

Why are apostrophes such a problem?

Even some teachers are not always confident in their own ability to use apostrophes, and this is evident in some classroom displays and letters sent to parents. Like many other people, they may not appreciate that apostrophes have two uses: they are used either to show omission or to show possession. No one is helped by the fact that there are lots of incorrect examples all around us, or that some possessive words like *yours, his, hers, ours, theirs*, and *its* are not written with an apostrophe, while *someone's, everyone's, no one's* and *one's* are. And then there are further complications such as what to do when words end in 's', and how to deal with words that have irregular plurals. A plethora of websites offer often quite clear guidance on using apostrophes, but a search will also reveal many which provide a forum for people to grumble about other people's misuse of apostrophes and to share examples of this. However, it seems that even one of the groups who are often derided for their use of apostrophes may have some historic justification for their errors.

Research focus: greengrocers' apostrophes

Apostrophes used incorrectly to form plural words are sometimes known as 'greengrocers' apostrophes' because, traditionally, they were often seen on fruit and vegetable market stalls (Truss, 2003). Because the plural form of most nouns used in English sounds, when spoken aloud, like the possessive form (for example, 'the apple's core' and 'a bag of apples'), people sometimes give both versions an apostrophe.

It is thought that the term 'greengrocers' apostrophes' was coined in the mid-twentieth century by a teacher in Liverpool, England (Apostrophes, www.supaproofread.com). So, far from being a modern phenomenon, incorrect use of the apostrophe to make words plural was apparently common on the advertising signs of greengrocers in the UK around 60 years ago.

Indeed, Crystal (2005) shows that using an apostrophe for plurals was actually quite common in the eighteenth century, especially for words ending with a vowel. Johnson's dictionary (1755) includes the plural *vulcano's* rather than *volcanoes* (notice, too, in the definition, how an apostrophe is used in place of an 'e' in *calcin'd* (calcined)).

Vulcáno. n.s. [Italian.] A burning mountain; volcano.

Earth calcin'd, flies off into the air; the ashes of burning mountains, in vulcano's, will be carried to great distances.

Apostrophes were seen as a solution to the problem of pluralising words ending with 'o', since merely adding an 's' could lead to confusion over pronunciation (*potatos, tomatos*). Crystal concludes that to condemn someone for using such forms as *potato's* is actually to display linguistic ignorance – an ignorance of the logic behind such forms which the modern users are subconsciously manifesting (2005, p.455).

However, while Crystal may be linguistically and historically correct, you should certainly not revert to the eighteenth-century usage of apostrophes, either in your writing or your teaching. Our language changes constantly, but it is hard to envisage a time when the 'greengrocers' apostrophe' will be acceptable in schools or other educational institutions.

The apostrophe exists in other languages and can be found, for example, in French, where monosyllabic words which are formed of a consonant followed by an unaccented *e* (a *schwa* – the sound of, for example, the second syllable of *sofa* in English, or *je, te, ce* and *ne* in French) is contracted with an apostrophe when in front of a word that begins with a vowel sound, for example, *j'ai, c'est, n'a pas*. The French, however, are not immune from greengrocers' apostrophes, as you can see if you look at T-shirts and some shop signs, especially where these are translated into English. The English on many T-shirts often comprises familiar words but presented in an unfamiliar order (*Static Line in Athletic's Ass!* was seen recently) and these are rivalled by some of the translations of food items on menus.

An interesting phenomenon recently was the craze in France for small enamelled lapel pins, which could be bought on market stalls throughout the country. The French have several serviceable words for pins, brooches and similar items, but these were called *pin's*. One of them was *un pin's*, while en masse they were *les pin's*. The combination of an English word and an apostrophe apparently conferred a great glamour on these little articles. This effect is comparable, perhaps, to the use of exotic but superfluous inflection marks in the name of the group *Motörhead*, the unnecessary apostrophe in the band *Hear'say*, or the umlaut in the ice-cream company *Häagen Dazs* (this name, incidentally, was invented in the 1950s by an American wanting a Danish-sounding name for his brand: the Danish language actually contains neither an 'ä' nor a 'zs' combination!)

