

## Apostrophes

Apostrophes signal one of two things: **contraction or possession**.

**Contractions** squash two words together into one (or shorten one long word):

*we will* becomes *we'll*  
*you are* becomes *you're*  
*will not* becomes *won't*  
*cannot* becomes *can't*  
*it is* becomes *it's*

Contractions are common in casual speech and writing, but writers should avoid them in formal documents such as essays, reports, etc.

Using **apostrophes to show possession**—a sense of belonging—can be tricky. To **singular nouns**, add an apostrophe plus an *s* (even if the noun ends in *s*):

*The book's cover is torn.*  
*Les's classes are dull.* (*Les' classes* is also acceptable).  
*I ate my housemate's leftovers.*

But what if you were really hungry and helped yourself to all of the leftovers belonging to all of your housemates? To show possession for a **plural noun that ends in s**—let's assume you have several housemates—add an apostrophe after the *s*:

*I ate my housemates' leftovers.*

For plural nouns that don't end in *s*, add an apostrophe plus an *s*:

*The children's toys are broken.*  
*The women's washroom is on the left.*

The **exception** to the rules of apostrophe use and possession is *it*. The possessive of *it* is *its* (no apostrophe).

**X** *It's collar was too loose and kept coming off.*  
**✓** *Its collar was too loose and kept coming off.*

## Apostrophes and plurals

Apostrophes are never used to pluralize standard English words, but they can be used to signal the plural of non-standard words such as acronyms (CD's), single letters (p's and q's), or dates (the 1980's). *Please note*: some usage guides omit the apostrophe in these cases (CDs, 1980s, etc.). Just pick a strategy and stick with it for consistency. You can also take your cue from other writing or style guides in your field.