

The misunderstood apostrophe

I've dedicated a short chapter to the *apostrophe*, since it is the most misunderstood punctuation mark of all.

The apostrophe is the ' sign in a word. It means something (a letter or letters) has been *removed*.

That's *all* it means.

If you get one thing out of this book, it's to understand how an apostrophe is supposed to work!

Apostrophes are used in two different ways: To show a word has been created from two words (contraction) and to show possession.

Contraction

In English, we contract (join) words to be a little lazy. "We are" becomes "we're." The apostrophe shows that the letter "a" has been removed.

But it's confusing, because contracted words sound the same as other words.

We're sounds the same as *were* or *where*.

It's sounds the same as *its*.

They're sounds the same as *their*.

You're sounds the same as *your*.

You will need to know the differences so that you too don't make these common mistakes.

Possession

An apostrophe is also used to show possession (ownership). As I discussed earlier in this book, possession a very interesting concept in grammar. You can make it clear that someone or something "possesses" something. Get the concept of "possession" and you'll really get this one. It's not always *literally* possessing something. It's more of an *idea* of possession.

However, even in possession, *the apostrophe is still removing a letter*, and this fact is not understood by most people. Listen up: you will soon be smarter than about 95% of your friends.

In older English, the way you showed possession was to add "es" to a word. For example, there's a book by a fellow named Henry Chaucer, written 700 years ago. Here is something he wrote:

Christes gospel

He showed that it was the gospel of Christ by adding "es."

Later, people just took out the "e," but showed it had been removed by using an apostrophe.

Christ's gospel.

Neater, tidier, quicker, cleaner.

Here is another example of the idea of possession, using an apostrophe:

This is the house that Jim owns.

This is *Jim's* house.

We know Jim possesses (owns) it.

Or:

The house had bright lights.

The *house's* bright lights.

The house doesn't actually "possess" bright lights, but it's the *idea* of possession.

There are a few simple rules for apostrophes used in possession:

For a noun showing one thing (singular), add 's at the end.

The *horse's* hair.

Tom's shirt.

For a plural noun already ending in "s," simply add an apostrophe at the end.

Guys' night out.

Plurals

A common mistake is to use an apostrophe to make something plural (more than one).

For example:

The two *boy's* went to the store.

This is a mistake. Remember, an apostrophe means a letter has been *removed*. It should be:

The two boys went to the store.

Here are some examples of the correct use of apostrophes with plurals. We'll start with the simple example of a horse.

A *horse* – a single horse.

Two *horses* – more than one horse

Then, a single horse, showing possession:

A *horse's* tail – the tail of a horse.

But what if we want to describe several horses possessing something?
In older English, we would have added “-es” at the end:

The horseses tails.

But that's older English and honestly, it looks ridiculous! Because we're hip and modern, we use an apostrophe to remove the whole “-es” at the end.

The horses' tails – the tails of the horses.

These are the important rules for apostrophes. There are more rules which you can look up online if you like.