

# Avoiding Apostrophe Catastrophes

Interestingly, apostrophes were introduced to the English language in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (1500's). Apostrophe in Greek means "turning away", therefore "omission". Originally, apostrophes were only used to mark dropped or omitted letters. However, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (1600's) printers started to place "an apostrophe before the "s" in singular possessive cases ("the girl's dress"), and from then on quite frankly the whole thing has spiraled into madness. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, printers started to put it after plural possessives as well ("the girls' dresses")."<sup>1</sup>

Let's take a look at the main uses of apostrophes:

1. **Omission:** apostrophes are used to show that one or more letters have been left out of a word, thus making **contractions**. In formal writing contractions should be avoided. Here are the most common contractions:

- Verbs with "**not**"  
aren't = are not  
don't = do not  
won't = will not (in the past will was often spelled with an "o").  
More examples: isn't, wasn't, can't, weren't, wouldn't, doesn't, hasn't, haven't, couldn't.
- Pronouns with "**will**"  
I'll = I will  
you'll= you will  
More examples: he'll, she'll, they'll
- Pronouns and nouns with the verb "**to be**"  
I'm = I am  
you're = you are\*\*  
who's = who is or who has\*\*  
it's = it is or it has\*\*  
we're = we are\*\*  
they're = they are\*\*  
she's = she is  
he's= he is  
More examples: Sally's an excellent student. (Sally is an excellent student).  
Jenny's coming over today. (Jenny is coming over today).
- Pronouns with the verb "**to have**"  
I've = I have  
he's = he has (also could be he is)  
you've= you have  
More examples: we've, they've

<sup>1</sup>From Lynne Truss in *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, page 38.

\*\* These are some of the contractions involved in the most common mistakes! Careful with these!! See below.

- Pronouns with “would” or “had”
    - I’d = I would or I had
    - he’d = he would or he had
- More examples: she’d, you’d, we’d, they’d  
 I’d better go. (I had better go)  
 He’d want to go. (He would want to go)

2. **Possession:** apostrophes are used to show possession, that something belongs to someone.

- Sally’s report card shows she’s a good student. (The report card belongs to Sally (singular-one Sally) and it shows that “she is” a good student).
- Everyone’s homework was collected. (The possessive of an indefinite pronoun is formed by adding an apostrophe and an “s”).
- Iraq’s oil (the oil belongs to Iraq)
- Texas’ oil (the oil belongs to Texas...since Texas is a singular noun ending with an s, the possessive can be formed by adding just an apostrophe. Texas’s oil is acceptable)
- The girl’s book. (the book belongs to the girl (singular-one girl)).
- The girls’ book. (the book belongs to more than one girl).
- Chris’ school (If a name ends in “s” and you want to add ‘s to show possession, you can just add just an apostrophe ( ’ ) or an apostrophe and s (’s). Both forms are correct. So it can also be Chris’s school.)

**Remember!** The word immediately before the apostrophe is the owner.

boss’s office (boss is the owner)

bosses’ office (bosses are the owners)

3. **Plurals:** an apostrophe and “s” are used to form the plural of a letter, a sign, a number, or a word discussed as a word.

A’s, 8’s, +’s, to’s, 1920’s “Don’t use too many and’s in your writing.”

4. **Express time or amount:** an apostrophe is used with an adjective that is part of an expression indicating time or amount.

“**Tomorrow’s** school lessons may be taught over the Internet.”

“My father lost an entire **day’s** work when that thunderstorm knocked out our power.”

**Common Mistakes!!!**

\*The best way to avoid common mistakes is to say the sentence to yourself while getting rid of the contraction. For example, “It’s a common mistake.” (Say “it is a common mistake” to yourself and if it makes sense, you’ve (you have) written the contraction correctly!)\*

**Who’s vs. Whose**

Who’s = who is or who has

Whose=possessive of who

Who’s or Whose book is that? (Think: “Who is book is that?” or “Who has book is that?” Make sense? No! Then it’s “Whose book is that”...possession... who owns that book!

*Who’s* the writer *whose* books for young readers have sold more copies than any other U.S. author?

### It's vs. Its

it's = it is or it has

its= possessive pronoun

It's or its Mary's book. (Think: "It is Mary's book." Make sense? Yes! Then it's "it's"!)

*It's* a fact that a minnow has teeth in *its* throat.

### You're vs. Your

you're= you are

your=possessive pronoun

You're or Your book is over there. (Think: "You are book is over there." Make sense? No! Then it's "Your book is over there." You own the book!)

You know *you're* supposed to be doing *your* homework!

### They're, Their, There

they're = they are

their = possessive pronoun

there= that location

They're, their, or there is the book! (Think: "They are is the book." Make sense? No! So eliminate "they're". Is it showing possession or referring to a location? Location! So "There is the book!")

