

THE MYSTERIES OF APOSTROPHES AND DASHES

Apostrophes communicate important information in written language. Dashes, when used sparingly, add emphasis.

APOSTROPHES

USING APOSTROPHES TO SHOW **Possession**

Apostrophes are used to show that one or more things belong to one or more people or things. Apostrophes are often used because they shorten sentences, meaning fewer words for the reader.

USING APOSTROPHES TO SHOW Possession

These fingers belong to the boy.

These are the boy's fingers.

We must find the weaknesses of the brain.

We must find the brain's weaknesses.

Listen to the complaints of these ninnies.

Listen to the ninnies' complaints.

USING APOSTROPHES TO SHOW Possession

Changing the location of an apostrophe can change the meaning of a sentence. Look at each of the sentences in the next slide. The words in parentheses explain what the apostrophe means.

USING APOSTROPHES TO SHOW Possession

These are the boy's fingers. (The fingers belong to one boy.)

These are the boys' fingers. (The fingers belong to more than one boy.)

We must find the brain's weaknesses.

(One brain has weaknesses.)

We must find the brains' weaknesses.

(Several brains have weaknesses.)

Listen to the ninny's complaints.

(One ninny has several complaints.)

Listen to the ninnies' complaints.

(Several customers have complaints.)

USING APOSTROPHES TO SHOW Possession

The position of the apostrophe tells the reader whether one person or thing possesses something, or if it's more than one person or thing doing the possessing. That is, it tells whether the word that possesses is singular (referring to one) or plural (referring to more than one).

USING APOSTROPHES TO SHOW Possession

Add 's to *singular* words not ending in s.

child's innocent play

king's ruined palace

lady's Dalmatian coat

dentist's unhygienic aide

USING APOSTROPHES TO SHOW Possession

Add 's to *singular* words ending in s.

Garth Brooks's latest awful recording
American Express's bland advertising campaign

Lois's fabricated birth certificate

USING APOSTROPHES TO SHOW Possession

Add just a ' to *plural* words ending in s.

girls' broken bicycles

kids' picture books

ladies' revealing garments

employees' restraining order

USING APOSTROPHES TO SHOW Possession

Add 's to *plural* words not ending in s.

women's murder plans

children's tornado-stricken bedrooms

men's clown-sized shoes

people's puppet election

USING APOSTROPHES TO SHOW Possession

When a common or proper noun is more than one word, special rules apply.

Usually, you add the 's to the last word in the noun

USING APOSTROPHES TO SHOW Possession

Add 's to the *last* word of a compound noun.

mother-in-law's visit to prison

president-elect's fateful decision

manager-in-training's pedantic duties

USING APOSTROPHES TO SHOW Possession

Add 's to the *last* word of the name of a business
or institution.

Proctor and Gamble's caustic products

First State Bank's new hours

Banton and Barton Co's inept president

USING APOSTROPHES TO SHOW Possession

Add 's to the *last* name if a single item belongs to more than one person.

Wayne and Judy's burning log home
the receptionist and secretary's missing printer
Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell's stolen car

USING APOSTROPHES TO SHOW Possession

Add an apostrophe to words showing periods of *time* if they show possession.

one day's horrific schedule
one year's miniscule salary
three days' wait for execution

USING APOSTROPHES TO SHOW Possession

Add an apostrophe to words showing amounts of money if they show possession.

two cents' worth of your thoughts

a dollar's serial number

a penny's value is worthless

USING APOSTROPHES TO SHOW Omission

Use an apostrophe to show that letters or numbers have been omitted.

Becky doesn't (does not) work today. She is ill.

The doctor couldn't (could not) give me a prescription. He thinks I am faking the illness.

Who's (who is) on first? I just puked and cannot go on.

I can't (cannot) get together tomorrow afternoon. I have rabies.

My first car was a '67 (1967) Chevy. I still drive the rust heap.

Uncle Louis tells lies about life in the '50s (1950s). That, and he is just a liar.

WHEN NOT TO USE APOSTROPHES

Do not use an apostrophe to form a plural, but only to show possession for either singular or plural words.

Wrong: Get the tomatoe's from the garden.

Correct: Trim the tomatoes' lower limbs.

Wrong: Read the nutrition label on this bag of chip's.

Correct: Read the bag of chips' nutrition label.

WHEN NOT TO USE APOSTROPHES

Do not use an apostrophe with words that already show possession (my, mine, our, ours, your, yours, his, her, hers, their, theirs). Note that these words do not have apostrophes in the examples below.

This is their boat. The boat is theirs. (no apostrophe)

We brought our grill. The grill is ours. (no apostrophe)

This experiment must be yours. (no apostrophe)



DASHES

- A dash is a specialized punctuation mark reserved for only a few situations. However, many writers use it incorrectly in place of other marks.
- Dashes call attention to themselves. Because of this, a careful writer uses them sparingly.
- They are very effective if used correctly, but they lose their impact if they are overused.

DASHES

Use a dash to mark a sudden break in thought or to insert a comment.

- Take these files and this—Look out for that truck!
- I remember the day—what teenager doesn't—that the hunky One Direction boy band first emerged.
- Abby is delighted—as we are—about your new personality. The transplant team did well.

DASHES

Use a dash to emphasize explanatory material. You don't have to use a dash, but you may.

- Realizing your limitations—time, money, and energy—makes planning world domination more realistic.
- He lit a cigarette inside the building—an unconscious habit. He realized what he had done as he was being tackled by the clean air cops.

DASHES

Use a dash to indicate omitted letters.

- “Oh, sh—, I lost the code for the copier!”
- He had received a letter from Mrs. N—.

DASHES

Use a dash to connect a beginning phrase to the rest of the sentence.

- Diversity and challenge—these are the advantages of our programming.
- Albany, New York, and Trenton, New Jersey—that's where our current staff will be relocating.

