

The Apostrophe

The two main functions of apostrophes are to show omission and to indicate possession. In rare cases, an apostrophe may be required to indicate a plural form. However, a common mistake is to overgeneralize this usage where no apostrophe is required.

To show omission

Contractions occur when an apostrophe is used to indicate missing letters in the abbreviated forms of many short phrases. Avoid using contractions in academic writing as they are too informal. An apostrophe can also indicate numbers that have been omitted.

I'm (I am)	They're (They are)	Can't (Cannot)	Could've (Could have)
She's (She is/she has)	You're (You are)	He'll (He will)	Won't (Will not)
He'd (He would/he had)	We've (We have)	Doesn't (Does not)	Didn't (Did not)
Class of '08 (2008)	In the '60s (1960s)	It's (It is)	Who's (Who is)

To show possession

1. Use an apostrophe before an -s to show ownership.

The boy's hat	People's choice	Women's shoes	Glen's piano
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EXCEPTION: Possessive pronouns already indicate the notion of ownership, so no apostrophe is required (his, hers, theirs, ours, yours, whose, its).

2. Use an apostrophe before an -s to show ownership of a singular noun that already ends in -s.

James's hat (<i>James' hat</i> is also acceptable in non-academic styles.)
The boss's office (<i>The boss' office</i> is also an acceptable form, but it is less common.)

NOTE: Do not add another s for plural nouns ending in -s and names from the ancient world.

Students' grades	Three friends' letters	Jesus' followers	Achilles' heel
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Question: When do you use *it's* and *its*? Ask yourself if the sentence still makes sense if you replace *it's* with *it is*. (It's = it is; its = the possessive form.) Similarly, use *who's* as a contraction of *who is*, and use *whose* when you want to indicate possession.

Correct	The school closed its doors after 50 years.
Incorrect	The school closed it's doors after 50 years.
Correct	The student whose exam went missing will have to write it again.
Incorrect	The student who's exam went missing will have to write it again.

3. Add an apostrophe + s to show joint possession as exemplified below.

Correct	Todd and Anne's apartment.	Incorrect	Todd's and Anne's apartment.*
Correct	My and my husband's dog.	Incorrect	My husband and I's dog.

*Use "Todd's and Anne's apartments" to indicate that both Todd and Anne have their own apartment.

To form plurals of lowercase letters

An apostrophe is only used to indicate plurals of single letters and digits to avoid confusion.

Correct	The word "Athabasca" has four a's in it.
Incorrect	The word "Athabasca" has four as in it.
Correct	Nita's mother constantly stressed minding one's p's and q's.
Incorrect	Nita's mother constantly stressed minding one's ps and qs.
Correct	Parents are invited to attend the council meeting.
Incorrect	Parent's are invited to attend the council meeting.
Correct	Binary code uses 0's and 1's.
Incorrect	Binary code uses 0s and 1s.

References:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/punctuation/apostrophe_introduction.html

