

# Save the Apostrophe! A Mark of Great Importance [C1]

Nel mondo anglosassone non è raro vedere etichette e insegne con evidenti errori di ortografia. In particolare, l'apostrofo è uno dei segni di punteggiatura più abusati, motivo per cui esiste un'associazione che si occupa di preservarne e promuoverne l'uso corretto.

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One of the challenges of learning to write is how to use punctuation correctly. Punctuation exists for a valid reason: to add clarity and precision to a written text. This is particularly true of the apostrophe, a punctuation mark that is so commonly [misused](#) that there is an organisation in the UK dedicated to preserving its correct usage: the Apostrophe Protection Society.

## MISSING LETTERS

Apostrophes are used to indicate [missing letters](#), for example, in the words 'it's', a contraction meaning 'it is' or 'it has'; and 'hasn't', meaning 'has not'. They are also employed to denote possession or association, for example, 'the cat's bowl', meaning 'the bowl of the cat'. Unfortunately, apostrophes are often omitted or [misplaced](#) and, perhaps most disturbing of all to those who promote linguistic precision, used incorrectly when a word is in the plural form.

## MARKS & SPENCER

When the British [retail](#) giant Marks & Spencer began selling carbonated water with a label that read "Perfect on it's own or as a [mixer](#)", the Apostrophe Protection Society [chairman](#) Bob McCalden contacted the department store about the error. To the shop's credit, it was promptly corrected — [ridding the world of](#) one incorrectly-used apostrophe, at least. "That was satisfying," [acknowledges](#) McCalden, "because sometimes I contact organisations that have got it wrong and there's just total silence."

## WORLD PEACE

Poor spelling, wrong grammar or incorrect punctuation can cause a reader confusion. It can also reflect badly on the writer, suggesting someone with little care for communicating a clear message. In fact, such errors may even provoke a negative physical response. In 2023, linguistics researchers at the University of Birmingham published the results of a study that found that observing grammar mistakes, including bad tense use, poor sentence structure, errant commas and misplaced apostrophes, can trigger a physical reaction similar to that of the fight-or-flight response. “Stressed is probably the right word for it,” said McCalden, describing the feeling.

## EDUCATING PEOPLE

To find out more about the effects of poor apostrophe use, Speak Up contacted McCalden. We began by asking him why he chose the apostrophe in particular to defend and promote its correct use. Why not another prominent punctuation mark: the comma, for example, or (ubiquitous these days) the exclamation mark? **Bob McCalden (British accent):** It’s a good question. The unique thing about the apostrophe is the fact that it just gets misused so much. It has one foot in the camp of being punctuation, and also at the same time it’s spelling. So I take the view that misusing the apostrophe is tantamount to misspelling the word, rather than just having a misplaced punctuation. Because it’s a nice balance between the two. A lot of punctuation — full stops, commas, semicolons — are there to break up the flow of the written text, whereas the punctuation is there to... more to add clarity and meaning. So it’s a bit of a unique case.

## MAIN MISUSES

We then asked McCalden which misuses of the apostrophe were most common. **Bob McCalden:** The two most common misuses are, firstly, putting an apostrophe in a simple plural. If you said ‘cats and dogs’, you would see c-a-t-s or d-o-g-s. But there are so many instances where people just put an apostrophe in. Sometimes people seem to think that if the word ends in a

vowel, then it just doesn't look right as a plural without an apostrophe in there. So they would put 'radio's' and they'd do apostrophe s or 'menu's', m-e-n-u apostrophe s, because they don't like the look of it without an apostrophe. But it is totally, totally wrong. The other main case where people get it wrong is where it's a contraction of two words. So 'it is' becomes 'it's'. And you put that apostrophe in to say that there's a letter being omitted. 'Haven't' is another example. So you could say 'have not'. And that would be two separate words. If you're going to concatenate them together and say 'haven't', then you need an n apostrophe t at the end to indicate that a letter has been left out. Clearly the one that happens most of all, and it's actually the one that got me first passionately excited about the need for apostrophe usage, is 'it's', and people who will put an apostrophe in 'its' when it doesn't need it or will leave it out when it does need it. 'Its' by itself without an apostrophe is a possessive pronoun. 'The dog lifted its leg.' That's i-t-s. But if you're going to say "It's cold outside", then it's i-t apostrophe s because it means 'it is'.

## TOP TIPS

So, does he have any tips to get it right? **Bob McCalden:** It's easy to get it right, in my view. If you've put i-t apostrophe s, then just expand it out to say 'it is' or 'it has'. Does it still make sense? 'The dog has lifted it is leg' clearly doesn't make sense and therefore it doesn't need an apostrophe. So these really are the two main, simplest apostrophe rules that people just get wrong.

## UNFORGIVABLE

As McCalden explains, apostrophe misuse is extremely common. However, while some instances are forgivable, some are not, and require immediate intervention. **Bob McCalden:** It does get misused everywhere. The worst ones, the ones I find most unforgivable, are the ones where it was the writer's job to get it right. So I would say sign writers are one of the worst cases. The ones that in the UK are colloquially known as 'the greengrocer's apostrophe' are the cases where a greengrocer, a seller of

fruit and vegetables, has written up handwritten signs and has put 'apple's' with an apostrophe s. Those one irritate them but I'm not going to get terribly [upset](#) about it because it's not the [greengrocer's](#) profession to get that right. But the ones that do really get me, and that is a good example: Marks & Spencer are a very well-known, reasonably [upmarket](#) department store in the UK. That should have been checked by so many people in an organization like Marks & Spencer. The people who printed the labels that went on the bottle. Someone should have looked at that and said, "[Hang on](#), I think this isn't right."

