Aggie Grammar Guide: Apostrophes

There are two main reasons why you need to use an apostrophe: to show ownership (possession) and deleted letters (contraction).

Ownership (Possession)
Use an apostrophe to show that one noun belongs to another noun or proper noun. (In the phrases below, the possessive is bold and the noun that is owned is underlined.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nouns (not ending in -s)</th>
<th>Nouns (ending in -s)</th>
<th>Proper Nouns (not ending in -s)</th>
<th>Proper Nouns (ending in -s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Singular</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The kid’s innocent eyes</td>
<td>The bus’s bicycle rack</td>
<td>Amanda’s birthday</td>
<td>Chris’ birthday OR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A woman’s bicycle</td>
<td></td>
<td>China’s anonymous wealthy people</td>
<td>Chris’s birthday</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Plural</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A women’s bicycle seat</td>
<td>The buses’ bicycle rack</td>
<td>The Hunters’ address (to refer to the entire Hunter family)</td>
<td>The Edwardses’ address (to refer to the entire Edwards family)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To show possession of compound (two or more) nouns/proper nouns, first determine whether the nouns are acting separately or together. Separate nouns are each marked with an apostrophe; joint nouns are only marked with a single apostrophe on the final noun.

- **Example:** After reading about Michael McMichael’s and Anthony Odom’s experience with the police, I could understand the police brutalization toward the community of color. (McMichael and Odom have separate experiences)
- **Example:** After reading about Michael McMichael and Anthony Odom’s experience with the police, I could understand the police brutalization toward the community of color. (McMichael and Odom share this experience)
Deleted Letters (Contraction)
Use an apostrophe when you combine two words or delete letters (often with helping verbs and negative markers).

Contractions are regularly used in speech and conversational writing but are often avoided in formal writing. To understand the conventions of your field of study, you can ask a professor or review academic writing in your discipline. However, it is always correct to use the non-contracted form. Some example contractions appear in the list below:

- I + have becomes I’ve
- you + are becomes you’re
- she + had becomes she’d
- they + will becomes they’ll
- what + is becomes what’s
- it + is becomes it’s
- should + not becomes shouldn’t
- is + not becomes isn’t

Example: The Inupiat people of Alaska created a video game that’s (that + is) played in their native language.

Example: Does it mean that you can’t (can + not) do something in the future if you couldn’t (could + not) do it before?

(Note that the non-contracted form of can’t is cannot. There is a different meaning for the sentence “I cannot go to class” [I am unable to go to class] and the sentence “I can not go to class” [I am able to skip class].)

Visual Reasons to Use an Apostrophe
Use an apostrophe to abbreviate a year or decade of time. Most style guides recommend omitting the apostrophe for plural use of years and dates.

Example: I was born in the ‘90s/1990s. (not *90’s/1990’s)

Optional apostrophe: Style guides disagree, but you can use an apostrophe to refer to plural letters, numbers, and abbreviations. Check with your instructor or examine writing in your discipline, but be consistent with your choice. Using an apostrophe with lowercase letters is preferred over using an apostrophe with uppercase letters. It is also acceptable to use quotes instead of an apostrophe.

Example: My name has two a’s (or “a”s, As, or A’s) in it.
Example: I’ve been receiving 10s (or 10’s) on all my assignments.
What’s the Difference between Possessive/Contracted Homophones Such As its/it’s, your/you’re, whose/who’s etc.?

Homophones are word pairs that sound identical but have different meanings, e.g. sight and cite. Like any homophone pair, these possessive/contracted homophones are indistinguishable when spoken but must be written correctly to avoid confusion.

The first version (its, your, whose, etc.) is a possessive determiner and the second (it’s, you’re, who’s, etc.) is a contraction. If you can expand the word to its two-word form, it’s a contraction. If you can’t, it’s a possessive determiner.

- Example: Rosseta (a robotic probe) finally landed on a comet after bouncing off its surface.
- Test: *Rosseta finally landed on a comet after bouncing off it is surface. (Ungrammatical = not a contraction. It must be a possessive determiner.)
- Example: It’s a proven fact that humans cannot fly.
- Test: It is a proven fact that humans cannot fly. (Grammatical = contraction.)
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Intermediate Practice

Circle the correct word form to complete the sentence. For some sentences, more than one answer may be correct.

**Example:** Bigger bills are enough to make people realize that their/they’re overspending their money, and its/it’s time to start saving.

**Answer:** Bigger bills are enough to make people realize that they’re overspending their money, and it’s time to start saving.

1) Rock climbing is important in **Travis’/Travis’s** social activities and relationships.

2) Discrimination is present in **todays/today’s** society, and **there’s/they’re** still a stereotype that prevents society as a whole from progressing.

3) Anarchism is a political philosophy which means that people believe that a stateless society will make people’s/peoples’ lives better.

4) The most important thing to enjoy **your/you’re** life is to be thankful for everything.

5) My brother is a Mexican American in his late **30’s/30s**, is covered with tattoos, and wears a muscle shirt.

