

# Punctuation: Apostrophes

This workshop will:

- Refresh your understanding of apostrophes
- Provide tips for the appropriate use of apostrophes
- Provide practice and follow-on activities for you to be able continue to improve your use of punctuation

Teaching points:

1. The jobs apostrophes do
2. Contractions
3. 'Its/it's' and 'there/they're/their'
4. Where to place apostrophes with plural nouns
5. Apostrophes and numbers
6. Acronyms, initialisms and apostrophes

## 1. *Jobs apostrophes do*

Many people are confused about how to use apostrophes – when to use them and where they go. Does an apostrophe go before or after an 's'? If a word ends in 's', do you add another 's' and an apostrophe? Are there different rules for plurals? Which word has the apostrophe?

They do two jobs:

A) Think of an apostrophe as a basketball **substitute** who comes off the team bench and replaces a letter or letters. The apostrophe is usually a vowel but not always. For example:

*I can't do my essay.*

*He won't deliver his presentation.*

B) An apostrophe can be used for **possession** showing when something belongs to something/s else. The personal pronouns 'my' and 'mine', 'your' and 'yours', 'his', 'hers', 'its', 'our' and 'ours' and 'their' and 'theirs' are exceptions to the possession rule as they do **not** have apostrophes.

*The cell's mitochondria...*

*The patients' X-rays.....*



## 2. Contractions

Contractions are words including an apostrophe acting as a **substitute** with words such as:

- *don't*
- *wasn't*
- *can't*
- *it's*

These word constructions are **not acceptable** in academic writing, so always write them out in full:

- *do not*
- *was not*
- *cannot*
- *it is*

Exceptions to this rule:

- ✓ in quotations you include in your written work or presentations
- ✓ for initialisms and acronyms which are special cases (more on these later).

## 3. 'Its/it's' and 'there/they're/their'

Remember - an apostrophe acts as either a substitute or to show possession.

### Its and it's

Quick reminder: there are exceptions to the rule of using an apostrophe for possession in relation to personal pronouns (as shown at the beginning of the first section). This means 'it's' is a contraction so should be written as 'it is' unless using a quotation. This may mean confusion over which to use is reduced.

One of these sentences is right and the other should have an apostrophe.

- A. *In the current conflict its uncertain whose borders they are contesting.*
- B. *In the current conflict it's uncertain whose borders they are contesting.*

Which is which? One tip is use expansion and see which makes sense.

*In the current conflict **it is** uncertain whose borders they are contesting.*

This makes sense, so as the apostrophe is substituting for the 'i' in 'is' the answer is

*B. In the current conflict **it's** uncertain whose borders they are contesting.*

\*However, whilst this **it's** is grammatically correct, when you are writing for academic purposes, you would have to write it out in full.

Let's try another one:

- A. *Discussing its function to the patient proved difficult due to his age.*
- B. *Discussing it's function to the patient proved difficult due to his age.*

We use the same technique – expansion – to see which to use.

*Discussing **it is** function to the patient proved difficult due to his age.*

This time it does not make any sense and there is no substitution so this time the answer is without an apostrophe.

*A. Discussing **its** function to the patient proved difficult due to his age.*

a)their b)there c)they're

I use this system to work out which one to use.

b) '**there**' is to do with space or time – a Doctor Who word. It contains another word which reminds you of that: 'here'. So, if you have sentences like the following..

*Results showed **there** was little use of the new evening surgery hours.*

OR

*The participant stated: "**there** wasn't enough people to keep conversations going"*

Think that they relate to space and time just like 'here' does, so the spelling must be '**there**'.

c) **they're**. You can use the expanding tip again.

***There/they're/their** developing a new computer programme to assist people with sight impairment*

becomes...

*'**They are** developing a new computer programme to assist people with sight impairment'*

So we are back to the apostrophe being about substitution for the letter 'a' in 'are'.

\*However, don't forget contractions are not appropriate for academic writing unless quoting a source.

a) Use the process of elimination, i.e., if it's not 'there' and not 'they're', it must be '**their**' – one of those pesky **possession** words without an apostrophe.

