

Apostrophes

Note: These reference guides do not take the place of assignment guidelines



Apostrophes perform two main roles in writing: they help form possessive nouns, and they help form contractions. If a word is being made plural with an “s”, an apostrophe is not needed unless it is *also* possessing something.

Forming Possessives of Nouns

- A combination of an apostrophe and the letter “s” are used together at the end of a singular noun to show that it is possessing something.
 - For example: “Mary’s essay is due today.” In this example, Mary needs a possessive apostrophe because the essay belongs to Mary and an “s” because Mary is singular.
 - Additional examples: “The student’s homework is missing.”
“The professor’s guidelines say that no late work is accepted.”
“James’s homework was turned in on time.”
- An apostrophe is used by itself at the end of a plural noun to show that it is possessing something.
 - For example: “The students’ desks needed to be moved.” In this example, there are multiple students possessing multiple desks, so the apostrophe is placed after the “s.”
 - Additional examples: “The students’ classes were let out early.”
“All of the professors’ students were on time to their classes.”
“Some of the students’ emails weren’t working.”
- Joint possession means that two or more nouns are both possessing the same object. When this happens, the last noun is made possessive. Whether you use apostrophe “s” or just an apostrophe will depend on whether or not the last noun is singular or plural.
 - For example: “It was time for Bob and David’s presentation.” In this example, “presentation” is being possessed by both Bob and David at the same time, so only the last noun, “David,” is made possessive.
 - Additional examples: “The Library and Writing Center’s joint presentation was very helpful.”
“The professor and students’ classroom was locked from the inside.”
“The student and professor’s meeting was cut short.”
- If two or more nouns are possessing multiples of the same object, each of the nouns is made possessive. Whether you use apostrophe “s” or just an apostrophe will depend on whether or not the nouns are singular or plural.
 - For example: “The History Department’s and Biology Department’s coffee machines are next to each other.” In this example, the “History Department” and the “Biology Department” are each individually possessing a different coffee machine, so each is made possessive.
 - If the nouns were possessing different objects, then each object would be listed after its corresponding noun: “The History Department’s microwave and the Biology Department’s fridge were next to each other.”
- Some words are already possessive, and do not require an apostrophe or an apostrophe “s”, such as her, his, whose, our, and their.
- The pronoun “it,” when made possessive, is the exception to the apostrophe “s” rule. This is because “it” can have an “s” added to it to make it possessive *and* to create the contraction of “it is.” The following rule should be followed when “it” is used:
 - Possessive of “it” becomes “its” *without* an apostrophe
 - Contraction of “it is” becomes “it’s” *with* an apostrophe
 - For example (possessive): “The dog hurt its paw” (The dog’s paw)
 - For example (contraction): “But it’s going to be okay” (It is going to be okay)