

Apostrophes

In English, apostrophes have three uses:

1. They are used to indicate **possession**.
2. They are used to indicate **time** and **measurement**.
3. They are used to form **contractions**.

1. **Apostrophes used with the letter “s” are possessive.** They show that somebody owns or has something. You can form the possessive by adding an apostrophe plus “s” to the person, place, or thing that owns an object. However, if the word already ends in “s,” whether it is plural or not, simply add an apostrophe to the end.

Possessive with words that do not end in “s”	Possessive with words that end in “s”
My mother’s sweater	The United Nations’ leader
Amanda’s car	James’ car
The Writing Lab’s worksheets	The countries’ airports
The bird’s nest	The bees’ hive

You can perform a simple test to determine where to place the possessive apostrophe by rephrasing the sentences with *have* or *has*:

Possessive, no –s ending, using have/has	Possessive, no –s, using apostrophe
My mother has a sweater.	<i>My mother’s sweater</i> is warm.
The bird has a nest.	<i>The bird’s nest</i> is small.

In these examples, the words *mother* and *bird* do not end in “s,” so add an apostrophe plus “s” to the end of each word.

Possessive, -s ending, no apostrophe	<i>Possessive, -s ending, with apostrophe</i>
James has a car.	<i>James' car goes fast.</i>
The countries have airports.	<i>The countries' airports are very busy.</i>

In these examples above, the words *James* and *countries* end in "s," so add *only an apostrophe* to the end of each word. Notice that even though *James* is a singular noun, you add an apostrophe to the end because the word ends with the letter "s."

2. **Apostrophes can indicate adverbs of time or place in certain uses.** To test where to place the apostrophes, this time use the word *of*.

Adverbial expressions using <i>of</i>	<i>Adverbial expressions using apostrophes</i>
The society of today	<i>Today's society</i>
The heat of the summers	<i>The summers' heat</i>
The music of the 1960s	<i>The 1960s' music</i>

3. **Straight apostrophes can abbreviate some measurements.** For latitude and longitude, an apostrophe is used for minutes and a double quote for seconds. For length, an apostrophe is used for feet, quotes for inches.

Measurements in words	Measurements using apostrophes
15 degrees 45 minutes 30 seconds North, 75 degrees zero minutes 12 seconds East	15° 45' 30" N, 75° 00' 12" E
Five feet four inches (n.)/ five-foot-four (adj.)	5'4"

4. **You can use an apostrophe to form a contraction combining two words.** The apostrophe replaces one letter or more in one or both of the words being combined.

Place the apostrophe where the letter(s) have been removed.

When you form a contraction by joining a helping verb or modal verb with “not,” the apostrophe takes the place of the “o” in “not.” Notice that the contraction of *will* and *not* is irregular. Even though some letters are changed in *will*, the apostrophe is still placed where the “o” is omitted in *not*.

Be contractions	Do contractions	Modal contractions	Have contractions	Will contraction
is + not = isn't	does + not = doesn't	can + not = can't	has + not = hasn't	will + not = won't
are + not = aren't	do + not = don't	could + not = couldn't	have + not = haven't	
was + not = wasn't	did + not = didn't	would + not = wouldn't	had + not = hadn't	

Also, sometimes you can form a contraction by joining a subject with a helping verb or modal verb. However, you cannot form a contraction using *was* or *were*.

Subject + will	Subject + would	Subject + are	Subject + is	Subject + has/have
I + will = I'll	I + would = I'd	They + are = they're	He + is = he's	She + has = she's
He + will = he'll	Who + would = who'd	We + are = we're	Joe + is = Joe's	They + have = they've

A style note about contractions: Contractions are often considered informal, so check with your instructor to confirm what is expected for assignments.

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