer *share* the same wedding anniversary, which they celebrated at their party.)
- The wine of Martini and Ross was delicious. *or* Martini and Ross’s wine was delicious.  
(Martini and Ross *share* ownership of the same winery.)
- The concert of Jay Z and Timberlake *or* Jay Z and Timberlake’s concert was fantastic.  
(Jay Z and Timberlake are on tour, appearing in concerts together.)

## Exercise 2

**Instructions** Using Principles III and IV, rewrite each underlined group of words, using apostrophes to show possession. The first sentence has been done for you.

- Examples:**
- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <u>The wedding anniversary of my grandparents</u> was unforgettable.                               | My <u>grandparents’</u> wedding anniversary   |
| <u>The old songs that Keith Richards and Mick Jagger</u> wrote for the Rolling Stones are classic. | Keith Richards and Mick <u>Jagger’s</u> songs |
| The luxury cars of Kim Kardashian and <u>Nicole</u> “Snooki” Polizzi are expensive.                | <u>Kim’s and Snooki’s</u> cars                |

1. The adventures of Bill and Ted were vividly depicted in the film about time travel.  
Bill and Ted’s adventures were vividly depicted in the film about time travel.  
(Bill and Ted shared their adventures.)
2. The audience enjoyed the balcony scene of Romeo and Juliet.

3. The audience laughed during the movie of Laurel and Hardy.
4. The literary works that Toni Morrison and Langston Hughes wrote are among the most admired in African American literature.
5. We admire the designs that Armani and Dior created.

### Exercise 3

**Instructions:** Using Principles I, II, III, and IV, rewrite each underlined group of words, using apostrophes to show possession. The first sentence has been done for you.

1. The critics of the playwright saw these plays as ways of sorting through the meanings of both the calamities of the past and the uncertainties of the present.

*The playwright's critics* saw these plays as ways of sorting through the meanings of both the calamities of the past and the uncertainties of the present.

2. The search of Oedipus for the killer of Laius and the doubt of Othello about the fidelity of his wife all lead to irreversible results.
3. In the woods, the lovers find themselves in the unpredictable kingdom of King Oberon and his wife Titania.
4. The play ends with the warm assurances of Puck and his gentle urging to “Give me your hands.”

—adapted from *The Bedford Introduction to Literature* by Michael Meyer

## **Part Two: Apostrophes with Contractions**

In addition to using apostrophes to show possession, writers use apostrophes with contractions. In a contraction, two words are combined, and the apostrophe shows where one or more letters are missing. For example, when the words **are** and **not** are combined into the contraction **aren't**, we use an apostrophe to show *where* the letter “o” is missing. Some of the most common contractions are listed below.

<b>Original Words</b>	<b>Contraction</b>
are not	aren't
can not <i>or</i> cannot	can't
did not	didn't
do not	don't
does not	doesn't
he is	he's
I am	I'm
I had	I'd
I have	I've
is not	isn't
it has, it is	it's
let us	let's

<b>Original Words</b>	<b>Contraction</b>
she is	she's
should not	shouldn't
they are	they're
they would	they'd
they will	they'll
was not	wasn't
we are	we're
we have	we've
we will	we'll
who is, who has	who's
will not	won't

**Principle V.** A contraction is a combination of two words in which an apostrophe is added to show *where* one or more letters are missing.

### **Contractions in Informal and Academic Writing**

We frequently use contractions when we speak. But since they are generally inappropriate in academic or formal writing, if in doubt, check with your instructor to see if she or he allows you to use contractions in your writing. While contractions might be acceptable in informal writing such as emails, text messages, and letters, many instructors find contractions inappropriate in essays.



**Principle VI. Contractions are generally inappropriate in academic or formal writing.**

Although contractions are usually words like *isn't*, *I've*, *we're* and *they're*, some contractions consist of places and names as show in the following examples. All the apostrophes in the sentence below are used to make contractions of a noun + the verb “*is*.” However, these kinds of contractions are always considered too informal and should never be used in academic writing.

Informal: School's almost over, and Yuri's returning to a full-time job as a paralegal in a law office, anxiously waiting for Friday's paycheck.

Academically Correct: School is almost over, and Yuri is returning to a full-time job as a paralegal in a law office, anxiously waiting for Friday's paycheck.

### Exercise 4

**Instructions:** Using Principles V and VI, revise the following sentences to correct any mistakes in the use of apostrophes. First, underline the contractions. Then, if the apostrophe is missing, the apostrophe should be added, or if a contraction is too informal, make the correction. The first sentence has been done for you.

1. If you're a fan of the outdoors, you'll enjoy exploring the trails at Point Lobos.  
If you're a fan of the outdoors, you'll enjoy exploring the trails at Point Lobos.
2. In the middle of summer, a bus will take it's passengers from San Francisco to Pfeiffer State Park where hiking enthusiasts wont be disappointed.
3. Even though theyre going to be arriving late in the afternoon, they wont be hungry because they will have eaten lunch on the bus.
4. Its not uncommon that some hikers wont want to wait for dinner and might stop by the restaurant at the Lodge where Ive enjoyed many delicious meals.
5. Juanita's not willing to eat indoors and doesnt want to pay for an expensive meal.
6. Theyd prefer buying food at the local grocery, and dont want to enjoy an outdoor picnic.

7. Even though some people don't enjoy "roughing it," a true outdoor enthusiast doesn't mind making sacrifices to enjoy the wonders of nature, something that can't be experienced in the city.
8. Kathleen's hoping that the fog will disappear by this weekend and that it won't spoil the fireworks display that we've all been eagerly anticipating.

