

Apostrophes: A Simple Guide

The Craft of Writing · By Simon Townsend · 1 min read

The apostrophe

Many writers (even good ones) mis-use the apostrophe. But you will find that editors appreciate articles with correctly used apostrophes. A few rules:

Rule 1

Use an apostrophe to show possession (owning). Put an apostrophe in front of the s to show possession by one person. For instance: the man's dog (one man owns one dog) Or, the man's dogs (one man owns more than one dog).

Rule 2

Use an apostrophe to show ownership by more than one person (or thing or other noun). But first make the noun plural. Put an apostrophe after the s to show ownership by more than one person.

For instance, all these are correct:

one dog's bone

two dogs' bones

one digger's spade

two diggers' spades

one cat's hat

two cats' hats

Rule 3

Use an apostrophe in contracted (shortened) words. An apostrophe is put in the spot where the letter or letters would be. For instance: ma'm (madam), don't (do not), we'll (we will).

Rule 4

To show singular possession with proper nouns ending in s or an s sound, today you must write the word and add apostrophe-s. Singular possession: Mr Jones's office, John Laws's car. Plural possession: the Joneses' house, the Lawses' cars.

Rule 5

Use an apostrophe and s after the second name only if two people possess the same item. For instance: Bill and Mary's car is now repaired. Bill's and Mary's cars are now repaired (separate ownership).

Rule 6

Don't use the apostrophe with the possessive pronouns such as his, hers, theirs, ours, yours. They already show possession, so do not need the apostrophe.

Rule 7

Using an apostrophe to show plurals of numbers, letters, and figures (two KFC's, 1700's) is today not used. Correct writing: She bought two CDs, he did best in the 1980s. Most mainstream Australian editors (and I) demand it without the apostrophe.

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