

Apostrophes

Apostrophes have three uses in English:

1. They are used to indicate **possession**, whether literal or figurative.
2. They are used to indicate time and measurement in some cases.
3. They are used to form contractions.

POSSESSIVE APOSTROPHES show ownership of something and are used in conjunction with the letter s. For example, *John's toy* shows that John has a toy. You can perform a simple test to determine the location of a possessive apostrophe by rephrasing with *have* or *has*.

My mother has a sweater.

My mother's sweater... (The apostrophe follows *mother*.)

Joan has a Honda

Joan's Honda... (The apostrophe follows the name *Joan*.)

The Writing Lab has a coffee pot.

The Writing Lab's coffee pot... (The apostrophe follows *Lab*.)

In the above examples, the possessive is made by adding an apostrophe plus an s to the word that possesses. However, if the word already ends in s, whether plural or not, it is acceptable to add an apostrophe only.

The Kellers have a Honda.

The Kellers' Honda... (The apostrophe follows *The Kellers*.)

James has a Walkman.

James' Walkman... or *James's Walkman...* (The apostrophe follows *James*.)

The twins have kittens.

The twins' kittens... (The apostrophe follows *The twins*.)

TIME AND MEASUREMENT APOSTROPHES indicate time value and measurement in certain uses. Again, the location of the apostrophe can be determined by rephrasing, this time using the word *of*.

the society of today

today's society

the heat of the summer

the summer's heat

the worth of ten dollars

ten dollars' worth

CONTRACTION APOSTROPHES make two words into one for ease of conversation by replacing some letters in one or both of the words being combined.

Do not use contractions in formal papers!

do not becomes *don't*

I would becomes *I'd*

would have becomes *would've*

I will becomes *I'll*

Make sure the apostrophe is placed where the letter(s) have been omitted and not between the two words. For example, in the contraction of *does* and *not*, the apostrophe replaces the *o* in *not*: *doesn't*.

Note: the contraction of *will* and *not* is *won't*. Even though some letters are omitted from *will*, and an *o* is added, the apostrophe is placed only where the letter *o* is omitted from *not*.

BE CAREFUL! Some words that are contractions sound exactly like words that are not. For example, the words *it's* (from *it is*) and *its* (the possessive form of *it*), along with *you're* (from *you are*) and *your* (the possessive form of *you*) frequently cause problems. If it makes sense as two words, then it's probably the contraction you're dealing with.

Finally, while contractions are usually words like *we're*, *I'm*, *shouldn't*, and so on, they're often made up of names, places, seasons, and the like, as in the following sentence:

Summer's over, and Sheila's going back to where life's a bowl of oatmeal and Friday's the first day of the week.

All the apostrophes in this example are used to make contractions of a noun and the verb *is*. This sort of contraction is considered to be informal, however, and should not be used in formal writing such as term papers.

For further information on the use of apostrophes, consult any good English handbook.