### **Part Three: The Misuse of Apostrophes**

#### **Possessive Pronouns**

Sometimes apostrophes are misused. Consider these two groups of sentences:

**Group 1:** The dog is wagging it's tail.  
That Prius in the parking lot is our's.  
Lorena said that camera is her's.

**Group 2:** The dog is wagging *its* tail.  
That Prius in the parking lot is *ours*.  
Lorena said that diamond bracelet is *hers*.

Can you identify which group seems better? In your own words, explain why.

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As you may have noticed, the sentences in Group 2 are correct. Not every word ending in "s" requires an apostrophe. In the case of the possessive pronouns in boldface above (*its*, *ours*, *hers*), apostrophes are incorrect and should *not* be added.

Be especially careful with *it's* and *its*, \* which are frequently confused.

- *It's* stands for *it is* or *it has*.  
For example: *It's* cold in the Writing Center.
- *Its* is a personal pronoun showing possession.  
For example: The cat licked *its* paw.

**Principle VII. To form the possessive of a pronoun, do not add an apostrophe.**

### Plural Nouns and Verbs that End in “S”

There are other ways that apostrophes are misused. Consider the following groups of sentences.

Incorrect: He ordered three **smoothie’s**.

Correct: He ordered three **smoothies**.  
*plural noun*

Incorrect: The San Francisco **Giants’** are playing the **Dodgers’** tonight.

Incorrect: The San Francisco **Giant’s** are playing the **Dodger’s** tonight.

Correct: The San Francisco **Giants** are playing the **Dodgers** tonight.  
*plural noun plural noun*

Incorrect: The team **play’s** basketball.

Correct: The team **plays** basketball.  
*third-person singular verb*

Note how none of the previous nouns or verbs require apostrophes since they do **not** show possession, and they are **not** contractions.

**Principle VIII. Never add an apostrophe to a third-person singular verb (a verb that ends in “s”). When you make a noun plural, do *not* add an apostrophe. The only time plural nouns should have apostrophes is when they are possessive.**

Consider these examples.

Correct: The Golden State **Warriors’** game with the Denver **Nuggets** is tonight.  
*possessive plural noun*

Incorrect: The Golden State **Warrior’s** are playing the Denver **Nuggets’** tonight.  
*plural noun*

## Exercise 5

**Instructions:** Using Principles I through VIII, proofread the following paragraphs for possessives and add apostrophes if necessary.

The Golden State Warriors recent loss of lead assistant coach Mike Malone may have profound implications for the team. Malone, who was recently hired as the head coach of the Sacramento Kings, was certainly part of the Warriors success in reaching the Western Conference semifinals this past season. When they hired head coach Mark Jackson in 2011, the Warriors were making sure that Jackson, a first-time coach, would have an experienced assistant coach in Malone, making him the highest-paid assistant coach in the league.

Jacksons coaching was unfairly discredited during the postseason as a result of in-huddle camera time that showed him motivating more than strategizing. Sports writer Lowell Cohn of *The Santa Rosa Press* expressed little respect for Jacksons actual coaching in a recent column. Cohn essentially writes that Malone provided all the strategy for the team:

Malone was the Warriors strategist. Jackson doesnt want you to believe that. Its a bad look when the head coach is not the strategy guy. You never in a million years could imagine the Spurs Gregg Popovich ceding strategy decisions to someone else. Jackson did. Youve watched Warriors games on TV. Youve heard Jackson do the rah-rah routine during timeouts—he loves to put on the microphone so fans can hear him. Never once did he give his team a play.

With respect to Cohn, its hard to agree with such overly simplistic summations for two reasons. First, TV networks always wait for moments of viewer-friendly narration to relay to its audience. Second, Jackson also has played the 13th-most games in NBA history, and hes third in all-time assists; its safe to say he learned something along the way. In other words, Jackson knows what hes doing, too.

However, its also true that Jackson will need another strategic top assistant, and yes, this makes him very similar to most coaches in the league. Its obvious Malone was an excellent assistant, and its going to be tough to replace him. Clearly people in the organization thought highly of Malone, and he was going to land a head-coaching job eventually. So if Jackson wants to repeat his teams success in 2013-14, the goal will be to seek a replacement that closely fits Malones skill set. The loss of Mike Malone will certainly sting, but Jackson and the Warriors ownership have made all the right moves in management thus far. It stands to reason they wont settle for anything less than another top-flight assistant.

## **Proofreading for Apostrophes**

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 tend to put in too many apostrophes, underline all the words that contain apostrophes, and then check every one to see if you can justify it with a rule or principle in this tutorial.
- Read your work aloud; often you can hear an incorrect “s” ending or notice that an “s” ending is missing.
- Remember to check with your instructor to see if s/he allows you to use contractions in your essays.

## Exercise 6

### Instructions:

1. Review an essay where your teacher has graded and marked your apostrophe errors. Are there any similarities in your errors? For example, are you adding apostrophes to plural nouns or verbs that end in “s”? Are you placing apostrophes in the wrong places in contractions? Or are you adding apostrophes to possessive pronouns? Knowing what to look for during proofreading can make it easier to find your apostrophe errors.
2. Look back at the principles and exercises in this tutorial and make notes on a separate sheet of paper. You will bring these notes and the essay to your conference.
3. Make an appointment for a conference with an instructor in the Writing Center (18-104) or English 800 Center (18-102). To make this appointment, stop by the Centers or call (650) 574-6436. During this appointment, the professor will make sure you understand the concepts covered in this tutorial, answer any questions that you might have, review your answers to these exercises, and check to see if you can incorporate the skill into your writing.

### Reminder:

For this appointment, bring

- any notes about the tutorial that you have taken
- your completed tutorial exercises
- and the essay