



APOSTROPHES

THE PRINCIPLE

The principle behind the apostrophe is this: use an apostrophe either to make a noun show possession or to take the place of missing letters, as in contractions.

Apostrophes Show Possession

The apostrophe is used with nouns to show possession (ownership). Ask yourself whether or not the noun showing possession ends in “s.” If it does *not*, add an apostrophe plus an “s.”

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| Ex: dog + 's = dog's | The dog's house is painted red. |
| Ex: today + 's = today's | Today's children watch too much TV. |
| Ex: children + 's = children's | The children's movie is a cartoon. |

If the noun already ends in “s,” then decide whether it is singular or plural. If it is singular, add an apostrophe and another “s”:

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| Ex: Keats + 's = Keats's | We are reading Keats's poetry. |
| Ex.: boss + 's= boss's | The boss's car is parked in a special space by the door. |

If the noun ending in “s” is plural, simply add an apostrophe after the “s” to show possession:

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| Ex: five boys + ' = boys' | The five boys' chores are listed on the bulletin board. |
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Apostrophes in Contractions

For contractions (two words combined to make one word) the apostrophe is placed in lieu of the missing letter(s). For example:

is + not = isn't (the apostrophe replaces the letter “o”).

THE PROBLEM

Here is a paragraph that violates the principles of apostrophe use outlined above. (Words used incorrectly are underlined.)

Cinderellas stepmother, an ugly woman, has two mean daughters. The daughter's whining makes life difficult for Cinderella. The womens jealousy overtakes them because Cinderella is beautiful. Then, Cinderella receives the princes invitation to a ball. Every girls desire is to attend. The stepmother doesnt want Cinderella to go, but she decides shes going anyway.

THE SOLUTION

Here is the same paragraph, corrected, with possessive nouns and contractions in bold type:

Cinderella's stepmother, an ugly woman, has two mean daughters. The **daughters'** whining makes life difficult for Cinderella. The **women's** jealousy overtakes them because Cinderella is beautiful. Then, Cinderella receives the **prince's** invitation to a ball. Every **girl's** desire is to attend. The stepmother **doesn't** want Cinderella to go, but she decides **she's** going anyway.

NOW SOME FINE PRINT

- 1) USE AN APOSTROPHE WITH A PRONOUN ONLY IF THE PRONOUN IS PART OF A CONTRACTION.

| | |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| it's = it is or it has | It's been years since I read the story of Cinderella. |
| you're = you are | If you're a stepmother, you may not like the story. |
| they're = they are | Stepsisters may also feel they're portrayed unfairly. |

- 2) PRONOUNS (unlike nouns) DO NOT USE APOSTROPHES TO SHOW POSSESSION.

Always write *yours, hers, and theirs*, NOT your's, her's, or their's
It's is correct as a contraction (see above) but incorrect as a possessive pronoun.

WRONG: After many days, the glass slipper finds it's way to it's rightful owner.
Both stepsisters try to claim its their's, but Cinderella knows its her's.

RIGHT: After many days, the glass slipper finds **its** way to **its** rightful owner.
Both stepsisters try to claim **it's** **theirs**, but Cinderella knows **it's** **hers**.

- 3) DO NOT OVERUSE APOSTROPHES. While it is sometimes tempting to place an apostrophe wherever you see an "s" (regardless of whether or not it is a noun showing possession or a contraction), resist this temptation. Here are two examples of apostrophes used incorrectly:

Ex: In many household's across the country, family's rely on ABC news for information.
Ex: Mom says's ABC news is the best source.

Note: In the first sentence, the noun "household" does not show possession (ownership). It is simply a plural noun (more than one household); an "s" is needed, but no apostrophe. "Family's" is the possessive form of the singular noun "family," but the sentence doesn't show the family owning anything; instead we need the plural form of the noun: "families."

Correct: In many **households** across the country, **families** rely on ABC news for information.

In the second sentence, "says" is a verb ending in "s," but verbs cannot show possession, so they do not need apostrophes (unless they are part of a contraction -- as in "Verbs *can't* show possession, so they *don't* need apostrophes unless *they're* part of a contraction.")

Correct: Mom **says** ABC news is the best source.

- 4) ONE LAST WORD ON CONTRACTIONS: Keep in mind that contractions do make writing sound somewhat informal. While they are not incorrect in academic writing, you should be careful not to overuse them.