*They're* busy looking for *their* book! Wait! I see it over *there*!

**A mnemonic trick for 'their' is to use the letters 'e' and 'i' inside the word. Since it shows possession, try substituting 'her' and 'his'. (See the 'e' and 'i'?) If it makes sense with those substitutions, then you need both 'e' and 'i' for 'their'.**

*Their house is on that street.* (Think: Can you say 'Her house is on that street.' and 'His house is on that street'? Yes, you can, so you need both letters.)

### We're, Were or Where

we're= we are

were=past tense of the verb "to be"

where= refers to a place

We're, Were, or Where looking for the book. (Think: "We are looking for the book." Make sense? Yes! So that's your answer!)

We *were* lost in the middle of Timbuktu. No one knew *where* we *were*. Next time we travel, *we're* going to bring along a map.

### Witch vs. Which (Not really related to our lesson...but I'm tired of seeing this mistake)

witch=a person who practices magic. which=a non-personal pronoun meaning "what one"

Witch or Which book is your favorite? (Think does a person who practices magic make sense in this context? No! "Which book is your favorite?" is the correct choice. However, "Witch" could be used in the answer: "The witch book is my favorite." Meaning the book about people who practice magic is my favorite book.)

Another mnemonic trick is to remember 'witch' as a magical person is the 't'. (Think: Witches brew potions and serve you a magic tea to drink. You can also sketch a broom using the letter 't' as a base of your drawing, and witches fly on a broom.)

**Practice:** Read the following sentences. Choose the correct word.

1. **Who's/Whose** absent from school today?
2. Later today, **we're/were/where** going to have lunch at my favorite restaurant.
3. I met a woman **who's/whose** husband is a college professor.
4. That's nothing! I met a woman **who's/whose** the CEO of a billion-dollar corporation.
5. Her name is Martha Stewart. **Marthas/Martha's/Marthas'** home is in New York State.
6. **Its/It's** a very large house **who's/whose** landscape is absolutely exquisite.
7. The **Jones'/Jones's/Jones** new car is parked outside.
8. The car is small, but **its/it's** engine is a 300-horse-power motor.
9. I want to know **who's/whose** at the door.
10. **Its/It's** the mailman.
11. I was surprised to find that **they're/their/there** already on vacation.
12. Are you going to **your/you're** house today?
13. Emily is a girl **who's/whose** my friend.
14. I went to the movies and saw my best friend **they're/their/there**.
15. **Witch/Which** movie is your favorite one?
16. American comedic team Abbot and Costello were famous for their skit "**Who's/Whose** on First?"
17. A: I am the boss!  
B: Hmm. **Who's/Whose** boss?

## Apostrophe Catastrophe Reflection

What did you do well on and consistently use correctly in your writing?

What did you get incorrect? Why?

What was made clearer to you? How?

What have you used incorrectly in your writing in the past and will now pay closer attention to make sure you use it properly?

The answers are in **red**.

1. **Who's** absent from school today?

There is no possession here.

2. Later today, **we're** going to have lunch at my favorite restaurant. - "we are"

3. I met a woman **whose** husband is a college professor.

**Whose** represents woman; husband belongs to the woman. The part of the sentence following **whose** is an adjective clause. For more information about adjective clauses with **whose**, [click here](#).

4. That's nothing! I met a woman **who's** the CEO of a billion-dollar corporation.

There is no possession here.

5. Her name is Martha Stewart. **Martha's** home is in New York State.

This is possession. The home belongs to Martha.

6. **It's** a very large house **whose** landscape is absolutely exquisite.

**It's** is a contraction. **Whose** represents house; the landscape belongs to the house. The part of the sentence following **whose** is an adjective clause. For more information about adjective clauses with **whose**, [click here](#).

7. The **Jones'/Jones's** new car is parked outside.

**Jones** is a name which ends in s. This is also possession. Therefore, both forms are correct.

8. The car is small, but **its** engine is a 300-horse-power motor.

**Its** represents car; the engine belongs to the car.

9. I want to know **who's** at the door.

**Who's** is a contraction.

10. **It's** the mailman.

**It's** is a contraction.

11. I was surprised to find that **they're** already on vacation. "they are"

12. Are you going to **your** house today? - possessive

13. Emily is a girl **who's** my friend.

**Who's** is a contraction.

14. I went to the movies and saw my best friend **there**. **Place**

15. **Which** movie is your favorite one? - not the person who does magic

16. American comedic team Abbot and Costello were famous for their skit "**Who's/Whose** on First?"

**Who's** is a contraction.

17. A: I am the boss!

B: Hmm. **Who's/Whose** boss?

There is no absolute answer here. They could both be answers. Why? Because person B may be asking sarcastically and in disbelief "Who is boss?" On the other hand, person B might be asking "You are the boss of whom?" Therefore, no one knows the correct answer.