

# Study Advice Service

Student Support Services

## APOSTROPHES

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There are two main uses for apostrophes – 1) for **possession** and 2) for **omission**.

**Possession** is quite easy – if you know the rule.

When we write about someone (the **possessor**) possessing **something**, then this is shown by an apostrophe. The rule is:

**PUT THE APOSTROPHE AFTER THE POSSESSOR (AND ADD AN 'S' IF THE SOUND REQUIRES IT). SO,**

One boy's books	<i>The books of one boy</i>
Two boys' books	<i>The books of more than one boy</i>
A woman's rights	<i>The rights of an individual woman</i>
Women's rights	<i>The rights of (all) women</i>
Dogs' behaviour	<i>How dogs (in general) behave</i>
A dog's behaviour	<i>How one particular dog behaves</i>
The USA's voting record	<i>The history of how the USA voted</i>
The States's record OR The States' record	<i>It depends on how you pronounce it</i>
James's bike OR James' bike	<i>It depends on how you pronounce it</i>

**Omission** is also quite easy. If you leave letters out of words, then show you have left them out by putting an apostrophe instead.

**WARNING: in academic English try to avoid the use of contracted (shortened) words. Use the full forms where possible**

**Examples:** he is                      he's  
                  is not                     isn't  
                  will not                    won't  
                  you are                    you're  
    etc, etc

**PAY ATTENTION:**

**it's = it is  
and  
its = of it**

**WARNING: plural nouns which are not possessors  
NEVER need apostrophes — even if they are  
abbreviations like GPs, or dates, like the 1960s**

I am indebted to Philip Dalton for the explanation of possession. It is the simplest I know.

All web addresses in this leaflet were correct at the time of publication.

**The information in this leaflet can be made available in an alternative  
format on request. Telephone 01482 466199.**