6) I recommend fixing the uneven locks inside every stall of the **woman’s/women’s** bathroom in Giedt Hall.

7) The beach **cruisers/cruiser’s** style looks stupid because its/it’s wide and clunky.

8) After reading this article, I have come to the conclusion that I cannot relate to the **author’s/authors’** main point, even though global warming is something that affects everyone worldwide.

9) To a country, the aerospace industry is very significant to **its/it’s** development.
10) In Bradley and Engelstein’s/Bradley’s and Engelstein’s articles, the authors each look at the same empirical data and information about Russia during the 1800s/1800’s.

**Advanced Practice**

In each set of sentences, one sentence is ungrammatical and three sentences are grammatical. Identify and explain which sentence is ungrammatical. For the remaining 3 sentences, describe their differences in terms of meaning or grammatical function.

Please note, there may be multiple ways to write your explanation although you will see only one option in the answer key. Compare your explanation to the one provided and determine if one is more effective.

*Example* (Identify which sentence is ungrammatical and explain the differences in the remaining 3 sentences in terms of grammatical function):

A. She’s bought snack.
B. She could’ve bought a snack.
C. She could have bought a snack.
D. She could of bought a snack.

**Answer:**
A. Grammatical. *She’s* is the contracted form of *she has.*
B. Grammatical. *Could’ve* is the contracted form of *could have.*
C. Grammatical. No possessives or contractions.
D. Ungrammatical in written English. *Could of* is a spoken version of *could have.*

1) Identify which sentence is ungrammatical and explain the differences in the remaining 3 sentences in terms of grammatical function:

A. They’re freshmen.
B. Their freshmen.
C. Their freshmen are in debt.
D. They’re in debt.

2) Identify which sentence is ungrammatical and explain the differences in the remaining 3 sentences in terms of meaning:

A. My friend’s apartment is nice.
B. My friends’ apartment is nice.
C. My friends have a nice apartment.
D. My friend’s have a nice apartment.

3) Identify which sentence is ungrammatical and explain the differences in the remaining 3 sentences in terms of grammatical function:

A. John Brooks’ family sent me a letter.
B. The Brooks family sent me a letter.
C. I received a letter from the Brookses’.
D. The Brookses’ letter was sent to me.

4) Identify which sentence is ungrammatical and explain the differences in the remaining 3 sentences in terms of meaning:

A. Lewis and Laurie’s children are in college.
B. Lewis’s and Laurie’s children are in college.
C. Lewis’ and Laurie’s children are in college.
D. Lewis and Laurie’s children’s are in college.
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Answer Key

Intermediate Practice

1) Rock climbing is important in Travis’ or Travis’s social activities and relationships. (Either option is correct)
2) Discrimination is present in today’s society, and there’s still a stereotype that prevents society as a whole from progressing.
3) Anarchism is a political philosophy which means that people believe that a stateless society will make people’s lives better.
4) The most important thing to enjoy your life is to be thankful for everything.
5) My brother is a Mexican American in his late 30s, is covered with tattoos, and wears a muscle shirt.
6) I recommend fixing the uneven locks inside every stall of the women’s bathroom in Giedt Hall.
7) The beach cruiser’s style looks stupid because it’s wide and clunky.
8) After reading this article, I have come to the conclusion that I cannot relate to the author’s or authors’ main point, even though global warming is something that affects everyone worldwide. (Either option could be correct, depending on whether there are one or many authors)
9) To a country, the aerospace industry is very significant to its development.
10) In Bradley’s and Engelstein’s articles, the authors each look at the same empirical data and information about Russia during the 1800s. (The word each shows that only one interpretation is correct – that the authors wrote separate articles.)
Advanced Practice

1)  
A. Grammatical. They’re is a contracted form of they are, so the sentence has a verb.
B. Ungrammatical. Their is possessive and the sentence lacks a verb.
C. Grammatical. Their is possessive and the sentence has the verb are.
D. Grammatical. They’re is a contracted form of they are, so the sentence has a verb.

2)  
A. Grammatical. One friend has one nice apartment.
B. Grammatical. Many friends share one nice apartment.
C. Grammatical. Many friends have one nice apartment.
D. Ungrammatical. Friend’s is either a contracted form of friend is or the possessive form, but either way the sentence is ungrammatical.

3)  
A. Grammatical. John Brooks is a singular proper noun and as a possessive is either John Brooks’ or John Brooks’s.
B. Grammatical. No possessive is used because Brooks is functioning as an adjective describing family.
C. Ungrammatical. Brookses’ is the possessive form; what’s needed is the plural form Brookses.
D. Grammatical. Brookses’ is the plural possessive, and the entire Brooks family owns the letter.

4)  
A. Grammatical. They have children together.
B. Grammatical. They both have children but not with each other.
C. Grammatical. They both have children but not with each other. Lewis’ is an alternate form of Lewis’s.
D. Ungrammatical. Children is not possessive.