

# Apostrophes

Apostrophes can cause a lot of problems in writing as they are often misused. You just need to remember two things:

First, apostrophes have many uses, but they do not make the plural form of words.

*For more information on this, see the guide on Plurals.*

Second, apostrophes are not used in academic writing except to denote the possessive, that is to say, something belongs to somebody or something.

Then the confusion is around where to put the apostrophe. Is it before or after the S?

## To mean belonging to a single thing or person

If the person or thing is only one, in the context of the sentence, then the apostrophe goes before the s:

 *The dog’s leg (one dog, one leg)*

 *The child’s prize (one child, one prize)*

 *The jar’s handle (one jar, one handle)*

 *The dancer’s shoe (one dancer, one shoe)*

The apostrophe still goes before the S if the person or thing is still only one, even though they have many things belonging to them:

 *The dog’s legs (one dog, more than one leg)*

 *The child’s prizes (one child with many prizes)*

 *The jar’s handles (one jar, two handles)*

 *The dancer’s shoes (one dancer, several shoes)*

The many things belonging to them are plural but they do not have an apostrophe because, rule one, apostrophes do not make plurals.

## To mean belonging to many things or people

If the people or things that the thing or things belong to is more than one, then the apostrophe goes after the s.

*The rope got caught around the dogs’ legs. (Here there are several dogs and several legs).*

*The jars’ handles (Here there are several jars and several handles)*

*The rope got caught around the dog’s legs* would mean that there was only one dog and the rope had caught around more than one of his legs.

*The rope got caught around the dog’s leg* would mean that there was only one dog and the rope had got caught around only one of his legs.

## Collective words

Confusion comes when the thing or person is more than one, yet the word that denotes them is singular.

*The group’s accounts* The accounts belonging to one group.

*The university’s team* – The team belonging to one university.

These words are singular although containing many individuals, therefore the apostrophe comes before the s. There is no apostrophe on accounts as this is just the plural form of account.

## Nouns and names of people

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| If the noun is singular, add an apostrophe s  | *E.g. the government’s proposals, the group’s accounts, the university’s team* |
| If the noun is plural and already ends in s just add an apostrophe  | *E.g. the universities’ teams, the girls’ and boys’ books* |
| If the first name of the person ends in s, add an apostrophe s  | *E.g. Chris’s slippers* |
| If the second name ends in s, just add an apostrophe | *E.g. Perkins’ shop* |

## Expressions of length of time

Apostrophes are used for expressions of time, literally meaning lasting for:

Three weeks’ leave literally leave lasting three weeks (more than one week, therefore s’)

Two hours’ parking literally parking lasting two hours

One hour’s lecture literally a lecture lasting one hour (Single hour, therefore ‘s)

## Possessive pronouns

**No** apostrophes are needed as these words have built into them already the sense of belonging. There is no need to use apostrophes or add another s.

|  |
| --- |
| Possessive Pronouns |
| My belonging to me | Mine belonging to me |
| Your belonging to you | Yours belonging to you |
| His belonging to him | His belonging to him |
| Her belonging to her | Hers belonging to her |
| Their belonging to them | Theirs belonging to them |
| Our belonging to us | Ours belonging to us |

*This is my dog, not theirs.* (This dog belongs to me and does not belong to them)

*I prefer his bag to yours.* (Your bag or the bag belonging to you)

## Shortened words

Apostrophes were originally used to indicate missing letters or shortened words and they still have this role. Shortened word should not be used in academic writing, but it is how we speak and they are used a lot in dialect speech.

 *Seven o’ clock*  literally seven of the clock

 *doesn’t* literally does not

 *weren’t* literally were not

 *let’s*  literally let us

*I’m*  literally I am

## It’s and its

This is another area of confusion. It’s means ‘It is’ and the apostrophe is being used to shorten the word as above. But it is best not to use abbreviated words in academic writing, so when you write ‘Its’ in your assignments, it will **never** have an apostrophe.

 *It’s a lovely day* means It is a lovely day

but

Its without the apostrophe means belonging to it

 *The flower waved its petals in the breeze.* [The petals belonging to it, the flower]

*The house stood before them. Its windows were all dark.* [the windows belonging to it, the house]

**To check if you need an apostrophe in its, read your sentence replacing ‘its’ with ‘it is’. If it makes sense, you need an apostrophe; if it doesn’t, then you don’t.**

 *The flower waved its (it is) petals in the breeze* (no apostrophe)

*It’s (it is) worth the money* (apostrophe)

And sometimes it’s just easier to rearrange a sentence than use apostrophes.

*Liz’s boyfriend’s car* becomes John’s car

*Inspectors of Mines’ reports* becomes the reports of the Inspectors of Mines

*My father’s sister’s child* becomes my cousin

*Cyprus’s economy* becomes the economy of Cyprus to avoid s’s

## Do not use apostrophes for

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Decades  | 1960s unless it is something that belongs to that time e.g. 1960’s fashions |
| Numbers  | She was in her 30s |
| Capital Letters  | For plurals e.g. CDs; DVDs unless it is something that belongs to or is connected with an organisation which ends in s e.g. C.I.A’s funding |