Speakers of other languages sometimes seem to assume that the apostrophe gives a particularly British air to their writing – Japanese T-shirts often bear cryptic slogans such as 'My flowers' garden', or 'Team sunshine play's sport', and translated menus are also a rich source of this kind of error. Tourists in France, Spain or Italy are often offered lamb's chops (or lamb's chop's), spare rib's, or apple's pie. (The French phrase 'de maison', meaning homemade, is not infrequently translated as 'house's', though here at least the apostrophe use is correct.)

Essentially, apostrophes are used to show that something is missing. For omission or contraction this is relatively simple: 'has not' becomes 'hasn't', 'did not' becomes 'didn't', and so on. To understand the use of the possessive apostrophe, we need to go back a few hundred years. Although English has developed from many different languages, it is essentially a Germanic language which has much in common with modern German. Older versions of English used a genitive case ending to show possession. This was normally *-es*. For example, *The man's car* in German is *Das auto des mannes* (*The car of the man*). The ending *-es* on *mann* shows possession.

Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, written in the fourteenth century, included *The Knyghtes Tale* (*Knight's Tale*), *The Clerkes Tale* (*Clerk's Tale*) and *The Nonnes Priestes Tale* (*Nun's Priest's Tale*).

and featured phrases such as *Kynges court* (*King's court*) and *Goddess love* (*God's love*). *The Millere his tale* also appears instead of *The Miller's Tale* in the original, suggesting that Chaucer had two ways of showing possession.

Given the examples from earlier versions of English and from modern German, it is often argued that we no longer use the *-es* possessive form in English and have replaced it with *-s*, so that apostrophes always replace missing letters for possession as well as for omission.

Using apostrophes correctly

In this section, we have taken frequently asked questions about apostrophes and have answered them with answers and explanations. You will find further explanations in the glossary.

- I understand that I need to add *'s* to singular nouns to show possession, but what should I do when a word already ends with *'s*?

For singular possessives like Jess, Charles and Burns add *'s* to get *Jess's bike*, *Charles's book* and *Burns's poetry*.

For French names which end with a silent *'s*, the same applies – *Rabelais's ideas*, *Louis's palace*.

For names like Hodges, Bridges and Moses, where the name ends with *-es* pronounced *-iz*, just add an apostrophe – *Paul Hodges' coat*, *Mrs Bridges' kitchen*, *Moses' followers*.

Polysyllabic names like Nicholas can have just an apostrophe, but it is also correct to add an *'s* after the apostrophe; this is a rare example where it is a matter of personal choice. The *'s* is generally pronounced – we would say *Nicholas's*.

Classical or historical names like Ceres, Mars and Jesus are usually made possessive with an apostrophe but no *'s*. This can lead to problems – St James, for instance, is a historical or classical figure, so by this convention we would write *St James' Church*, but when talking of a child in the class, *James's book*. As you will see later in the chapter, there are many inconsistencies to be found.

For plurals ending with *-es*, add an apostrophe but not *'s* to the normal plural, so that we get *the buses' routes*, *the Joneses' house*, and *the horses' stables*.

- What about expressions like a week's holiday and two days' break? Why do they get apostrophes?

This is because they represent a shortening of the phrase 'a holiday of one week', and so on; the usage is similar to the possessive – *of* meaning 'belonging to'. *Three days' work* means 'the work of, or assigned to, three days'.

- Why don't pronouns have apostrophes when they are possessive?

It's not necessary to add an apostrophe because possessive pronouns already show ownership, for example, hers, his, ours, theirs and its.

The only personal possessive pronoun with an apostrophe is *one's*, which extends to *everyone's*, *someone's* and *no one's*.

The pronouns in *who's*, *it's* and *they're* are contractions of *who is* (or *who has*), *it is* (or *it has*), and *they are* respectively, and are not possessive pronouns.

However, we do add an apostrophe plus *'s* to form the possessive of some indefinite pronouns:

- somebody's car
- nobody's fault
- one's corgis.

Probably the most common error is to confuse *it's* (meaning 'it is') with the possessive pronoun *its*:

- It's time you learned this.
- The cat licked its paws.

- Why do many shops have apostrophes in their names?

