

# The Dreaded Apostrophe

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## One Easy Rule

The apostrophe must be the most misunderstood and misused piece of punctuation in the language. This is made worse by the fact that most people simply fail to understand what it does, and make it unnecessarily complicated. The result is that many people, in an effort to appear correct, use a scattergun approach, dropping in apostrophes every time the letter "s" ends a word, for plurals, possessives and contractions alike.

In fact, using the apostrophe correctly is easy - once you know the rule!

Notice I say, "**the** rule". Despite the confusion about this and many variations, there is in fact just one place where an apostrophe is used. **Just one**. It really is easy to remember.

### Use an apostrophe when letters are missing.

I have taught many children, mainly Year 6 (aged 10-11), this method over many years and 90% of them have "got it" immediately and never get it wrong again. Sadly the other 10% would probably never "get it", at that age anyway.

You can print this all to read normally as a [PDF file](#). (330K). You will need the FREE Acrobat Reader which you may [download here](#). (It is often on magazine CDs etc. as well.)

Explaining something in written form is not the same as interactive teaching, where the listeners respond and the teacher can adapt as they go along. I have tried to take this step by step and cover all the angles, but it means there is a lot of reading to do. Please be patient.

Those of you who were taught a multi-rule method (presumably unsuccessfully or why would you be here) are probably now puzzled. How can there be just one rule which covers all uses of the dreaded apostrophe? I repeat:

### Use an apostrophe when letters are missing.

Misuse often occurs where plurals are involved. Plural simply means more than one. So we see the famous greengrocer signs like *Carrot's cheap today*. But there is nothing missing here, it just means more than one carrot, so it should read *Carrots cheap today*. Another example: *Parent's are asked to supervise their children*. Again nothing is missing, it is a request to more than one parent to look after their kids. The correct form is *Parents are asked to supervise their children*. But the children belong to the parents, you say. True no doubt, but the two words are not together in the sentence and the message is directed at parents, not children. *Parents children* would need an apostrophe, but before or after the "s"? Have no fear, all will be explained later.

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## So where do we use an apostrophe?

**We use an apostrophe when letters are missing.**

I will look at the obvious cases first. These are where we deliberately shorten a word or phrase and then use an apostrophe to show that letters are missing.

These are called **contractions**.

In full	Letters missing	Shortened form
do not	o	don't
can not	no	can't
could not	o	couldn't
let us	u	let's
that is	i	that's
would not	o	wouldn't
they are	a	they're
they had	ha	they'd
you would	woul	you'd
we had	ha	we'd
you are	a	you're
I am	a	I'm
was not	o	wasn't
it is	i	it's
it has	ha	it's
what is	i	what's
my car is there	i	my car's there
the coat is on the peg	i	the coat's on the peg

The list above does not contain every possible abbreviated form, but from that one can see how the apostrophe goes in place of the missing letters. Missing spaces do **not** get an apostrophe. Think of it this way, it was a space so there was nothing to go missing in the first place!

People often confuse **you're** and **your**. But now you know the rule, you need never confuse them again! **You're** is short for **You are**, while **your** means belonging to you, as in "your head is probably spinning by now".

**There, their** and **they're** are often confused but **there** is a place, **their** means belonging to them and **they're** is short for **they are**.

English is a living language, and all such languages contain irregularities. One which is relevant to apostrophe usage is **it's** and **its**. **It's** is short for **it is** or **it has** as you see in the table above. **Its** means belonging to **it**, as in "It's probably spun off its neck by now". If you are uncertain which to use, say it in full, e.g. "The world spins on its axis" is plainly silly, so one should use **its** rather than **it's**.

I have mentioned belonging already. So what about possessives, I can hear you saying to your computer screen? **It is in fact the same rule**.

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## Possessives

The same rule applies:

### Use an apostrophe when letters are missing.

To understand this, we need first to take a trip back in time...

#### *The Olden Days*

English is an old language, but an ever changing one. Many people today find the English of Shakespeare hard to understand, but it is actually relatively modern in structure compared with English from earlier periods. It is to these earlier periods of English we must look for the roots of modern apostrophe usage.

I am also going to simplify matters, and having studied linguistics I know this may be oversimplification for some. But here the aim is to explain the dreaded apostrophe, not teach linguistics and old or middle English. So bear with me.

English is a Germanic language. It shares much in common with modern German, although much vocabulary was later imported from French/Latin. Quick example: the German for foot is Fuss, for ball is Ball, so football is Fussball. We get the word pedestrian from the French/Latin side though. Some Germanic usage survives in English, particularly in North American English where some archaic forms remain in use - gotten for instance. The -en participle ending will be familiar to German speakers.

Like modern German, old forms of English used a genitive case ending to show possession. This is normally -es. For our purposes, that will do. For example, the English **The man's coat** in German is **Der Mantel des Mannes** (The coat of the man). Note the -es ending on **Mann** to show possession.

So now let's (let us) go back a few hundred years in English. Geoffrey Chaucer wrote his famous *Canterbury Tales* in the English of his time. What today we call the **Knight's Tale** he wrote as **Knyghtes Tale**. He also writes about the **Kynges court** and **Goddess love**. But in modern English, of all varieties, the "e" is missing. Coupled with modern spelling, **Kynges court** becomes **King's court** and **Goddess love** becomes **God's love**. The old -es possessive form in English is now missing, and as I am sure you will now remember we

### use an apostrophe when letters are missing.

#### Plural Initials

How often have you seen signs that say **CD's for sale** or similar? The **MP's voted against the bill** is another example.

These are plurals, nothing is missing, so the correct form is **CDs** and **MPs**. If your child writes that he or she gained four As at A level, be pleased also that he or she knows when **not** use an apostrophe. If they tell you they got four A's, I just hope English was not one of them!

