Tutorial #8:
Use of Apostrophes with Possessives and Contractions

Using Apostrophes with Possessives
Using Apostrophes with Contractions
Avoiding the Misuse of Apostrophes

Writing Center
English 800 Lab
All notes and exercises can be done on separate sheets of paper, which you should bring to your conference with an instructor in the center.

As you work through the tutorial, make sure to see an instructor in the Writing Center or English 800 Lab if you have any questions or difficulties.
Apostrophes

Apostrophes have two main functions: to show possession and to form contractions. This tutorial will demonstrate strategies for using apostrophes correctly:

1. **using apostrophes with possessives**
2. **using apostrophes with contractions**
3. **avoiding the misuse of apostrophes**

As you do this tutorial and learn about the different ways that we use apostrophes, try to think about the kinds of apostrophe errors that your classroom instructor may have pointed out in your writing. If you know what types of errors to look for in your own essays, you will be able to proofread more effectively.

**Part One: Apostrophes with Possessives**

Consider these two groups of phrases:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1:</th>
<th>Group 2:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the key that belongs to Bianca</td>
<td>Bianca’s key</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the essay of the student</td>
<td>the student’s essay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the policy of the school</td>
<td>the school’s policy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both groups of phrases are correctly written, but one group may be more effective. Which one seems better? In your own words, explain why.
As you may have noticed, if you do not use an apostrophe, your writing may become too wordy. By shortening each of the phrases below, the apostrophe reduces the phrase from five or six words to merely three.

Please review Group 1 and Group 2 once again. As you can see, an apostrophe can be used to show ownership or possession. To change a noun into a possessive, you add an apostrophe + “s” to the person or thing that possesses or owns:

- the key that belongs to Bianca or Bianca’s key (Bianca possesses the key.)
- the essay of the student or the student’s essay (The student owns the essay.)
- the policy of the school or the school’s policy (The school possesses the policy.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle I.</th>
<th>To form the possessive of a noun that does not already end in “s,” add the apostrophe + “s.” Remember to add the “s” to the person or thing that possesses or owns.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The books of the children or the children’s books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the circulation of the newspaper or the newspaper’s circulation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sometimes adding “s” to a word that already ends in “s” is correct, but it is always correct to add an apostrophe after the “s.” If a singular proper noun ends in “s,” you may decide to add the apostrophe + “s” or just the apostrophe alone. Consider these examples, which are all correct:

- Tom Hanks’s films or Tom Hanks’ films
- Edie Adams’s songs or Edie Adams’ songs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle II.</th>
<th>If the possessive noun already ends in “s,” it is always correct to add an apostrophe after the “s.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the rules of the parents or the parents’ rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the lyrics of the rappers or the rappers’ lyrics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the car belonging to Chris or Chris’ car</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Exercise 1

Instructions: Using Principles I and II, rewrite each underlined group of words, using apostrophes to show possession. The first sentence has been done for you.

Examples: We like the brownies of her grandmother. Her grandmother’s brownies
The instructor read the poems written by the students. The students’ poems

1. Dominique renewed the lease of her apartment.
   Dominique renewed her apartment’s lease.

2. She liked the drawings of the children.

3. The crowd at PacBell Park was surprised at the skill of the rookie player.

4. Enrique was angry about the voting records of the senators.

5. Raquel’s new boyfriend disliked the attitude that her parents have.

6. The university was surprised with the test scores of the applicants.

7. I have already graded the essay that James wrote.

Individual and Shared Possession

Principle III. To show individual possession, add an apostrophe + “s” to each possessive noun.

Consider these examples, which are both correct:

- the careers that Smokey Robinson and Aretha Franklin have or Smokey Robinson’s and Aretha Franklin’s musical careers
  (Smokey Robinson and Aretha Franklin have not both had the same musical careers. They each possess separate, individual careers.)

- the cell phones of Lily and Benny or Lily’s and Benny’s cell phones
  (Lily and Benny each have their own individual cell phones.)
Principle IV. To show shared possession, add an apostrophe + “s” only to the last noun.

- The anniversary party of Phil and Marlo or Phil and Marlo’s anniversary party was memorable.
  (Phil and Marlo share the same wedding anniversary, which they celebrated at their party.)