Originally, the shop would have been a possession of the owner – the pharmacy owned by Jesse Boot became Boot's Chemists, then simply Boot's, just as we might talk of *going over to Tom's* when referring to a friend's house.

Many businesses have now dropped the apostrophes which once showed who owned them (*Barclays* is no longer *Barclay's* and *Currys* no longer *Curry's*, and *Chambers English Dictionary* has no apostrophe). Waterstones bookshop attracted much press attention by deciding to do this in 2012, claiming this made the name more versatile in online use. The press reacted with much lamentation and talk of falling standards of literacy and so on, and a *Guardian* journalist simply suggested that that one should carry a felt-tip pen and some correcting fluid around to correct errors wherever they are spotted, claiming *This will make you feel much better* (Mayes, 2005).

Curriculum links

What are we expected to teach at Key Stage 1? Year 1 children should read words with contractions, e.g. *I'm*, *I'll*, *we'll*, and understand that the apostrophe represents the omitted letter(s). Year 2 children should understand how spoken language can be represented in writing by learning how to use both familiar and new punctuation correctly (see Appendix 1), including full stops, capital letters, exclamation marks, question marks, commas for lists and apostrophes for contracted forms.

More on inappropriate uses of apostrophes

Some time around Years 2 to 4, most teachers experience an outbreak of apostrophes from many of their pupils. This usually coincides with children developing as independent readers and noticing that in some words an apostrophe precedes the final 's'. Joseph, a third-year undergraduate trainee, found **this** happening in his Year 3/4 class and, **after** discussion **with** the class **teacher**, devised a series **of** lessons to show the children how to use **apostrophes** correctly.

Case study: an outbreak of apostrophes

Joseph decided, after discussions with the literacy coordinator, who was also the usual teacher of his class, that he would use two main approaches to develop children's understanding of apostrophes.

He focused on apostrophes in shared reading, using a passage from a short story he had written for the class. He chose a section in which there was dialogue which included words such as *can't*, *won't* and *wouldn't*, and in which there were three examples of apostrophes being used for possession (*Tom's*, *the girls' changing room*, and *the car's headlights*). The initial focus was very much on the text and its content, but then Joseph asked the children about the apostrophes:

- Why were they there?
- What did they tell us?

He then spent a few minutes writing some examples of both possession and omission, with the children's help, all the time discussing where to place apostrophes and why they were needed.

Next, Joseph asked children in two of his literacy groups to collect and classify apostrophes by looking in pairs at different photocopied texts which he provided. First, the children used highlighters to show where the apostrophes were, using green for possession and yellow for omission. Where they were unsure **about** why an apostrophe was used, they used a pink highlighter. The highlighted sheets **gave** Joseph a quick and easy way of assessing children's knowledge and understanding and helped him to plan for further lessons to address misconceptions and explain usage. He also made extensive use of shared writing to model correct usage and looked for opportunities to discuss apostrophe usage when children were engaged in guided or independent writing.

The case study shows the importance of assessment in informing our planning for children's learning. By analysing children's errors and misconceptions you can tailor your teaching to their needs.

Curriculum links

In the National Curriculum (2013), Year 2 children are expected to be able to use apostrophes to mark where letters are missing in spelling and to mark singular possession in nouns (for example, *the girl's name*).

Year 4 children should be able to use apostrophes to mark plural possession (for example, *the girls' names*).

Clearly, children could use a range of texts to collect and classify apostrophes, but they will usually find more examples in fiction texts, especially those which include dialogue. This is because informal versions of *do not* (*don't*), *could not* (*couldn't*) and so on are often a feature of dialogue, but tend to be used less in non-fiction or in more formal pieces of writing. In the next section, you will see how apostrophes are also used in dialogue to indicate how a speaker pronounces words.

Apostrophes in dialogue

When teaching children about apostrophes, many teachers focus on omission through examples such as *can't*, *don't* and *isn't*. These are relatively easy to understand for most children, but as their reading develops they will begin to encounter other examples, in dialogue, in stories, and on road signs, posters and lists.

Activity

Look at the dialogue below and decide why each apostrophe has been used:

Bill turned to Jo and said, 'old on a minute! What's goin' on 'ere?'

