

## The correct use of the apostrophe in English

The apostrophe or inverted comma is a much misused part of English punctuation, but there is a prescribed way of using it. As with so much of English, it is somewhat illogical in its function, the finer points being confused even by master grammarians. One way of looking at it is that the apostrophe is always used to mark contractions - spaces in words where letters have been left out for ease of pronunciation. However, because of the organic way in which English has evolved, there are plenty of loopholes, to be clarified here.

The language and attitudes towards it are evolving. The rapid evolution of computers has led to a general reduction in the amount of punctuation used. What was convention 30 years ago is now largely ignored. Formerly, *plane* was regarded as a contraction of *aeroplane*, and used to be written '*plane*'. No one does this any more, and because *plane* has become a word in its own right; most grammarians agree that this usage is no longer regarded as correct. Thus, while this article dwells on 'rules', it should be remembered that they are not set in stone for all time.

### Where to use apostrophes

#### Contractions

The apostrophe is used to denote missing letters in words that over the years have been dropped to ease pronunciation. The commonest examples are the auxiliary verbs and the word 'not'. Thus, *I am* becomes *I'm* and *are not* becomes *aren't*. Some nouns can be shortened in the same way: *five of the clock* became *five o'clock*. Some words gain apostrophes only in lyrical works, to help illustrate the rhythm - an examples of this is *ev'ry*.

#### Possession

Possession is nine tenths of the law, even in the grammar of apostrophes. The majority of pitfalls in using apostrophes occur when trying to say something belongs to something else. But with the aid of this handy guide, grammatical foibles will be eradicated forever.



**Singular possessive:** The apostrophe is used to indicate possession with all nouns, both proper and common. The rules here are straightforward: add an apostrophe and an s. The ball belonging to Jack is *Jack's ball*. The ball belonging to the man is *the man's ball*. The apostrophe comes between the word and the s.

However, words ending with an s present a problem. There are two valid options in this case. It is either *Thomas' teaching* or *Thomas's teaching*. Elegance would seem to preclude the latter.



**Plural possessive:** The same elements are used, but in a different order: add an s then an apostrophe. Therefore, the ball belonging to the boys is *the boys' ball*.

However, this rule is not so easy. For plural nouns not ending in s, like *men*, for example, the rule is the same as for most singular nouns. The ball belonging to the men is *the men's ball*.

#### Plurals

In the solitary case of single lower case letters, it is preferable to use an apostrophe to avoid confusion, as in 'mind your p's and q's'.



## Foreign Words

An apostrophe also appears in foreign words written in English, used to transcribe a curious pronunciation, known as the glottal stop, for example *Hawai'i*. The apostrophe in this case is purely decorative, as the glottal stop is usually ignored by English speakers.



## Where not to use apostrophes

### Possessive Adjectives and Pronouns

These are technical terms for two very common groups of words. The first group, is your, her, his, its and their. Note the complete lack of apostrophes - the ball belonging to it is signified as *its* ball. And 'his' is not 'he's'. The corresponding possessive pronouns all end in s, with, once again, not an apostrophe in sight: yours, hers, his, its and theirs.

There is perhaps understandable confusion between the 'its' here with the contraction of 'it is' - it's. This is somewhat contradictory but helps to show that there is a difference in meaning between *it is* and *that which belongs to it*. This rule is frequently overlooked.

### Plurals

Excepting the one case above, there is no need to use any apostrophe with plurals.

There seems to be something of an urge in writers of shop signs to use it to denote plurals. This is manifestly wrong.

**DVD's:** The plural of *DVD* is, by convention, *DVDs*. This applies to all other abbreviations like *HGVs* or *A to Zs*.

**1000's:** No, it is *1000s*, especially if you have *1000s of DVDs*.

**The 70's:** The *70's* are in fact the *'70s*.

**Pencil's:** This means belonging to the pencil, not more than one pencil.

### A Note on Style

Armed with new-found skills you may want to put your knowledge to good use. Be aware that, as with everything, there is a time and a place. In a formal letter, using a word like *don't* is very poor style indeed. Choose the elongated form.

### Quotations

There are many factors to be taken into consideration when making a quotation. Punctuation varies in this case between the UK and the US, and printers' conventions are different again.

**In British English:** Quotations are displayed with a single inverted comma: 'Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law my services are bound' - King Lear, Shakespeare. Speech marks are double inverted commas, like this ".

**In American English:** Here, convention dictates that both quotation and speech are displayed using double inverted commas. Increasingly, British printers choose to use the American convention in order to appear more global.

**In General:** One final point. To quote speech, do this: "'Your punctuation is atrocious," he said'.

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