

The Writing Center @ JSCC

Apostrophes

Apostrophes are easy to use, once you know the rules that govern them. In general, apostrophes are used to signal possession in the words they are attached to. For example, if you want to signal that a pile of bones belong to the dog, you would write “the dog’s bones” to indicate such.

The other common use of apostrophes is to signal a contraction – the joining of two words into one by dropping one or more letters and/or spaces, as in “don’t,” which is a contraction of “do not.” However, since you should, for the most part, avoid contractions in your formal writing and since contractions rarely lead to mistakes, we will cover only possessive apostrophes here.

- I. If you are using **APA**, **MLA**, or **Chicago** (Turabian) format, the following rules apply.
 - A. For regular singular nouns, use *apostrophe+s* to signal possession. For example, “the dog’s bone,” “the reporter’s story,” and “my grandmother’s shoes” all show that one dog, one reporter, and one grandmother own the bone/story/shoes.
 1. Importantly, use *apostrophe+s* even if the noun you are making possessive already ends in *-s*. Words like *bass*, *Arliss*, and *empress* all receive the *apostrophe+s* possessive marker, even though they already end in *-s*. (e.g., *bass’s* tail, *Arliss’s* house, *empress’s* throne)
 2. The exception to this rule comes with a certain list of famous names that end in *-s*, including *Jesus* (when referring to the Biblical figure), *Moses* (when referring to the Biblical figure), and *Socrates*. You can find a list of these terms in an MLA or APA handbook. These names are treated as irregular nouns, and they are made possessive with only an apostrophe, as in “Jesus’ robes,” “Moses’ staff,” and “Socrates’ lectures.”
 - B. For regular plural nouns, make the noun plural first; then add only an apostrophe. Regular plural nouns have an *-s* on the end already. For example, the plural of *dog* is *dogs*. If you write “the dogs’ bones,” you are indicating that more than one dog own the bones.
 - C. For irregular plural nouns, which are plural nouns that are not formed with an *-s*, like *children*, *geese*, or *mice*, make them possessive in the same way you would a regular singular noun. For example, write “children’s toys,” “geese’s wings,” and “mice’s cheese” to show that more than one child own the toys.
- II. If you are using **AP** format for journalism, the rules remain the same, except for the rule governing the words that end in *-s*. In AP format, use only an apostrophe to signal even singular words that happen to end in *-s*, like *bass*, which would be made possessive like this: “bass’ tail,” whether one or many bass have tails.