'I 'aven't a clue,' replied Jo, 'but if 'arry doesn't 'urry up we'll get caught!'

'Too blinkin' right we will,' grumbled Bill, 'and then we'll all end up goin' t'nick.'

Jo's face turned red with anger. 'It'll be 'arry's fault if we do!'

The dialogue above provides an example of the way in which authors make use of apostrophes to show the reader how characters speak. Dropped aitches (and they are aitches and not 'haitches', otherwise the word might have been written as 'aitches – see Research focus below) are signified by omitting the aitch and replacing it with an apostrophe; in two cases a final 'g' is replaced by an apostrophe to show it wasn't sounded by the speaker; and *t'nick* replaces *the nick* (prison). The final line includes *it'll*, which is short for *it will*, and *'arry's*, which has one

apostrophe to show there is a missing *h* at the beginning, and another to show that the fault belongs to Harry.

For other examples of apostrophes being used in dialogue, look at Sergeant Samways' dialogue in Roald Dahl's *Danny the Champion of the World* or at Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, in which the author reproduces the Yorkshire dialect spoken by some of her characters.

Research focus: aitch vs haitch

The dropping of aitches in dialogue is a common feature of many novels, but the name of the letter often causes confusion. The BBC has a pronunciation unit responsible for advising presenters on pronunciation and offers the following on aitch:

*British English dictionaries give aytch as the standard pronunciation for the letter H. However, the pronunciation haytch is also attested as a legitimate variant. We also do not ask **broadcasters** who naturally say **haytch** to change their pronunciation but if a **broadcaster contacted** to ask us, we would tell them **that aytch is regarded as the standard pronunciation in British English. People can feel very strongly about this and this pronunciation is less likely to attract audience complaints.***

*Haytch is a standard pronunciation in Irish English and is increasingly being used by native English-speaking people all across the country, irrespective of geographical provenance or social standing. Polls have shown that the uptake of haytch by younger native speakers is on the rise. Schoolchildren repeatedly **being told** not to drop Hs may cause them to hyper-correct and insert them **where they don't exist.***

(Jo Kim, BBC Pronunciation Unit, BBC 2010)

All of which might lead to a thought-provoking pub quiz question: Which is the second letter of the alphabet to be defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary*? (Answer: *aitch*.)

Apostrophes are also often used in names, particularly on road signs and lists where space is limited. However, they are increasingly disappearing from names of streets and villages as signs are replaced, and some councils, like Birmingham in 2009, have made a conscious decision to omit them. Badsey-Ellis (2008) even studied the history of London Underground to find out about apostrophes in station names.

Apostrophes on the London Underground

Badsey-Ellis found that there are currently eight station names with apostrophes:

- Earl's Court
- King's Cross St Pancras

- Queen's Park
- Regent's Park
- Shepherd's Bush (two stations)
- St James's Park
- St John's Wood
- St Paul's.

Three stations started out in life with apostrophes, but lost them many years ago:

- Parson's Green – last used around 1909
- Golder's Green – lost around 1919
- Rayner's Lane – lost around 1921.

Badsey-Ellis also found that maps of the Tube system have sometimes been produced with no apostrophes, for example in 1913, 1928 and 1933. The last station to lose its apostrophe was Collier's Wood in 1987. All of which you may either find fascinating or dull, or you may even be provoked to wonder why the saints and the aristocracy have kept their apostrophes while Messrs Parson, Golder, Rayner and Collier have been downgraded. However, the example shows how apostrophe usage has fluctuated for more than a hundred years; there is, perhaps, small wonder that people are confused.

Abbreviations on road signs continue to include apostrophes so that lettering can be large and easy to see when travelling at speed. The presence of such abbreviations led children in one class to ask their teacher questions about the use of apostrophes in abbreviated place names and surnames, during a coach trip from Durham to Scarborough.

Case study: researching apostrophes for omission in names with Year 5

Laura, an NQT, had been working with her Year 5 class revising the use of apostrophes in the days before the coach trip took place. She was delighted that on the journey some children were sufficiently aware of apostrophes that they asked her about some of the place names they noticed on road signs, such as H'pool. M'b'ro' and S'boro'. Fortunately, Laura had brought some inexpensive road atlases with her so that children could follow their route, and she asked them to look at the atlases to find out which places might be represented by the abbreviations.

