**Apostrophes and Possession**

There are *two* main uses of the apostrophe:

 to indicate a contraction

 to indicate possession (of something)

This handout will explain both of these uses, including when and how to make sure that your apostrophes are correct1!

Forming Contractions

Using an apostrophe within a contraction is easy. Simply add the apostrophe where the missing letters were:

does not = doesn't do not = don't I am = I'm

EX: didn't, that's, weren't, what's, I'll, would've, where'd, he's

If you're not sure *which* of the letters to eliminate, make sure that you check your spelling or look up the correct contraction.

**Exceptions**

Beware! Contractions are easy to form correctly, but they can also be easy to misuse. Some contractions are **homophones** with other words - they sound the same, but have different spellings and meanings. If you aren't sure which word to use, pull apart the contraction and see if it still makes sense in the sentence.

For example: You're not sure which form to use in this sentence: "*Don't judge a book by (its /it's) cover."*

Ask yourself, does "*Don't judge a book by it is cover"* make sense? No, it doesn't.

So you do not want to use the contraction, *it's*. You want to use *its*, which is the possessive pronoun.

Here are the most common contraction homophones:

it's / its

who's / whose

they're / there / their

you're / your

To Form the Possessive Case

The second use of the apostrophe is to show possession. Instead of saying, "Lauren owns that car in the driveway," you can say, "Lauren's car is in the driveway." The "'s" indicates that Lauren owns the car.

To form the possessive of all **singular nouns** and **indefinite pronouns**2, add an *'s*:

**EX:**  the student's iPod someone's wallet

day's end everyone's city Bob's party anybody's ideals

This rule still applies when the singular noun already ends in *-s*:

**EX:**  the bus's exhaust Charles Dickens's novels

Agnes's clarinet Camus's humanism

1

Advice and some examples adapted from the following sources:

*The Heath Guide to Grammar and Usage*. Copyright, 1995, D.C. Heath and Company. Author, Gerald P. Mulderig.

*The College Writer's Handbook*. Copyright, 2007, Houghton Mifflin Company. Authors, Randall VanderMey, Verne Meyer, John Van Rys, and Pat

Sebranek.

2 An indefinite pronoun refers to one or more items (ex: Everyone).

There is one exception to this rule. When the addition of *-'s* would create an awkward-sounding proper name, the singular

possessive may be formed by adding the apostrophe alone (there is no additional *s*):

**EX:**  Moses' life Euripides' plays

Xerxes' conquests

To form the possessive of all **plural nouns that do not end in *-s***, add an *'s*:

**EX:**  children's game two deer's tracks

men's and women's clothes the alumni's money

To form the possessive of all **plural nouns that end in *-s***, add the apostrophe alone:

**EX**: boys' and girls' games the strawberries' taste

in two hours' time the Kennedys' estate both babies' cries the Douglases' party

**Additional Rules**

If multiple people or things own an item or items, use the possessive form for the last noun in the series to communicate

shared ownership:

**EX:**  Kirk, Spock, and **Bones's** spaceship [All three own the same spaceship.]

**Kirk's**, **Spock's**, and **Bones's** spaceships [Each owns a separate spaceship.]

To form the possessive of a compound noun, place the possessive ending after the last word:

**EX:**  his mother-in-law's name [singular]

their mothers-in-law's names [plural]

the secretary-of-state's career [singular] the secretaries-of-state's careers [plural]

**Notes to Remember**

Remember that the word that comes immediately before the apostrophe is the owner.

**EX:**  the girl's guitar [*girl* is the owner] the girls' guitar [*girls* are the owners]

the boss's office [*boss* is the owner] the bosses' offices [*bosses* are the owners]

You do **not** need an apostrophe for possessive pronouns; they are already in the possessive case:

**EX:**  the responsibility is ours **NOT** the responsibility is our's

the cookies are hers **NOT** the cookies are her's

give me yours **NOT** give me your's

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