

**Academic Assistance and Tutoring Centers****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.)

	<b>Nouns (not ending in -s)</b>	<b>Nouns (ending in -s)</b>	<b>Proper Nouns (not ending in -s)</b>	<b>Proper Nouns (ending in -s)</b>
<b>Singular</b>	The <b>kid's</b> <u>innocent eyes</u> A <b>woman's</b> <u>bicycle</u>	The <b>bus's</b> <u>bicycle rack</u>	<b>Amanda's</b> <u>birthday</u> <b>China's</b> <u>anonymous</u> <u>wealthy people</u>	<b>Chris' birthday</b> OR <b>Chris's birthday</b>
<b>Plural</b>	A <b>women's</b> <u>bicycle seat</u>	The <b>buses'</b> <u>bicycle rack</u> The <b>kids'</b> <u>innocent eyes</u>	The <b>Hunters'</b> <u>address</u> (to refer to the entire Hunter family)	The <b>Edwardses'</b> <u>address</u> (to refer to the entire Edwards family)

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 table below:

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I + have → I've	what + is → what's
you + are → you're	it + is → it's
she + had → she'd	should + not → shouldn't
they + will → they'll	is + not → 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

Choose the correct word form to complete the sentence.

*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 **today's/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/cruisers'** 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.

*Example set (explain differences in grammatical function):*

- I. *She's bought snack.*
- II. *She could've bought a snack*
- III. *She could have bought a snack.*
- IV. *She could of bought a snack.*

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### *Answer set:*

- I. Grammatical. **She's** is the contracted form of **she has**.
- II. Grammatical. **Could've** is the contracted form of **could have**.
- III. Grammatical. No possessives or contractions.
- IV. Ungrammatical in written English. **Could of** is a spoken version of **could have**.

### *Set #1: Explain differences in grammatical function*

- I. They're freshmen.
- II. Their freshmen.
- III. Their freshmen are in debt.
- IV. They're in debt.

### *Set #2: Explain differences in meaning*

- I. My friend's apartment is nice.
- II. My friends' apartment is nice.
- III. My friends have a nice apartment.
- IV. My friend's have a nice apartment.

### *Set #3: Explain differences in grammatical function*

- I. John Brooks' family sent me a letter.
- II. The Brooks family sent me a letter.
- III. I received a letter from the Brookses'.
- IV. The Brookses' letter was sent to me.

### *Set #4: Explain differences in meaning*

- I. Lewis and Laurie's children are in college.
- II. Lewis's and Laurie's children are in college.
- III. Lewis' and Laurie's children are in college.
- IV. 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 **cruisers'** 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**

Set #1:

- I. Grammatical. **They're** is a contracted form of **they are**, so the sentence has a verb.
- II. Ungrammatical. **Their** is possessive and the sentence lacks a verb.
- III. Grammatical. **Their** is possessive and the sentence has the verb **are**.
- IV. Grammatical. **They're** is a contracted form of **they are**, so the sentence has a verb.

Set #2:

- I. Grammatical. One friend has one nice apartment.
- II. Grammatical. Many friends share one nice apartment.
- III. Grammatical. Many friends have one nice apartment.
- IV. Ungrammatical. **Friend's** is either a contracted form of **friend is** or the possessive form, but either way the sentence is ungrammatical.

Set #3:

- I. Grammatical. **John Brooks** is a singular proper noun and as a possessive is either **John Brooks'** or **John Brooks's**.

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- II. Grammatical. No possessive is used because **Brooks** is functioning as an adjective describing **family**.
- III. Ungrammatical. **Brookses'** is the possessive form; what's needed is the plural form **Brookses**.
- IV. Grammatical. **Brookses'** is the plural possessive and the entire Brooks family owns the letter.

### Set #4:

- I. Grammatical. They have children together.
- II. Grammatical. They both have children but not with each other.
- III. Grammatical. They both have children but not with each other. **Lewis'** is an alternate form of **Lewis's**.
- IV. Ungrammatical. **Children** is not possessive.