- The wine of Martini and Ross was delicious.
  (Martini and Ross share ownership of the same winery.)

- The comedy act of Stiller and Meara or Stiller and Meara’s comedy act was entertaining.
  (Stiller and Meara, Ben Stiller’s parents, worked together and shared the same comedy routines.)

Exercise 2

Instructions Using Principles III and IV, rewrite each underlined group of words, using apostrophes to show possession. The first sentence has been done for you.

Examples: The wedding anniversary of my grandparents was memorable. My grandparents’ wedding anniversary

The songs that Keith Richards and Mick Jagger wrote are compelling. Keith Richards and Mick Jagger’s songs

The father purchased the luxury cars that Mary Kate and Ashley own. Mary Kate’s and Ashley’s luxury cars

1. The adventures of Bill and Ted were vividly depicted in the film about time travel. Bill and Ted’s adventures were vividly depicted in the film about time travel. (Bill and Ted shared their adventures.)

2. The audience enjoyed the balcony scene of Romeo and Juliet.

3. The audience laughed during the movie of Laurel and Hardy.
4. The literary works that Toni Morrison and Langston Hughes wrote are among the most admired in African American literature.

5. We admire the designs that Armani and Dior created.

**Exercise 3**

**Instructions:** Using Principles I, II, III, and IV, rewrite each underlined group of words, using apostrophes to show possession. The first sentence has been done for you.

1. The audiences of the playwright saw these plays as ways of sorting through the meanings of both the calamities of the past and the uncertainties of the present.

   The playwright's audiences saw these plays as ways of sorting through the meanings of both the calamities of the past and the uncertainties of the present.

2. The search that Oedipus made for the killer of Laius and the willingness that Othello had to doubt the fidelity of his wife all lead to irreversible results.

3. In the woods, the lovers find themselves in the unpredictable kingdom belonging to King Oberon and his wife Titania.

4. The play ends with the warm assurances of Puck and his gentle urging to “Give me your hands.”

5. After learning of the death of his father, Hamlet returns to the Danish court to find Claudius, the dead king’s brother, ruling Denmark and married to Gertrude, the mother of Hamlet.

—adapted from *The Bedford Introduction to Literature* by Michael Meyer
Exercise 4

FIND A COPY OF THIS EXERCISE INSIDE POCKETS OF BINDER IN WRITING CENTER.

Instructions: Using Principles I, II, III, and IV, proofread the following paragraphs for possessives and add apostrophes if necessary.

Jupiter, the gods and mens father, had a noble beginning. Jupiters father was Saturn and Rhea was his mother. They both were born into the race of the Titans. But Saturn and Rhea were not only the only members of the Titans race. Hyperion, another Titan, was the Sun, Moon, and Dawns father. He is, therefore, the original sun god, and is often painted with splendor and beauty, which were afterwards bestowed on Apollo.

Jupiter, with his brothers and sisters, rebelled against his father Saturn and Saturns brothers, who were also Titans. Jupiters brother Atlas was condemned to bear up the heavens on his shoulders.

On his fathers dethronement, Jupiter with his brothers, Neptune and Pluto, divided Saturns dominions. Jupiters portion was the heavens, Neptunes portion was the ocean, while Plutos portion was the deads realm. Jupiter was now the gods and mens king. Jupiters weapon was thunder, and the eagle, his favorite bird, bore Jupiters thunderbolts.

Juno was Jupiters wife, and the gods queen. Vulcan, the celestial artist, was Jupiter and Junos son. Mars, the god of war, was also Jupiter and Junos son.

—adapted from Bulfinch’s Mythology compiled by Bryan Holme
Part Two: Apostrophes with Contractions

