

# Writing Center

## Apostrophes

The apostrophe has two main functions: forming contractions and forming possessives. In addition, some symbols and lower case letters form their plurals with the addition of 's, for example, two t's, two 2's.

### FORMING CONTRACTIONS

The apostrophe signals omission of one or more letters:

it's = it is                  couldn't = could not                  I'll = I will

### FORMING POSSESSIVES

Use the possessive form for the owner or possessor, not for the thing possessed. Note that a possessive noun functions as an adjective.

the desk of George = George's desk  
a vacation of two weeks = two weeks' vacation  
payment for one day = one day's payment

### Single Possessives

Add apostrophe plus s ('s) to form the possessive of all singular words except when pronunciation would be difficult.

the car of Ms. Jones = Ms. Jones's car  
the dial on a phone = a phone's dial  
a vacation of one week = a week's vacation

**Exceptions:** Jesus' teachings, Charles' xylophones

### Plural Possessives

Since most nouns form their plurals with the additions of s, most plural possessives add the apostrophe alone. Add apostrophe plus s ('s) to form the possessive of a plural word only when the plural word does not end in s.

cars of the Joneses = the Joneses cars; desks of the secretaries = secretaries' desks; books by the women = women's books

### Suggestions

1. To ensure correct formation of possessives, use a two-stage technique. For clarity when handwriting with apostrophes, leave a space rather than join letters separated by apostrophes.
  - a. First, establish the singular or plural nature of the base word, for example, cow.
  - b. Second, form the possessive of the base word, for example, cow's.
2. Do not use apostrophes to form the possessive of possessive pronouns; they are already possessive in form: their, theirs, ours, its, her, hers
3. Be careful to distinguish between simple plurals, verbs ending in s, and possessive forms:  
Neither the *horses* nor the *cow eats oats*; in fact, the *cow's* favorite food is carrot cake, and the *horses'* favorite food is candy.