Apostrophe Usage

Use Apostrophes in Three Situations:

1. Weird Plurals: Dot your i’s and cross your t’s. Try to use fewer that’s and this’s in your paper.
2. Contractions: Put the apostrophe where the letters are missing. Don’t put it where the words come together. Really: do’nt!
3. Possessive Nouns

Use #3 Explained—Possessive Nouns

How do I know I have a possessive noun?

- Do a simple pronoun test—decide which pronoun you would substitute.
- If you would use they or them, you have a simple plural: use no apostrophe.
- If you would use his, her,* its, or their, you have a possessive noun: you need an apostrophe.

*Because the word her can also be an object: substitute his to make sure you have a possessive.

Note: possessive pronouns have no apostrophes: zero.

If I do need an apostrophe, where do I put it?

- Write down who the “owner” is: This item belongs to _________________.
- Add an apostrophe.
- Do an s-check:
  - If you have no s, add one—you’re done.
  - If you do have an s already, decide if the “owner” is singular or plural.
    - If you have an s and the owner is plural, STOP—you’re done.
    - If you have an s and the owner is singular—Do a syllable check:
      - If you need another syllable, add an s.
      - If you don’t need another syllable, STOP—you’re done.

Example/Exercise—Whose Million Dollars?

Follow the above steps to determine the appropriate apostrophe placement as you insert each of following potential millionaires into the sentence below:

__________________ (somebody’s) million dollars will be awarded at the end of the ceremony.

the woman  the man  Dr. Reese  Chris  the children
the people  the winners  the tutors  that lucky student  Moses
the ladies  the lady  those women  the winner  our students

The information in this handout was developed by Armstrong Assistant English Professor Mary Anne B. Brock.

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Apostrophe Proofreading: Possessives

How Can I Proofread for Apostrophes with Possessives?

Checking for Potential Missing Apostrophes

Convert all nouns to personal pronouns.

- When the pronoun conversion leaves you with *they* or *them*, you have plurals and need no apostrophes in those words.
- If, however, any of the nouns convert to *their*, *his*, *her* (because the word *her* can also be an object, try substituting the masculine *his* for the test), or *its*, you have a possessive noun: it is functioning as an adjective, and your word needs an apostrophe.

Checking Apostrophes Already in the Text

Verify you have a possessive and not a plural

- Can you substitute *their*, *his*, *her*, or *its*?
- If so, then you have a possessive noun and need an apostrophe.
- If, instead, you must substitute *they* or *them*, you have a simple plural and should delete any apostrophes.

Exercise

Underline each word up to the apostrophe. Think about the possible contexts. Identify which items could be right or wrong. Correct any errors in apostrophe usage.

1. the tutor’s
2. the man’s
3. Dr. Reese’s
4. Chris’s
5. the children’s
6. the peoples’
7. the three winners’
8. that lucky students’
9. Mose’s
10. the ladie’s
11. the lady’s
12. those womens’
13. that one winners’
14. our five finalist’s

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