



9 Apostrophes and how to use them correctly

Apostrophes are one of the most misused punctuation marks. They should be used for only two reasons:

- 1 to show possession
- 2 to show you have shortened a word by missing out letters

1 Using an apostrophe to show possession – when something belongs to someone

Where one person or thing has possession, the apostrophe goes **before** the 's':

- Carol's coat (the coat of Carol)
- the dog's tail (the tail of the dog)
- the child's toy (the toy of the child)
- the tree's branches (the branches of the tree)
- the family's car (the car of the family)

Where more than one person or thing has possession, the apostrophe goes **after** the 's':

- the schools' teams (the teams of the schools)
- the builders' work (the work of the builders)
- the churches' spires (the spires of the churches)
- the families' houses (the houses of the families)

There are some exceptions to this rule where the apostrophe goes before the 's':

children children's
people people's

Turning the sentence around and putting the 'of' back will help you to make sure you put the apostrophe in the right place. Where it ends is where you put the apostrophe...

Example: The childrens playground has all sorts of facilities.

Put the 'of' back: The playground of the children

Put the apostrophe where it ends: The children's playground...

Example: The peoples wish was for a clearer communication.

Put the 'of' back: The wish of the people

Put the apostrophe where it ends: The people's wish...

More examples

Example: The Citizens Panel has nearly 1,000 members.

Put the 'of' back: The Panel of Citizens

Put the apostrophe where it ends: The Citizens' Panel...

Example: The libraries opening hours are varied.

Put the 'of' back: The opening hours of the libraries

Put the apostrophe where it ends: The libraries' opening hours...

Example: This years corporate plan is on our website.

Put the 'of' back: The corporate plan of this year

Put the apostrophe where it ends: This year's corporate plan...

Example: The families commitments mean they cannot carry out further foster care.

Put the 'of' back: The commitments of the families

Put the apostrophe where it ends: The families' commitments

Examples that show possession isn't always linked to a person or a physical thing

Example: In seven days time, the Council will send out a press release.

Put the 'of' back: The time of seven days

Put the apostrophe where it ends: In seven days' time...

Example: Employees have 25 days leave a year.

Put the 'of' back: Leave of 25 days

Put the apostrophe where it ends: ...25 days' leave

Example: The Assistant Manager had over five years experience in the job.

Put the 'of' back: the experience of over five years

Put the apostrophe where it ends: ...over five years' experience

Example: The library is 10 minutes walk from the bus station.

Put the 'of' back: the walk of ten minutes:..

Put the apostrophe where it ends: ...ten minutes' walk

Sometimes, there's no right or wrong answer. For example:

boys school – meaning school **for** boys

or

boys' school – meaning school **of** boys

Ulster Teachers Union – meaning Union **for** Ulster Teachers

or

teachers' union - union **of** teachers

girls activities – activities **for** girls

or

girls' activities – activities **of** girls

2 Using an apostrophe to show you have shortened a word by missing out letters

Use an apostrophe to show where you have missed out a letter or letters in the word to contract the word...

don't	do not
won't	will not
can't	cannot
you'll	you will
you're	you are
we're	we are
you'd	you would
here's	here is
that's	that is
who's	who is
doesn't	does not
let's	let us - don't confuse this with 'lets' (allows)
it's	it is. This one is often confused with 'its' – see Its or It's below.

It's perfectly acceptable to use contracted words in your communications – this reflects one of our plain English principles of writing as you would speak (but not writing as you chat). Our communications should be professional but customer-friendly.

For example: 'Do not forget' is an order but 'Don't forget' is more advisory. Also, 'We cannot accept photocopies' sounds far harsher than 'We can't accept photocopies'.

Its or It's?

Many people get confused about when they need to use an apostrophe. It all depends on whether you're showing possession or shortening the words 'It is'.

- **Showing possession - its**

This is the **only exception** to the rule about using an apostrophe to show possession – you **don't** in this case! Here are some examples...

Derby is a city that cares for **its** environment – meaning 'the environment of Derby'.

The Council manages the city centre through **its** management team – meaning 'the management team of the Council'

The Council has recently established **its** first Children's Centres – meaning 'the Children's Centres of the Council'

The Council has increased the Council Tax to pay for **its** services by x per cent – meaning 'the services of the Council'

- **Showing missing letters – it's**

You only need to use an apostrophe to show when you've contracted 'it is'. Here are some examples...

It's (it is) at the forefront of changing the way we deliver Council services.

The Council will be promoting democracy projects and **it's** (it is) hoped that many residents will take part.

It's (it is) the responsibility of the Council's Cabinet to make a decision on this policy.

To check whether or not you need an apostrophe, put the missing letters back in to see if it's a contraction. In the following examples, you can see that, when we do this, the sentence doesn't make sense. It's not a contraction, it's possessive so you don't need an apostrophe.

Example: You can find information about its services from the website.

Put letters back in: You can find information about **it is** services from the website.
Result: Doesn't make sense. It's possessive, so **no** apostrophe.

Example: The Council needs to make sure it can meet its priorities.

Put letters back in: The Council needs to make sure it can meet **it is** priorities.
Result: Doesn't make sense. It's possessive, so **no** apostrophe.

Example: Its message to the residents of Derby is 'rethink rubbish'.

Put letters back in: **It is** message to the residents of Derby is 'rethink rubbish'.
Result: Doesn't make sense. It's possessive, so **no** apostrophe.

Example: The Council and its partners are working together to create a better Derby.

Put letters back in: The Council and **it is** partners are working together to create a better Derby.

Result: Doesn't make sense. It's possessive, so **no** apostrophe.

Never use an apostrophe...

You should **never** use an apostrophe in the following cases:

	✓	✗
• when you're writing about years	1980s, 1990s	1980's, 1990's
• if you give numerals in thousands	000s	000's
• when you're referring to ages	20s, 30s, 40s	20's, 30's, 40's
• when you're using abbreviations or acronyms as plurals (always spell these out first)	ASBOs, BVPIs GCSEs, SENs	ASBO's, BVPI's GCSE's, SEN's
• when you're using well-known abbreviations	DVDs, GPs CD-ROMs	DVD's, GP's CD-ROM's
• when you're talking about weekdays	Mondays, Fridays	Monday's, Friday's
• when writing...	DOs and DON'Ts (write these in capitals as lowercase can be mis-read)	Do's and Don't's

For your reference

Income Based Jobseeker's Allowance
Carers' assessment
Children's Trust
Children's Fund
Children's centres
Older people's strategy
Women's Aid
Children and Young People's Department
Farmers' markets
St Peter's Street
Derby Homes