

The Writer's House

Opps! Where did the apostrophe go?



Bad writing costs. Good writing pays.



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The world abounds with often hilarious apostrophe errors, but as professional writers we want the reading world to laugh **with** us not **at** us.

The apostrophe has two uses:

1. To show a contraction
2. To show ownership

Using the apostrophe to show a contraction

When you join two words together and leave out one or more letters you use an apostrophe to show that you have done this. Below are some contractions that can often be misspelt.

TWO WORDS	CONTRACTION
It is	It's
Should have	Should've NB: 'Should of' is incorrect
Could have	Could've NB: 'Could of' is incorrect
You are	You're
Let us	Let's
I would	I'd
That is	That's
We have	We've
Who is	Who's
You would	You'd
We will	We'll
They are	They're





Using the apostrophe to show ownership

Ownership means that something belongs to somebody. Any word that *belongs* to or is *for* another word is said to be *owned* by it.

The staff member's pay increased.

*A staff member had her pay increase; the apostrophe goes straight after **member**.*

The report's analysis is encouraging.

*The analysis belongs to the report; the apostrophe goes straight after **report**.*

It took a week's work to complete.

*It was the work of a week; the apostrophe goes straight after **week**.*

The consultant's response was considered.

*The response was given by the consultant; the apostrophe goes straight after **consultant**.*

The airline's flights were delayed.

*The airline owns the flights; the apostrophe goes straight after **airline**.*





But what happens if the word is already a plural?

The same rule applies; look for the word that implies ownership or belonging to. Ask yourself who or what is the owner? Put your apostrophe after the last letter of the owning word.

The staff members' pay increased.

*The pay increase belongs to the staff members; the apostrophe goes straight after **members**.*

Otago Boys' High School

*The School belongs to many Otago boys; the apostrophe goes straight after **boys**.*

It took five weeks' work to complete.

*It was the work of five weeks; the apostrophe goes straight after **weeks**.*

The consultants' responses were considered.

*The responses were given by the consultants; the apostrophe goes straight after **consultants**.*

The airlines' flights were delayed.

*The airlines own the flights; the apostrophe goes straight after **airlines**.*

The children's playground is at the end of the street.

*The playground belongs to the children which is already a plural; the apostrophe goes straight after **children**.*

The citizens' referendum changed the law.

*The referendum belongs to the citizens; the apostrophe goes straight after **citizens**.*





Okay but what do I do if the owning word already ends in S?

Here is where the confusion sets in. The N.Z. Government Style Guide says, "NO," to adding 's, as does The Associated Press Style guide book.

Department of Internal Affairs' address, Shane Jones' speech, business' work, Dickens' novels

The Chicago Manual of Style once recommended that only biblical and classical names should drop the 's.

Jesus' disciples, Moses' tent, Achilles' heel, Socrates' works

In the interests of consistency, the CMOS then changed this rule to recommend that all proper nouns ending in s use 's.

Moses's tent, Achilles's heel, Shane Jones's speech, business's work, Dickens's novels

The Penguin Guide to Punctuation, and many other style guides to boot, now take another view based on the way readers commonly pronounce the possessive form of the word. If the extra s in the possessive form of the word is usually pronounced, add 's.

Shane Jones's speech, business's work – because we do say Jones iz, business iz

If the possessive form of the word does not pronounce the extra s, add only an apostrophe.

Dickens' books, Achilles' heel, Socrates' works – because we don't say Dickens iz books, Achilles iz heel, Socrates iz works

The Writer's House follows The Penguin Guide to Punctuation because the goal of all writers is to assist readers. If you can reflect the way the word is commonly pronounced in your text, do so. You will be another step on the way to providing consistent, clear text for your readers.





When not to use apostrophes

Some words called possessive pronouns already have the meaning 'belonging to' and therefore do not need an apostrophe.

mine your yours their theirs our
ours its his hers whose

But, the words: *someone, somebody, everybody, anyone, each other*, do not indicate ownership and therefore require an apostrophe.

- Somebody's bag has been left behind.
- Everyone's suitcases are here.
- Is this anyone's seat?
- This must be someone's responsibility?
- It is no-one's fault.

Don't use apostrophes for plural abbreviations

CDs, PCs, URLs, FAQs, MPs,
The 1960s and 1970s

Don't use apostrophes for New Zealand Place names

Millers Flat
Burkes Pass
Banks Peninsula
Young Nicks Head

There are some exceptions, consult a survey map if you are unsure.

Arthur's Pass
Birdling's Flat

And Finally...

If it helps your reader, use apostrophes for the following:

mind your p's and q's
do's and don'ts
dot the i's and cross the t's

