

Word for Word

Avoiding Apostrophe Errors (not Error's)



Many people struggle with apostrophe use, for good reason. The rules regarding apostrophes are complicated, vary among different style guides, and include exceptions. Here are a few general guidelines about apostrophe use, along with some commonly misused terms.

Guidelines for apostrophe use

Apostrophes have two main uses: to form contractions and to form possessive nouns. To form a contraction, an apostrophe is used in place of the missing letter or letters (e.g., it is → it's, do not → don't, they are → they're). To form a possessive noun, an apostrophe is combined with an *s*. For singular nouns, the apostrophe comes before the *s* (e.g., Tom ate the dog's food); for plural nouns, the apostrophe comes after the *s* (e.g., Tom ate both the dogs' food).

Error 1: errant apostrophes in possessive pronouns

Unlike possessive nouns, possessive pronouns do not require apostrophes. Pronouns instead have irregular possessive forms. For example, the

possessive forms of *I, we, him, her, they,*
and *it* are *mine, ours, his, hers, theirs,* and *its*, respectively.

Because an apostrophe is used to form a possessive noun, people often mistakenly add an apostrophe to a possessive pronoun that ends in *s*.

Incorrect: The book is her's.

Correct: The book is hers.

Incorrect: Our clinic first opened it's doors in 1990.

Correct: Our clinic first opened its doors in 1990.

Error 2: omitted apostrophes

Some contractions would spell an unrelated word if the apostrophe is removed. In these cases, a simple typo can cause a spelling error that might be ignored by an automated spell check. For example, if the apostrophe is left out of *we're* (we are), it becomes *were* (the past tense of *are*). If the apostrophe is left out of *I'll* (I will), it becomes *ill* (sick).

Incorrect: I am not sure how long well be there.

Correct: I am not sure how long we'll be there.

Error 3: errant apostrophes in plural nouns

Another common error is using an apostrophe with the *s* that forms a plural noun. Often, editors see apostrophes erroneously used to form plurals when a noun ends in a vowel or a *y*. Because this type of error is occasionally seen on produce signs in grocery stores (e.g., *banana's* instead of *bananas*), it is sometimes called a greengrocer's apostrophe.¹

Incorrect: The clinic is closed on Sunday's.

Correct: The clinic is closed on Sundays.

Incorrect: Burkitt lymphoma is more aggressive than other lymphoma's.

Correct: Burkitt lymphoma is more aggressive than other lymphomas.

For more information about apostrophe use, consult the *AMA Manual of Style*,² which is [available online](#) through the Research Medical Library.

References

1. Dreyer B. *Dreyer's English*. New York: Random House. 2019:36.
2. *AMA Manual of Style*, 11th ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press; 2020, Chapter 8.7. Accessed February 15, 2022. <https://www.amamanualofstyle.com>

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