**TALKING POINT**

Its/it's; they're/their/there: let's fill the gaps together. Write answer on the mini-whiteboards

1. My friends cannot find \_\_\_\_\_ jackets.
2. The dog licked \_\_\_\_\_ paw.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ always late to every event.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ are four squirrels in the yard.
5. My sister is always complaining that \_\_\_\_\_ too hot in Spain

**Activity 1:** Its/it's and they're/their/there

Read the text below and with a neighbour decide whether the word provided is correct and if not, choose the correct option. One option may be used more than once. There are also some other mistakes in here which are not covered above but you can solve by using the methods we have discussed. There are 10 mistakes altogether.

One of the problems that arises when your paying for something over the internet is that you never see whose receiving your details at the other end. We like to think that their trustworthy but its impossible to know whether that is the case. As anyone who has been the victim of credit card fraud will know, it can very difficult to regain you're faith in online shopping once your identity has been stolen. Shops and restaurants may seem safer but just as much fraud goes on their as it does on the web. These days, customers need reassurance that they're transactions are safe and banks need to raise there game with regard to financial security. For all it's advantages, the online world can certainly have it's downside.

Adapted directly from Harrison, Jakeman and Paterson (2012: 115)

#### 4. Where to place apostrophes with plural nouns

The short answer to the problem of where to put the apostrophe for plurals is if there is one 'thing', the apostrophe is before the 's', if more than one, after the 's'. This problem is all about where you put an apostrophe for **plurals** when you want to show **possession**, although they are really about **substitution**. Oh no, I hear you say!

Bear with me. One way to think about it is like this...

A. The **cat's** collar is red.

Expand it: *The cat **has** a collar (that) is red.*

In this one, '**has**' is between 'cat' and 'collar' and you are substituting the letters '**ha**' for an apostrophe, so it goes **before** the 's'.

B. The **cats'** collars are red.

Expand it: *The cats **have** collars (that) are red.*

In this one, '**have**' goes after 'cats' and you are substituting all of '**have**' which is after 'cats' so the apostrophe goes **after** the 's' in 'cats'.

The census of opinion for plurals ending in 's' is not to write another 's' after the apostrophe although you may see this construction in various texts.

*'The collars of the cats are red'* becomes *'the cats' collars are red'*

*'The colours of the irises were fading'* becomes *'the iris' colours were fading'*

That's all very well, I hear you say, but what about words that are plurals but do not end in 's': words like 'children', or 'geese'.

Easy – you treat them just like a singular word, ie 'cat', because they that word describes **one group** of whatever it is. You put an apostrophe and then the 's'.

*The four classes of **children's** coats were on the floor.*

*We spotted eight pairs of **geese's** nests next to the lake.*

#### TALKING POINT

Let's try to pick the right words as a group

A. The beneficial effect of Vitamin D on children's/childrens's health has been noted in recent research findings/findings's.

B.Apparently Ferrari's/Ferraris latest supercar can reach speeds/speeds' of over 200 miles per hour.

C.The development of teenagers/teenager's/teenagers's identities is heavily influenced by their peers/peer's/peers's behaviour.

D.People have enjoyed Beethoven's/ Beethovens music for more than two hundred years.

E.I've always believed that a designers's/designer's/designer most successful approach is to follow his intuition, rather than pander to clients's/client's/clients ideas.

Adapted directly from Harrison, Jakeman and Paterson (2012: 47)

## ***5. Apostrophes and numbers***

Sometimes students do not miss out apostrophes, they add them where they are not needed.

You do not add an apostrophe to numbers:

- Decades: the 1980s (there is no substitution and no possession)
- Any other number: in his 40s (there is no substitution and no possession)
- For plurals: Levi 501s (there is no substitution and no possession)

See below for more information on how to deal with acronyms and initialisms.

## ***6. Acronyms, initialisms and apostrophes***

These are terms, sometimes words, made up of the capital letters in (usually) the name of an organisation, item or method.

