

Apostrophes 1: The basics of possession

This is the first of a two-part article on the rules governing the use of apostrophes, of which there are quite a few. Rather than leap straight into advanced usage, however, this article addresses just possessive apostrophes; that is, where to put 's to indicate ownership or possession.

The second part will include more advanced usage, including contractions, numbers, titles, and so on.

About apostrophe use

The humble little apostrophe, like the comma, is one of the most misused and misunderstood points of punctuation. While the comma is often considered by those in editing as one of the most misused, it is the apostrophe that you find on websites like *This Is Broken*, the *Grocer's Apostrophe* pool on Flickr, the comments about the apostrophe on the *Complaint Dept.*, and this article at *Odd News*, about misuse of the possessive apostrophe being the most common grammatical mistake in the UK, and the most annoying.

History

Did you know that it has only been since the eighteenth century that the apostrophe has been used to show possession or ownership? You do now! Prior to that time, they were usually only used to indicate missing letters.

Basic rules of apostrophe use

These cover possessive apostrophes and nouns, both singular and plural, proper and common.

The rules governing possessive apostrophes and nouns are as follows:

1. Singular common nouns.

These words taken an apostrophe s ('s) at the end of the word, even if the singular noun ends in s: *The boy's water bottle. The atlas's index.*

2. Plural common nouns that end in s.

Insert an apostrophe (but no s) at the end of the word: *The books' covers.*

3. Plural common nouns that do not end in s.

These words take an apostrophe s ('s) at the end of the word: *The children's bags.*

A simple way of remembering and using these three rules

While English grammar is full of obscure-sounding rules, sometimes there is a shortcut; and apostrophe use is one area in which the shortcut is helpful.

In most instances, all you need to do is reconfigure what you're trying to write in order to establish where the apostrophe goes.

Because a possessive apostrophe indicates possession or ownership, you can reconstruct the sentence so that it is written out in full, with the noun that has possession at the end of the sentence. This way you can work out, based on whether the phrase is singular or plural, where to put in your apostrophe.

Using the shortcut 1: Plural nouns

Each example is broken down into ways of using the shortcut to placing your apostrophes.

Example 1: *The children's balls.*

Step one: re-order the phrase so that the possessive noun is at the end: *Those balls belong to the children.*

Step two: does the word end in s? No, it doesn't, so you put in apostrophe s at the end of the noun. Remember, even though children is plural it does not end in s.

You might exclaim, "But *children* is plural!" Indeed it is. This is where we come to step three.

Step three: Test yourself.

If you are thinking that children is plural and looks wrong with just one *apostrophe s*, reconstruct it the other way:

Those balls belong to the childrens.

You would never say 'childrens' as meaning 'more than one child', hence you would not put an apostrophe after the s. If you're not sure, refer back to the third grammatical rule earlier in this article: plural common nouns that do not end in s take 's at the end of the word.

Let's try it again, this time with a plural common noun that does end in s.



Example 2: The chairs' legs.

Step one: re-order the sentence. *Those legs belong to the chairs.*

Step two: does the word end in *s*? It does, so you put in an apostrophe at the end, and not an additional *s*. *The chairs' legs.*

Step three: test yourself. Would you say *The chairs's legs*? No, you wouldn't—it wouldn't sound quite right. Therefore, you don't need the final *s*.

Using the shortcut 2: Singular nouns

The basic thing to remember with singular nouns (where you are only writing about one of something) is that they always take 's, even if the noun ends in *s*.

Confusing? Not really; all you need to remember is that whatever goes before the apostrophe will show you 'how many'.

Such as, *girl's* = one girl, possessive. If you take away the 's you get girl.

Or, *atlas's* = one atlas, possessive. If you take away the 's you get atlas.

Example 3: The girl's shoes.

Step one: re-order the sentence. *The shoes belong to the girl.*

Step two: does the word end in *s*? No, it doesn't, so you put in 's at the end of the word.

Step three: test yourself. Because it's a singular noun, remember you are only writing about one girl. Would you say *The shoes belong to the girls* when you are only writing about one girl? No, you wouldn't - it wouldn't sound right. Therefore you don't need to write *girls's* nor *girls'*, because the apostrophe needs to show that there is only one girl.

Example 4: The worker's desk.

Step one: re-order the sentence. *The desk belongs to the worker.*

Step two: does the word end in *s*? No, it doesn't, so you put in an 's at the end of the word.

Step three: test yourself. Because it's a singular noun, remember you are only writing about one girl. Would you say *The desk belong to the workers* when you are only writing about one desk and one worker? No, you wouldn't - it wouldn't sound right. Therefore

you don't need to write *workers's* nor *workers'*, because the apostrophe needs to show that there is only one worker.

Example 5: The atlas's pages.

Step one: re-order the sentence. *The pages of the atlas.*

Step two: does the word end in *s*? Yes, it does. But is there more than one atlas? No. Therefore you put in 's at the end of the word.

Step three: test yourself. Because it's a singular noun, remember you are only writing about one atlas. Would you say *The pages of the atlases* when you are only writing about one atlas? No, you wouldn't - it wouldn't sound right. Therefore you don't need to write *atlases'* nor *atlas'*, because the apostrophe needs to show that there is only one atlas.