Back at school in the following days, the children explored road signs and abbreviations further and looked at other names and words which were commonly abbreviated using apostrophes, including o'clock, O'Neill, D'Artagnan, D'Arcy and John O'Groats.

Through exploring books and websites, and with Laura's help, the children discovered that *O'* in names came from Irish names where *O'* was short for 'of', and showed who the person's father was ('Martin of Neill' becomes 'Martin O'Neill' over time). *D'*, they discovered, also indicated parentage in France, with *de* meaning *of*, being shortened to *d'* before a vowel. This also led to discoveries about the ways in which surnames have been created in other countries (*son* was added in many northern European countries, regardless of whether the offspring was a boy or girl, except in Iceland where females acquired *dottir*; and *Mac* preceded names in Scotland: *MacDonald*, *McNeill*, etc.).

Children also looked at *o'clock*, which they found was short for *of the clock* ('the time is seven of the clock').

Laura also drew children's attention to football league tables, especially those shown as a narrow strip at the side of a television screen, in which teams' names were shortened using apostrophes (for example, T'ham, B'ham, M'c'r City and B'pool).

The children's heightened awareness of apostrophes led them to ask questions about other examples they found in books, newspapers, websites and on signs and posters. Laura found that she was unsure what to tell the children about the use of apostrophes for things like 1960's (or is it 1960s?), minding your P's and Q's and even SAT's (or is it SATs?), and this led her to explore these herself (see later in this chapter for an explanation).

The case study above illustrates one of the problems associated with developing an understanding of apostrophes: not only are they widely misused in places where children see them, but there continues to be debate about their usage, with conventions changing over time and apostrophes often ceasing to be used by councils and companies for names which had previously included them on fascias, in company logos and so on.

Curriculum links

An exploration of maps to find places which include apostrophes in their names, as well as those which perhaps ought to but no longer do, can help develop children's awareness of the functions of apostrophes. Where they find place names which they think ought to have apostrophes, they could use the internet to find out more about the places and to see if they had ever had apostrophes in the past. Children could look at both atlases with maps of large areas and street maps. There should be no shortage of examples, even including some school names: *St John's*, *St Andrew's*, *Our Lady's*, etc.

Interestingly, the English football club Queen's Park Rangers no longer has an apostrophe in its name, while the Scottish club, Queen's Park, does. Newcastle United play at St James' Park, while Exeter City play at St James Park – and a park in Central London is called St James's Park. In Birmingham, residents of the suburb of Kings Norton campaigned for the restoration of an apostrophe in its name.

Residents voted 80 to 8 in favour of returning to being called *King's Norton*, but the local council refused to make the alteration, claiming that this would be costly as stationery would have to be changed.

You may not wish to turn your classes into apostrophe hunters on the lines of the Apostrophe Protection Society, but with ready access to cameras in mobile phones and a range of apostrophe-focused websites, it should be easy for you and them to bring examples to school for display and discussion. You might also like to read Lynne Truss's (2003) chapter in which she cites some of her favourite errors, which include a giant financial institution announcing 'Prudential were here to help you' rather than 'Prudential we're here to help you', and the BBC website, which advertised a grammar course for children: *Next week: nouns and apostrophe's*.

Other (mis)uses of apostrophes

It is quite common to see apostrophes used for plurals of abbreviations such as SAT's, MOT's, CD's, MP's and 1960's. These apostrophes are unnecessary and do not show that anything is omitted or owned (unless you wanted to talk about the CD's box – the box belonging to the CD – or the MP's constituency). Nevertheless, children see so many examples of apostrophes used in this way that there can be little surprise when they copy from such examples.

When lower-case letters are being used, it is common practice to use an apostrophe for clarity – in the phrase, 'dotting the i's and crossing the t's', for example, it would look strange and ambiguous to refer to 'the is and the ts'. However, there is no need to do this when the letters are upper case. So *CDs*, *MPs* and *1960s*, then, are perfectly correct. And when minding your manners, you can refer to p's and q's or Ps and Qs.

