

LEARNING ABOUT APOSTROPHES

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What are apostrophes?

They are the comma-like marks that 'float' above the line, between letters.

Pic of Billy and guitar

Talking balloons appear, saying <That's Billy's guitar>

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But what is the purpose of an apostrophe?

It shows that a letter (or letters) has been omitted. The word 'apostrophe' comes from the Greek *apostrophos* (to turn aside or replace). It was originally applied to the moment when a speaker turned away and pretended to address someone else. It came eventually to mean the idea of someone (or something) not there – ie something removed, or not visible.

Pic of Billy and guitar

Talking balloons appear, saying <That is the guitar of Billy>

Replace this with: <That's Billy's guitar>

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In practice, apostrophes are used for two major reasons:

1 APOSTROPHES OF **CONTRACTION**

Pic showing talking balloon: <That's his guitar!>

2 APOSTROPHES OF **POSSESSION**

Pic showing talking balloon: <This is Billy's guitar!>

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APOSTROPHES OF **CONTRACTION**

We often want to shorten – or 'contract' – words. This happens most often with common expressions – the sort we use every day. Sometimes it's a single letter that is removed, like

I'm not so sure. (Short for '**I am** not so sure.')

Pic of Billy looking confused

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Sometimes several letters are removed together, like

I **can't** go with him, '**cos** I hate him.
(Short for 'I **cannot** go with him, **because** I hate him.)

I'**ll** never speak to him again.
(Short for 'I **will** never speak to him again.)

Pic of Mary-Jane looking disdainful

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APOSTROPHES OF POSSESSION

These came from the Old English use of 'es' to show possession (as in 'Williames house'). When printing came along this was often mixed up with the possessive pronoun 'his' (as in 'William his house'). Shakespeare himself wrote 'the count his gally [galley]' – meaning 'the count's galley'.

Both the **es** and **his** could be simply contracted to '**s**', which soon became the common practice.

<This is Billy's guitar>

Pic of Billy and guitar

NOTE: There is no equivalent in most other languages. In French for instance you have to say 'This is the guitar of Billy' (Voila la guitare de Billy). In German it's 'Es ist die Gitarre von Billy'.

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So how does it work?

To show possession using an apostrophe, the rules are simple:

Add an apostrophe and an 's' after the noun

Pic of Billy and his guitar: <This is Billy's guitar>

Pic of Mary-Jane and her violin: <This is Mary-Jane's guitar>

HINT: If the noun ends in an 's' or 'z' sound (eg Mr Jones) you have a choice of either adding 's or using the ' on its own (whichever sounds better) – Mr Jones's house, or Mr Jones' house being equally 'right'.

What about two possessors?

When two (or more) people possess the same thing, the practice is to use one apostrophe on the last mentioned possessor, as in

We admired **Susie and Jim's new baby.**

Pic of baby

RULE 1: If the two people each possess their own version of the same thing, each possessor has to have an apostrophe (eg Billy's and Mary-Jane's bags).

RULE 2: If a phrase or sentence includes two people who each possess different things, each possessor has to have an apostrophe (eg Jim's sister's friend).

Irregular uses of apostrophes

Apostrophes can also be used for the following:

Decades or centuries eg the 1800's, the 1960's, the '70s
 Expressions involving time eg two weeks' holiday, an hour's break
 Expressions involving money eg a dollar's worth
 Short words used as special expressions eg do's and don'ts, cross
 your t's and dot your i's, I got all A's in my exam

Pic of girls on beach

Getting it wrong with apostrophes (1)

The greatest danger with apostrophes is when they are attached to ***all words ending in s***. Some examples:

**Please clean the bench's and chair's after use
 So everyone enjoy's our facility's**

Put a big cancel/wrong sign over this

**Please clean the benches and chairs after use
 so everyone enjoys our facilities.**

NOTE: Here the simple plural is given an apostrophe – WRONG! (This sign actually appeared in England.)

Getting it wrong with apostrophes (2)

The most common of all mistakes involves the possessive pronoun **its**. Many people believe it must always have an apostrophe, as in

My school is always changing **it's** bell times.

OR

The flu is horrible and **it's** symptoms are really nasty.

Put a big cancel/wrong sign over this

My school is always changing **its** bell times.

OR

The flu is horrible and **its** symptoms are really nasty.

Rule: The possessive pronoun (its) does not have an apostrophe! (The expression **it's** really means **it is** – completely wrong for the sentences above.)

Here's a sentence to keep in mind to show the difference:

It's true that the book has lost its pages.

NOTE: The first **it's** (it is) shows the genuine contraction. The second **its** is the possessive pronoun (which does **not** take an apostrophe!).