

## Possessive Language

- I. Singular Form: The possessive of singular nouns is formed by adding “apostrophe –s” regardless of the final consonant.

*-Joe’s rabbit*  
*-the boss’s desk*

- II. Plural Form: The possessive of plural nouns is formed by converting the noun to its plural form, then adding an apostrophe if it ends with an “s.”

*-the band’s equipment*

\*Add “apostrophe –s” to anything that does not end in “s.”

*-the oxen’s food*

\*If the singular noun that is claiming possession ends in “s,” when it is plural, add “es” and an apostrophe.

*-the Joneses’ house*

\*The plural form of hyphenated words is constructed by making the first word plural and leaving the last word in the singular form.

*-sisters-in-law*

If you are showing possession with a hyphenated word, construct the plural form and add “apostrophe –s.”

*-sisters-in-law’s children*

\*Compound nouns are made possessive by adding “apostrophe –s” to the component nearest to the subject possessed.

*-Ron, Trisha, and Peter’s computer...* If it is *Ron’s, Trisha’s, and Peter’s computers*, it is clear that each person has his or her own individual computer.

- III. Possessive Pronouns

\*These include *his, hers, yours, ours, theirs*, and *its*. These do not need an apostrophe because it is already implied that they are possessive.

*-its furry, little foot...NOT... it’s furry, little foot* (the latter is literally saying, “it is furry, little foot,” which makes no sense.)

\*Indefinite Pronouns (*one, each other, one another, someone else, etc.*) **do need** to be followed by an “apostrophe –s.”

*-one’s beliefs*

- IV. Arranging for Clarity

\*To be certain possessive form should be used, substitute an “of” phrase. If it works, possessive form is correct.

*-the young girl’s diary...the diary of a young girl*

\*When using “of” phrases, make sure you choose your wording carefully. Which of these two sentences sounds best?

*-Tom is a friend of my dad’s.*  
*or-Tom is one of my dad’s friends.*

The second sentence wins because the first sounds awkward and does not openly declare Tom’s identity. The second fulfills these rules.

\*Do not add a sign of possession to an “of” phrase.

NO- *A friend of mine's dog ran away last night.*  
YES - *The dog of a friend of mine ran away last night.*

\*Do not join multiple possessives.

NO- *I have not received the school's principal's letter.*  
YES – *I have not received the letter from the principal of the school.*

\*Do not assign possession to inanimate objects.

*-speakers of a stereo...NOT...stereo's speakers*

\*The following sentence is not clear: *The diagnosis was agreed upon by his and my doctor.* The sentence implies sharing one doctor. These are possible solutions:

*-his and my doctors*  
*-his doctor and mine*  
*-our doctors*

## V. Miscellaneous Apostrophe Fun

\*Add an apostrophe to ancient, classical names ending in “-es” or “-is” to show possession.

*-Achilles' heel*  
*-Isis' temple*

\*If a word ends in “ss” and it is singular, add an apostrophe only. If it is plural, add “-es.”

*-witness' testimony*  
*-witnesses' testimonies*

\*Do not misconstrue a descriptive form ending in “s” as a possessive.

*-news release*  
*-savings account*

\*If the addition of an extra syllable would make a word difficult to pronounce, add an apostrophe only.

*-Mrs. Phillips' order*

\*To form the singular possessive of an abbreviation, add “apostrophe –s.” To form the plural, add an “s” plus an apostrophe to the singular form.

*-Dr. Z's philosophy*  
*-the M.D.s' stethoscopes*

\*Don't underline the possessive if underscored.

*-Of Mice and Men's plot*

\*If a reference is made in time or measurements, which implies personification, possessive form is accepted.

*-an hour's wages*

Some information in this handout was found in these sources:

Strunk Jr., William & White, E.B. *The Elements of Style*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. New York: MacMillan, 1979.  
Freeman, Morton. *The Wordwatcher's Guide to Good Writing and Grammar*. Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1990.  
Sabin, William. *The Gregg Reference Manual*. 7<sup>th</sup> Ed. New York: MacMillan, 1992.

This document was assembled by Lucas Woods with the hope that, one fine day, we may all live in harmony with apostrophes and possessive language. 2000