Examples:

- *NATO is the acronym for North Atlantic Treaty Organisation*
- *WWF is the initialism for both the World Wildlife Foundation and the World Wrestling Federation.*

If you wish to use an acronym or initialism in a piece of written work or in a presentation, the correct procedure is to write out your organisation, etc. in full the first time it is mentioned followed by the acronym in brackets. Generally, full stops are not required in between the letters, although you may see this format in some texts. For example:

- *North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)*
- *World Wildlife Foundation (WWF)*
- *World Wrestling Federation (WWF)*

Another issue with acronyms and initialisms is what to do with apostrophes if there is a plural and/or possession involved.

Remember: apostrophes are only used for two reasons: to substitute for a letter/s or to show possession. The full stops act as substitutes for the rest of the letters in each word making up the acronym or initialism, so the acronym or initialism is just a word. This means you can treat it like any other word. For example:

- ***Individual First Aid Kit*** is ***IFAK***

The plural is...

***IFAKs*** (no apostrophe) which is a shortened version of...

***Individual First Aid Kits.***

- *The bandage belonging to one **IFAK*** would be...  
*the **IFAK's** bandage* which is a shortened version of...  
***Individual First Aid Kit's*** bandage.

- *The bandages belonging to five **IFAKs*** would be...  
*the **IFAKs'** bandages* which is a shortened version of...  
***Individual First Aid Kits'*** bandages.

## Treat acronyms and initialisms like words

### TALKING POINT

We will do three together on numbers, acronyms and initialisms. Should the apostrophes stay or go?

1.Sales of DVDs rose rapidly during the period, and they're ascendancy over video's was soon confirmed.

2. Cinema-going reached its height in the 1940's when its escapist appeal attracted audiences wanting to see movie stars whose lives seemed incredibly glamorous.

3. NATO's Secretary, General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, thanked President Obama for his country's leadership within the Alliance and strong commitment to transatlantic security.

### **Activity 2: Numbers and acronyms**

Read the short piece of text below and decide to insert, remove or keep the apostrophes. Confer with a neighbour to see if your answer tallies with theirs.

In one expert's view, the EU's target of 10 per cent biofuel use by 2020 is over-ambitious. Not least, this is due to the continued popularity of holidays abroad. Even with the high fuel efficiency of planes such as Boeing 747s, amongst the most commonly used commercial aircraft, individuals may well have to reconsider vacation plans.

Adapted directly from Harrison, Jakeman and Paterson (2012: 47)

### **Suggested websites for more information and activities:**

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/> and search for the punctuation type you want

<http://www.ereadingworksheets.com/languageartsworksheets/punctuationworksheets/> and search for the punctuation type you want

You can also visit The Language Centre at Bradford University who will be able to provide additional support on a 1:1 or group basis for ALL students:

<http://www.brad.ac.uk/study/languages/international-study-centre/>

If you would like help with other elements of punctuation or your grammar, we run workshops on these subjects.

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Clip Art – basketball

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## Answers

### TALKING POINT

Its/it's; they're/their/there: let's fill the gaps together.

1. My friends cannot find their jackets.
4. The dog licked its paw.
3. They're always late to every event.
6. There are four squirrels in the yard.
9. My sister is always complaining that it's too hot in Spain.

**Activity 1:** Its/it's; they're/their/there and others

One of the problems that arises when **you're or you are** paying for something over the internet is that you never see **who's or who is** receiving **your** details at the other end. We like to think that **they're or they are** trustworthy but **it's or it is** impossible to know whether that is the case. As anyone **who's or who is** been the victim of credit card fraud will know, it can very difficult to regain **your** faith in online shopping once your identity has been stolen. Shops and restaurants may seem safer but just as much fraud goes on **there** as it does on the web. These days, customers need reassurance that **their** transactions are safe and banks need to raise **their** game with regard to financial security. For all **its** advantages, the online world can certainly have **its** downside.

**TALKING POINT**

Apostrophes and plurals

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B.Apparently **Ferrari's** latest supercar can reach **speeds** of over 200 miles per hour.

C.The development of **teenagers's** identities is heavily influenced by their **peers's** behaviour.

D.People have enjoyed **Beethoven's** music for more than two hundred years.

E.I've always believed that a **designers's** most successful approach is to follow his intuition, rather than pander to **clients's** ideas.

**TALKING POINT**

Numbers and acronyms

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**Activity 2:** Numbers and acronyms

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