In addition to using apostrophes to show possession, writers use apostrophes with contractions. In a contraction, two words are combined, and the apostrophe shows where one or more letters are missing. For example, when the words are and not are combined into the contraction aren’t, we use an apostrophe to show where the letter “o” is missing. Some of the most common contractions are listed below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Words</th>
<th>Contraction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>are not</td>
<td>aren’t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>can not or cannot</td>
<td>can’t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>did not</td>
<td>didn’t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do not</td>
<td>don’t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>does not</td>
<td>doesn’t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he is</td>
<td>he’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am</td>
<td>I’m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had</td>
<td>I’d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have</td>
<td>I’ve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is not</td>
<td>isn’t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it has, it is</td>
<td>it’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>let us</td>
<td>let’s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Words</th>
<th>Contraction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>she is</td>
<td>she’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>should not</td>
<td>shouldn’t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they are</td>
<td>they’re</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they would</td>
<td>they’d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they will</td>
<td>they’ll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>was not</td>
<td>wasn’t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we are</td>
<td>we’re</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we have</td>
<td>we’ve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we will</td>
<td>we’ll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>who is, who has</td>
<td>who’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>will not</td>
<td>won’t</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Principle V. A contraction is a combination of two words in which an apostrophe is added to show where one or more letters are missing.

Be especially careful with it’s and its,* as well as who’s and whose, which are frequently confused.

- **It’s** stands for *it is* or *it has*.
- **Its** is a personal pronoun showing possession.
- **Who’s** stands for *who is* or *who has*.
- **Whose** is a personal pronoun showing possession.

*Note: If you need to review the use of homonyms such as *it’s and its* and who’s and whose, see Tutorial 9: Homonyms.
Contractions in Informal and Academic Writing

We frequently use contractions when we speak. But since they are generally inappropriate in academic or formal writing, if in doubt, check with your instructor to see if she or he allows you to use contractions in your writing. While they might be acceptable in informal writing such as journals and letters, most instructors find contractions inappropriate in essays.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle VI.</th>
<th>Contractions are generally inappropriate in academic or formal writing.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Although contractions are usually words like isn’t, I’ve, we’re and they’re, some contractions consist of places and names. All the apostrophes in the sentence below are used to make contractions of a noun + the verb is. However, these kinds of contractions are always considered informal and should never be used in academic writing.

**Informal:** School’s almost over, and Yuri’s going back to working full time as a paralegal in a law office, anxiously waiting for Friday’s paychecks.

**Academically Correct:**

School is almost over, and Yuri is going back to working full time as a paralegal in a law office, anxiously waiting for Friday’s paychecks.

**Exercise 5**

**Instructions:** Using Principles V and VI, revise the following sentences to correct any mistakes in the use of apostrophes with personal pronouns and contractions. First, underline the contractions. Then, if the apostrophe is missing, the apostrophe is in the wrong place, or a contraction is too informal, make the correction. The first sentence has been done for you.

1. If doesn’t fan of the outdoors, you’ll enjoy exploring the trails at Point Lobos.
   - If you’re a fan of the outdoors, you’ll enjoy exploring the trails at Point Lobos.

2. In the middle of summer, a bus will take it’s passengers from the city to Pfeiffer State Park where hiking enthusiasts won’t be disappointed.

3. Even though they’re going to be arriving late in the afternoon, doesn’t not be hungry because they will have eaten lunch on the bus.
4. It's not uncommon that some hikers won't want to wait for dinner and might stop by the restaurant at the Lodge where I've enjoyed many delicious meals.

5. Juanita’s not willing to eat indoors and doesn’t want to pay for an expensive meal.

6. They'd prefer buying food at the local grocery, and doesn’t want to enjoy an outdoor picnic.

7. Even though some people doesn’t enjoy “roughing it,” a true outdoor enthusiast doesn’t mind making sacrifices to enjoy the wonders of nature, something that can’t be experienced in the city.

8. Kathleen’s hoping the fog will disappear by this weekend and that it won’t spoil the fireworks display that we’ve all been eagerly anticipating.

**Part Three: The Misuse of Apostrophes**

**Possessive Pronouns**

Sometimes apostrophes are misused. Consider these two groups of sentences:

| Group 1:       | The dog is wagging it’s tail.                |
|               | That Prius in the parking lot is our’s.     |
|               | Lorena said that camera is her’s.           |

| Group 2:       | The dog is wagging its tail.                |
|               | That Prius in the parking lot is ours.      |
|               | Lorena said that diamond bracelet is hers.  |

Can you identify which group seems better? In your own words, explain why.

As you may have noticed, not every word ending in “s” requires an apostrophe. In the case of the possessive pronouns in boldface above (its, ours, hers), apostrophes are incorrect.
Principle VII. To form the possessive of a pronoun, do not add an apostrophe.

