

Apostrophes

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers apostrophes—how they indicate possession versus contraction and how to avoid common errors related to their usage. The specific areas of focus include:

1. Apostrophes for Contraction

An **apostrophe** is a punctuation symbol that indicates possession or is used to form contractions.

Contractions are words formed by abbreviating or combining other words. When you make a contraction, the apostrophe is added to the spot where missing letters used to be, indicating that cut.

➞ **EXAMPLE** “Could not” becomes “couldn’t.” When the “o” gets cut, the apostrophe goes there in its place.



TERM TO KNOW

Apostrophe

A punctuation symbol that indicates possession or is used to form contractions.

2. Apostrophes for Possession

Apostrophes are also used to make words **possessive**, which indicates that something in the sentence belongs to something else in the sentence.

For this purpose, the apostrophe connects the “s” to the possessor, as in these sentences:

The dog's bone was buried.

The geese's flight pattern was efficient.

This apostrophe with the “s” is the correct way to indicate possession when the possessor is singular and when the word doesn’t itself end in “s,” or when the plural form is irregular, such as “geese,” “their,” or more commonly, “children.”

Using this apostrophe “s” makes your writing more concise, as you don’t have to write out “The bone of the

dog was buried.”

If, however, the possessor does end in an “s” or is plural, then you have to use the apostrophe differently. In that case, the apostrophe will come after the “s” that was already there.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you were talking about many dogs, you would say “The dogs’ park.” If you were talking about one dog named Rufus, you’d say “Rufus’ bone.”

See that there is still an “s” and still an apostrophe? They’re simply in a slightly different order. Because the English language can be a little temperamental, there are also times when adding an apostrophe “s” to the end of a word is necessary, even when the word ends in “s.”

➞ **EXAMPLE** This is usually because it reads more easily if you write something, such as “The actress’s award” instead of “The actress’ award.”

Sometimes, however, you will use these apostrophes to help readers understand the differences between words that are plural, possessive, both, or just end in “s.”

For instance, there is a big difference between these two sentences:

The cat’s whiskers are dirty.

The cats’ whiskers are dirty.

In the former, there is one cat and one set of whiskers to think about. In the latter, there are multiple cats and multiple sets. You can see then that there are many times when a word will be plural and have an “s” at the end, but won’t be possessive.



TERM TO KNOW

Possessive

Indicates that something in the sentence belongs to something else in the sentence.

2a. Exception for Possessive Pronouns

Possessive pronouns are a kind of personal pronoun; **personal pronouns** are English pronouns that identify gender, person, number, and case.

The possessive ones, such as his, hers, her, their, theirs, our, ours, my, it, and its, indicate personal ownership. Notice how none of those uses an apostrophe. Possessive pronouns never do.

If you find yourself in the proofreading stage of the writing process, you will want to look for incorrect use of possessive pronouns, such as when an apostrophe is added incorrectly.



TERM TO KNOW

Personal Pronoun

English pronouns that identify gender, person, number, and case.

3. Correcting Apostrophe Errors

To better spot errors of usage, it’s helpful to look at how apostrophes might work in the context of a piece of writing.

There are many times when students need help beyond what a professor or instructor can offer. These are circumstances that demand the attention of a tutor. A tutors skills may help a students performance in class. Moreover, seeing tutors may help a students confidence and comfort with the materials. Teachers will also benefit when their students see a tutor, because a teachers schedule is always overfull, and they often struggle to fit in meetings with students who need, and deserve, extra support. A tutors help can be invaluable to everyone involved and can create more successful classes.

You probably noticed that there are no apostrophes here. Where do they belong? Start by highlighting all the words that end in “s”:

There are many times when students need help beyond what a professor or instructor can offer. These are *circumstances* that demand the attention of a tutor. *A tutors skills* may help a *students* performance in class. Moreover, seeing tutors may help a *students* confidence and comfort with the *materials*. *Teachers* will also benefit when their *students* see a tutor, because a *teachers* schedule is always overfull, and they often struggle to fit in *meetings* with *students* who need, and deserve, extra support. *A tutors* help can be invaluable to everyone involved and can create more successful *classes*.

Do any of these words need apostrophes? These underlined words are all plural, not possessive:

There are many times when students need help beyond what a professor or instructor can offer. These are *circumstances* that demand the attention of a tutor. *A tutors skills* may help a *students* performance in class. Moreover, seeing tutors may help a *students* confidence and comfort with the *materials*. *Teachers* will also benefit when their *students* see a tutor, because a *teachers* schedule is always overfull, and they often struggle to fit in *meetings* with *students* who need, and deserve, extra support. *A tutors* help can be invaluable to everyone involved and can create more successful *classes*.

You'll notice that they indicate amounts of people or things, so none of them get an apostrophe.

What about these underlined words?

There are many times when students need help beyond what a professor or instructor can offer. These are *circumstances* that demand the attention of a tutor. *A tutors skills* may help a *students* performance in class. Moreover, seeing tutors may help a *students* confidence and comfort with the *materials*. *Teachers* will also benefit when their *students* see a tutor, because a *teachers* schedule is always overfull, and they often struggle to fit in *meetings* with *students* who need, and deserve, extra support. *A tutors* help can be invaluable to everyone involved and can create more successful *classes*.

For these, ask yourself whether they own or belong to anything in their sentences. Here, the tutor owns the skills, so this is possessive and needs an apostrophe:

A tutor's skills may help a students performance in class.

Here, the student will own the confidence and performance, so give each an apostrophe:

A tutor's skills may help a student's performance in class. Moreover, seeing tutors may help a student's confidence and comfort with the materials.

Here, the teacher has a schedule that's overfull, so this schedule belongs to the teacher:

Teachers will also benefit when their students see a tutor because a teacher's schedule is always overfull, and they often struggle to fit in meetings with students who need, and deserve, extra support.

And here, the help belongs to the tutor:

A tutor's help can be invaluable to everyone involved and can create more successful classes.

In all of those spots, you need apostrophes. Just remember that plural words that are not possessive do not ever need apostrophes. It's as simple as that.



SUMMARY

In this tutorial, you learned that apostrophes are a punctuation symbol that indicates possession or is used to form contractions. **Apostrophes for contraction** are added to words in place of a letter, as in "don't" or "can't." **Apostrophes for possession** are added either before or after an "s" at the end of a word, depending on whether the word is singular or plural. It's important to remember there is an **exception for possessive pronouns**, as these words never require an apostrophe to indicate possession.

You also practiced **correcting apostrophe errors** in the context of a piece of writing by differentiating between possession and plurality in words that end with "s."

Good luck!

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Martina Shabram.



TERMS TO KNOW

Apostrophe

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Personal Pronoun

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Possessive

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