## **'YOU'RE' OR 'YOUR'**

And McCalden cites another example from a national British newspaper. **Bob McCalden:**[Funnily enough](#), it was a Daily Mirror story about Marks & Spencer. They printed a headline that said, "Marks & Spencer to close stores across the UK." And then in the sub-line was, "See if you're local is on the list." And "you're local" was y-o-u apostrophe r-e. So totally wrong!. So this is one of the classic mistakes. I wrote to them first thing in the morning, sitting with a cup of tea, and five minutes later they emailed me back and corrected it on the website. That was great. I'm really pleased about that.

## **GETTING WORSE?**

So, despite [spellchecks](#) and sophisticated [AI](#) writing tools, is poor punctuation becoming more prevalent? **Bob McCalden:** I'm not sure if it's more [prevalent] but yes, I do notice some fairly poor examples of punctuation. Stuff that is just [badly worded](#). Apostrophes are the ones that particularly [catch my eye](#). If somebody has left a comma out, then I just tend to read over it and I don't notice it. If I'm [proofreading](#) something, then I'll [spot](#) all the errors.

## **EVOLUTION**

And for English learners wishing to navigate today's global society, good punctuation is crucial to promote understanding, says McCalden. **Bob**

**McCalden:** Language does evolve. It does change over time. If you think about it, punctuation, and particularly the apostrophe, doesn't matter in spoken English. Because you never fit in the punctuation in the sentence, such as saying, "Full stop." But in spoken English, what you will tend to do is to insert pauses — such as that one — because that means either I've got to the end of a thought or the end of a sentence, and it helps to clarify what you're saying. If all you do is just speak one word after the other without any intonation or without any pauses or anything, then English as a language can be much more difficult to understand. Punctuation is there to provide clarity in written English, make it easier to read, make it make sense. So that's why punctuation continues to be important. And for people who speak English as a second language, that's pretty particularly important because it helps them understand what it is that they are reading, and removes some of those ambiguities and confusions that would otherwise be there.

## IN DECLINE

Some people believe that proper grammar, spelling and punctuation is in decline. We asked McCalden whether he believed this was true. **Bob**

**McCalden:** With social media communication, the standards of grammar are probably less important. In general, though, I don't think it's getting worse. It's two or three hundred years, since the apostrophe got properly established in the English language. It's not a very recent thing where it's been getting misused. So I think the English language and punctuation has always had a bit of trouble with people. However, it's probably worth noting that people should not totally rely on things like autocorrect, either in their text messages in their phone or in whatever they're using to write stuff, because sometimes the autocorrect gets it wrong. So, autocorrect and technology can be terribly beneficial, and people should certainly take note if it comes up that squiggly red line under what you've written. But they also need to check what hasn't been flagged just in case the autocorrect has corrected it incorrectly.

## DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

In digital communication all punctuation is often eliminated in favour of a [speedy](#) send. We asked McCalden about that. **Bob McCalden:** I think I'm a lot less bothered about poor punctuation and, if I [grit my teeth](#), even poor spelling, in social media communication. I sort of [liken](#) it to if I'm in a pub or in a bar or a restaurant with friends, I probably won't be speaking in completely perfect sentences. Because it's not what you do. You come out with [snippets](#) of conversation, and not everything is necessarily right. So in social media communication, it doesn't actually bother me too much. And I have to say that my two grown-up children are always very very careful that when they text me that they've got it grammatically correct, and [heaven forbid](#) a missed apostrophe. [www.apostrophe.org.uk](http://www.apostrophe.org.uk)

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# Glossary

- **full stops** = punti
- **upmarket** = di fascia alta, esclusivo
- **Hang on** = attendere
- **badly worded** = mal formulato
- **proofreading** = correggere
- **acknowledges** = ammettere
- **tantamount to** = equivalere a
- **AI** = intelligenza artificiale
- **catch my eye** = attirare l'attenzione
- **liken** = paragonare
- **misused** = usare in modo sbagliato
- **missing letters** = lettere mancanti
- **misplaced** = mal messo
- **greengrocer's** = fruttivendolo
- **Funnily enough** = curiosamente
- **snippets** = frammenti
- **heaven forbid** = Dio non voglia
- **semicolons** = punti e virgole
- **upset** = scocciato
- **speedy** = veloce
- **retail** = commercio al dettaglio
- **mixer** = bevanda da miscelare
- **trigger** = scatenare
- **squiggly** = sinuosa
- **spot** = identificare
- **chairman** = presidente
- **ridding the world of** = eliminare
- **reflect badly on** = incidere in modo negativo
- **vowel** = vocale
- **spellchecks** = correttori ortografici
- **flagged** = segnalare
- **grit my teeth** = stringere i denti
- **Poor spelling** = scarsa ortografia

- **tense use** = uso dei tempi verbali