



Appropriate Apostrophes

(Without Apoplexy)

This one item of punctuation probably confuses more people than any other. It is possible, however, to learn to use apostrophes correctly, and to do so without getting a headache—or worse. Although there is some flexibility in their use, we’ve outlined a few rules here that should serve you well since most “experts” can probably agree on them.

Rule 1: Use an apostrophe to indicate a missing letter, as in contractions. (But remember: You should generally avoid contractions in most academic or business writing.)

I *don't* know *what's* wrong today. (I *do not* know *what is* wrong today.)
It's hot in here. (It is hot in here.)
An early hit by Little Richard was *Slippin' and Slidin'*.

Rule 2: Use apostrophe and s ('s) to indicate possession if the “owner” (the possessor) does not already end in s.

That is the *dog's* toy. (That is the *toy that belongs to the dog.*)
He is the *people's* candidate. (He is the *candidate of the people.*)
There goes *Mrs. Smith's* brother. (There goes the *brother of Mrs. Smith.*)
Have you seen *yesterday's* newspaper? (Have you seen the *newspaper for yesterday?*)
Where is my *brother-in-law's* wallet? (Where is the *wallet that belongs to my brother-in-law?*)

Rule 3: Use only an apostrophe after the s if the possessor already ends in s.

That is the *dogs'* toy. (That is the *toy that belongs to the dogs.*)
He is the *senators'* choice as chair. (He is the *choice of the senators* as chair.)
There goes *Mr. Jones's* sister. (There goes the *sister of Mr. Jones.*)
Isn't that *Prince Charles's* top hat? (Isn't that the *top hat of Prince Charles?*)

Rule 4: Use an apostrophe and s with plurals of numerals, letters, and words that are used as example words.

You used too many *and's* and *but's* in your essay.
It's hard to tell his *1's* and *7's* apart.
There were 4 *A's*, 6 *B's*, 8 *C's*, and 2 *D's* on the test.

Common Mistakes with Apostrophes:

- Using an apostrophe when indicating the plural in a case not covered by Rule 4.

Correct: The foxes were running from the dogs.
Incorrect: The fox's were running from the dog's.

Correct: The genie gave Aladdin three wishes.
Incorrect: The genie gave Aladdin three wish's.