We can use this insight to help us place apostrophes correctly. Remember above I talked about **Parents children**. Does the apostrophe come before or after the "s"? If we pretend we are Chaucer, it becomes easy.

	Pretend Chaucer	Modern correct form
One <b>parent</b> and his or her children	<b>parentes</b> children	<b>parent's</b> children
All <b>parents</b> and all their kids	<b>parentses</b> children	<b>parents'</b> children

In the plural we could say parents's and drop only the "e" but having "s's" seems a bit silly so the whole es goes missing to be replaced by the apostrophe, leaving parents' as the plural possessive form.

Take **the boys coat**. Unless several boys share a coat (unlikely) we can assume this is one boy and his coat, so **the boyes coat** shortens to **the boy's coat**.

If we take **the boys coats** we are not sure now whether this is one boy with a lot of coats or lots of boys and all their coats.

#### Kids and Goats

When using "kids" to talk about children, I have in the past been told not to compare children with goats, even by school inspectors who should know better.

**Kid**, in this context is nothing to do with goats, but is an old English form which shares a common root with the German **Kind** (child, pronounced *kint*).

	Pretend Chaucer	Modern correct form
one boy with a lot of coats	<b>boyes</b> coats	<b>boy's</b> coats
lots of boys and their coats	<b>boyses</b> coats	<b>boys'</b> coats

In the first case, we have one **boy** to which we add the **-es** to show possession, to give us **boyes**. Today, the **-e** is missing, replaced by the apostrophe to give **boy's** so the apostrophe ends up before the "s".

In the second case, we have a plural **boys** to which we add the **-es** to show possession, to give us **boyses**. Today, the **-es** is missing, replaced by the apostrophe to give **boys'** so the apostrophe ends up after the "s".

Something that gets people confused is a word like children. (Making a plural with -en is another Germanic throwback.) Because they are not using the correct rule they assume that because children is plural, the apostrophe must come after the "s". So we get childrens' which is wrong. But my consistent system takes care of that. Think it through - take the example **childrens toys**. We can safely guess there is more than child involved here because of the word children.

	Pretend Chaucer	Modern correct form
childrens toys	<b>childrenes</b> toys	<b>children's</b> toys

The "e" goes missing and the apostrophe ends up correctly before the "s".

### **The Book of Cassius**

People sometimes get confused when a singular noun ends in the letter 's'. Because of that 's', panic sets in and people wonder which rule to apply. But remember, **there is**

**only one rule.** Use it.

In the case of a book belonging to Cassius, we will use the 'Chaucer' rule to place the apostrophe.

	Pretend Chaucer	Modern correct form
Cassiuss book	<b>Cassiuses</b> book	<b>Cassius's</b> book

Just apply the rule and the apostrophe will end up in the correct place. This clearly demonstrates that Cassius is singular, i.e. there is just one Cassius we are talking about, and he possesses the book.

**Now can see that there *really* is only one rule!**

**Use an apostrophe when letters are missing.**

We have covered both **contractions** - things like **cannot** becoming **can't** - as well as **possession**, where the apostrophe stands in for the missing possessive word ending, no longer used in modern English. And you should now even understand why in the case of possession, it sometimes comes before the "s" and other times after the "s".

Using the scattergun approach simply displays a lack of education which may not be the writer's fault, and a lack of desire to find out, which is, and is ignorant. But now you know! So why not try out your new found knowledge?

You can print out the following little story (PDF file) which is designed to test the use of the dreaded apostrophe - dreaded no longer I hope.

I am not going to mark it - you're grown up enough to have got this far so you can mark your own. (*Note the use of **you're** and **your**; in that sentence.*) If you cheat, only you lose.

**Good luck.**

I welcome comments about this approach. If you wish to contact me, email me on [mail@dreaded-apostrophe.com](mailto:mail@dreaded-apostrophe.com)

You can read some of the comments at the end of this website.

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*Scattergun approach taken with this notice*

Is it addressed to **Parents, Guardians, Children?** It is not clear who belongs to whom in this. No apostrophes are necessary.

**Person's** should be **persons** - it is simply a plural, meaning more than person. Although why not just say **People**?

**Year's** again is a plural, just more than one year. So **years** is correct.

I'm not sure why there are so many capital letters, but that's another issue.

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## Test your new found knowledge

Insert the apostrophes in the correct places.

Download story for printing ([PDF](#)) [here](#)

### The Shopping Trip

The boys and girls decided to go to town for a look round because there wasnt much to do at home. Johns coat was torn, so he borrowed his sisters. She wasnt going with them.

"Lets go round the shops," said Susans brother Stephen. The childrens parents had given them some money to spend.

"Dont you lose it," Richards father had said to him, so Richards money was in his pocket when he set out, but Alans had a zip so he ended up carrying Richards money as well as his own so they couldnt lose it.

In the shop, Alans zip got stuck, but Lucys skill got it open again.

"Thats good," said Alan, "both Richards and my moneys in there. Now its OK and we cant get into trouble."

The boys money came to more money than the girls, but theyd decided to share it equally. Then some of the boys said they wouldnt share it and the girls said theyd broken the agreement.

"Share it out," said Anne. "Its what you said youd do!"

"No, cant," said David.

"Perhaps wed better," said Richard, "Its what we said wed do."

"OK," said David, "I expect youre right but Im not very happy."

The boys money and the girls money was all put in Johns coat pocket because none of the girls coat pockets were deep enough.

The childrens afternoon was spent looking round, but they couldnt find anything they all wanted to buy, so in the end, the boys and girls went off to their homes.

"Wow!" said Johns sister. "Whats all this money doing in my coat pocket. Im rich!"

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