In the case study below, note how a teacher provides a visual aid as a reference for children as they learn about contractions, and then reinforces children's understanding through meaningful activities.

Case study: apostrophes for contraction in Year 2

Pippa, a Year 2 teacher who had recently taken up her post for the summer term, found that her new class often missed out or misplaced apostrophes in contractions, writing things like *did'nt*, *should'nt* and *was'nt*. She decided to create a chart which showed which letters were missed out of each contraction and used this at the beginning of a series of literacy lessons.

Words in full	Contracted form	Missing letters
let us	let's	u
should not	shouldn't	o
could not	couldn't	o
do not	don't	o
we are	we're	a
I am	I'm	a
you are	you're	a
it is	it's	i
that is	that's	i

Pippa asked the children to look for examples of apostrophes in texts which she prepared specially, in which all apostrophes were for contractions, and added to the table several new words. She then asked some children to look at books in the class library to find more examples. The contractions *you'd* and *shan't* required careful explanation, as more than one letter is missed in each (*woul-* is omitted when *you would* becomes *you'd*, and *ll* and *o* when *shall not* becomes *shan't*). *Won't* presented a greater challenge, given that *will not* changes to *won't* and the vowel changes from *i* to *o*, as well as the letters *ll* and *o* being omitted. Examples discovered by the children were added to the chart, which became a reference point for them in future lessons.

As children looked for examples in books they also encountered possessive apostrophes and this led Pippa to discuss these and work with a higher ability guided group to develop the children's understanding.

In subsequent lessons, Pippa asked children to write dialogue for short presentations and to include contractions with apostrophes wherever appropriate.

Most errors in using apostrophes for contractions arise because children are unaware of the reason for the placement of the apostrophe. By providing a chart and discussing its content, we can offer children a reference point when they are writing, as well as a focus for discussion.

Curriculum links

Children should learn about apostrophes for contracted forms and possessive apostrophes for singular nouns in Year 2 and possessive apostrophes for singular and plural nouns in Year 4. However, where children are capable of understanding concepts from the curriculum for the next age group, it is often valid to teach them, especially when they encounter them in their reading and wish to find out more.

could we do without apostrophes?

In many cases: yes, as Shaw showed in his writing. Take this extract from Act 1 of his play, *Pygmalion* (1912): *Dont start hollerin. Whos hurtin you? Nobodys going to touch you. Whats the good of fussing?*

It may look strange, but we can read it quite easily. We would soon get used to the changed look of the text, and learn not to miss the apostrophe when one would have been used to show the omission of letters. Even the distinction between singular and plural possessives is often superfluous:

Johns books the red one over there.

Johns books dustjackets are all torn.

However, an official decision to do away with the use of the apostrophe in written English is not likely to be made law in any of our lifetimes, so it is important that our children should learn to use it correctly! There are many situations, as suggested earlier in this chapter, where a correctly used apostrophe can add precision or avoid ambiguity in writing.

Conclusion: what do you need to know about apostrophes?

- Apostrophes have two functions: to show possession and to show omission of letters.
- Apostrophes of omission are found in informal writing or in dialogue.
- You need to understand how children's misconceptions come about. For example, it is understandable that they might put apostrophes in possessive words like *yours*, *his*, *hers*, *ours*, *theirs* and *its*, but they need to understand that these words already show possession and do not, therefore, need apostrophes.
- You need to be aware that children will see examples of apostrophes, both correctly and incorrectly placed, and that they may be confused about their purpose and may consequently place them before every 's', especially as words can sound the same when they need and don't need apostrophes (for example, *the potato's skin* and *the skins of the potatoes*).
- You need to understand that many people confuse *it's*, which is short for *it is* (it is time for bed) and *its*, which is possessive (the elephant flapped its ears).
- You need to show children that apostrophes for omission replace letters, but that sometimes they replace more than one letter (*you've*, *we've*, *shan't*) including in place names on road signs, etc.
- When using an apostrophe for possession, we save words by writing things like *Jo's book* instead of *the book belonging to Jo*.