Possessive pronouns show ownership. Some are used alone while others describe or modify a noun:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Pronouns Used Alone</th>
<th>Pronouns Used to Describe a Noun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Person</td>
<td>mine, ours</td>
<td>my, our</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Person</td>
<td>yours</td>
<td>Your</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Person</td>
<td>hers, his, theirs</td>
<td>its, her, his, their</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exercise 6

Instructions: Using Principle VII and the chart “Possessive Pronouns,” add the correct pronoun in each sentence. The first sentence has been done for you.

1. These are Bill’s and Ted's guitars.
   These are **their** guitars.
   These guitars are **theirs**.

2. I wrote this paper.
   Here is ___________ paper.
   This paper is ___________.

3. Here is Joaquin’s car.
   Here is ___________ car.
   This car is ___________.

4. This is Flor’s iPod.
   This is ___________ iPod.
   This iPod is ___________.

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5. That is Jonny’s and my digital camera.
   That is ___________ digital camera.
   That digital camera is ____________.

6. There is your Blackberry.
   That Blackberry is ____________.

Plural Nouns and Verbs that End in “S”

There are other ways that apostrophes are misused. Consider the following groups of sentences.

**Incorrect:** He ordered three smoothie’s.
**Correct:** He ordered three smoothies.

**Incorrect:** The San Francisco Giants’ are playing the Dodgers’ tonight.
**Incorrect:** The San Francisco Giant’s are playing the Dodger’s tonight.
**Correct:** The San Francisco Giants are playing the Dodgers tonight.

**Incorrect:** The team play’s basketball.
**Correct:** The team plays basketball.

Note how none of the previous nouns or verbs require apostrophes since they do not show possession, nor are they contractions.

**Principle VIII.** Never add an apostrophe to a third-person singular verb (a verb that ends in “s”). When you make a noun plural, do not add an apostrophe. The only time plural nouns should have apostrophes is when they are possessive.

Consider these examples.

**Incorrect:** The Golden State Warriors’ game with the Denver Nuggets is tonight.
Incorrect: The Golden State Warrior’s are playing the Denver Nuggets’ tonight.
**Proofreading for Apostrophes**

Try the following strategies to proofread for apostrophes:

- If you tend to leave out apostrophes, check every word that ends in “s” or “es” to see if it needs an apostrophe.
- If you tend to put in too many apostrophes, underline all the words that contain apostrophes, and then check every one to see if you can justify it with a rule or principle in this tutorial.
- Read your work aloud; often you can hear an incorrect “s” ending or notice that an “s” ending is missing.
- Remember to check with your instructor to see if s/he allows you to use contractions in your essays.

**Exercise 7**

**Instructions:** Now it is time to make your first appointment for a conference with an instructor in the Writing Center (18-104) or English 800 Lab (18-102). During this appointment, you will review your answers and ask any questions you may have about this tutorial.

To get ready for this appointment:

1. Review an essay where your teacher has graded and marked your apostrophe errors. Are there any similarities in your errors? For example, are you adding apostrophes to plural nouns or verbs that end in “s”? Are you placing apostrophes in the wrong places in contractions? Or are you adding apostrophes to possessive pronouns? Knowing what to look for during proofreading can make it easier to find your apostrophe errors.

2. Bring the essay where your teacher has marked your apostrophe errors and be prepared to describe, in your words, how to find these errors in your own writing and how to correct them. Feel free to look back at the principles, exercises, and proofreading tips for guidance and make notes on a separate piece of paper. Bring these notes and the graded essay that your teacher has marked to your conference.
ATTENTION!

STOP!

Now that you are at the end of this tutorial, please come to the Writing Center in 18-104 or the English 800 Lab in 18-102 for the first appointment with a lab instructor. Bring your reporting form. During this appointment, the instructor will review your answers to the exercises and answer any questions you may have about this tutorial.

At the end of this conference, please ask for the Writing Assignment for this tutorial. The Writing Assignment must be done in the Writing Center, English 800 Lab, or the Quiet Room.

During a second appointment with a Writing Center or English 800 Lab instructor, the instructor will review the Writing Assignment with you. Bring your reporting form. The instructor will sign your form so that you will receive credit for the tutorial after this second appointment.

Remember that you may go to the Writing Center or English 800 Lab at any time in this process to ask questions and seek help.