

## Punctuation: Apostrophes, Quotation Marks, Dashes, Parentheses, and Brackets

This resource is designed for English Language Learners (ELLs) who require assistance in a particular academic skill. Each handout provides brief explanations related to different core skills (reading, writing, listening, and/or speaking), and it offers some simple examples of mistakes and how these might be corrected.

While these handouts are designed primarily for ELL students, anyone seeking to improve their writing may find these documents useful. Check out the links at the end of the handout for more resources.

### Apostrophes

Apostrophes have two functions:

- Show that a **noun** or an **indefinite pronoun** is possessive.
- Create a contraction. The contraction puts two words together to make one word.

### Possessive apostrophes

Apostrophes are added to **nouns** or **indefinite pronouns** to show ownership of an idea or an object.

**Nouns** refer to people, places, ideas, or things. Nouns function as subjects or objects in sentences.

<https://writingcenter.ashford.edu/nouns>

An **indefinite pronoun** refers to a general person or thing. Singular indefinite pronouns include *one, each, either, neither, everyone, no one, anybody, somebody, nobody, everybody, anyone*, and *someone*. Plural indefinite pronouns include *several, both, many*, and *few*.

<https://www.ef.com/ca/english-resources/english-grammar/indefinite-pronouns/>

### Examples:

1. The movie's plot is boring.  
The plot belongs to the movie.
2. The artist's style was unique.  
The style belongs to the artist.
3. Someone's book was left on the table.  
The book belongs to someone.

4. The flower's smell is appealing.  
The smell belongs to the flower.

Apostrophes are not always needed to show possession. Possession can be indicated by using the preposition "of" to show ownership.

- ✓ The instructor's comments were useful.
- ✓ The comments of the instructor were useful.  
The comments belong to the instructor.

### Apostrophes in contractions

The apostrophes takes the place of one or more letters. This forms the contraction. Academic writing usually does NOT use contractions.

Contraction
It's = It is
They're = They are
Who's = Who is
You're = You are

### Possessive pronouns

Although possessive pronouns look almost the same as contractions, they are different. Possessive pronouns replace nouns to show ownership while contractions are often short for a few words.

Possessive pronoun	Contraction
Its	It's = It is
Their	They're = They are
Whose	Who's = Who is
Your	You're = You are

### Five common problems with possessive apostrophes

#### 1. Singular nouns ending in -s

If a noun ends in *-s* or *an s* sound, add *'s*.

- ✓ Mr. Jones's umbrella is open.
- ✓ She commented on Marx's teachings.

If the noun does not end in *-s*, add *'s*.

- ✓ Jack's bag is ripped.

## 2. Plural nouns ending in *-s*

Add the apostrophe to the end of the word.

- ✓ The boys' music was sad.

Do not insert the apostrophe before *-s*! This changes the meaning of the possession.

- ✓ The dogs' house was moved. = The house belongs to at least two dogs.
- ✗ The dog's house was moved. = The house belongs to only one dog.

## 3. Compound nouns

Add *'s* to the last word in the compound noun.

- ✓ His mother-in-law's friend was pleasant.
- ✓ The soccer player's goal was amazing.

## 4. Multiple possessive nouns

When a sentence has two or more possessive nouns, add *'s* to each noun.

- ✓ Rick's and Chester's houses need to be painted. (two houses)

This sentence means that Rick's house needs to be painted and Chester's house also needs to be painted.

If there is only an "s" added to the last noun, it means there is only one thing owned. If there is the last noun, it means there is only one thing owned.

- ✓ Rick and Chester's house needs to be painted. (one house).

This sentence means that only one house needs a paint job. This house is owned by Rick and Chester.

## 5. Possessive pronouns

**Possessive pronouns** show that something belongs to someone.

**Possessive pronouns** include *my/mine, your/yours, his, her/hers, its, ours, and their/theirs*.

<https://advice.writing.utoronto.ca/revising/possessives/>

Do not use the apostrophe with the possessive pronoun.

- ✓ That is our car.
- ✓ The car is ours.
- ✗ The car is our's.

- ✓ That is their car.
- ✓ The car is theirs.
- ✗ The car is their's.

- ✓ Whose car is that?
- ✗ Who's car is that?

## Four special cases: letters, abbreviations, numbers, and dates

### 1. Use the apostrophe to form the plural of letters in a sentence

- ✗ The sign was missing As and Ms.
- ✓ The sign was missing A's and M's.

### 2. Do NOT use the apostrophe to pluralize the abbreviation

For example: Automated Teller Machine = ATM; Teaching Assistant = TA

- ✗ There aren't any ATM's around here.
- ✓ There aren't any ATMs around here.
- ✗ First year courses have a lot of TA's.
- ✓ First year courses have a lot of TAs.

### 3. Do NOT use the apostrophe to form the plural of numbers

- ✗ The winning lottery number had a lot of 9's in it.
- ✓ The winning lottery number had a lot of 9s in it.

### 4. Do NOT use the apostrophe in the date

- ✗ I can barely remember the 2000's.
- ✓ I can barely remember the 2000s.
- ✗ The 1920's are known as the Jazz Age.
- ✓ The 1920s are known as the Jazz Age.

## Quotation Marks

### Four ways quotation marks are used

#### 1. Enclose direct quotations

When you use someone else's exact words, put them in quotation marks.

- ✓ In English grammar, we do not often use plural proper nouns "not because there is any grammatical restriction on them, but because we rarely need to use them."

#### 2. Refer to a word's function directly, rather than the idea that it represents

- ✗ People often use affect instead of effect in their writing.
- ✓ People often use "affect" instead of "effect" in their writing.

#### 3. Introduce and define technical terms

Only use quotation marks the first time the term appears in your essay.

- ✓ "Count on it" is an idiom that means you can depend on something happening. When

someone says count on it, they usually mean that they will personally guarantee the outcome of an action.

#### 4. Indicate disagreement and irony

Quotation marks can be used to show disagreement with the words being quoted.

✓ While the author argues that commas help with “breaking down ideas,” I find that using too many commas make sentences more confusing.

Display irony. Sometimes authors will put quotes around a word when they want to show its real meaning is the opposite.

- ✓ The proposed tax “reform” is actually a tax increase.
- ✓ The “help” I received from my TA made me fail the essay. However, this is not the academic style and should be avoided.

### Two ways quotation marks are NOT used

#### 1. Do not use quotation marks to refer to titles

Titles are the names of other people’s work. However, quotation marks are not used for longer, independently published works, such as novels, television series, movies, monographs, and paintings. Use *italics* instead.

✓ It is important to collect resources to help you understand English grammar. Books like *ESL Grammar: A Handbook for Intermediate and Advanced ESL Students* and *English Verbs & Essentials of Grammar for ESL Learners* are examples of good references for English learners.

#### 2. Do not use quotation marks to show the use of slang or to make a point.

✗ Today’s runway models “eat like birds” in an effort to remain thin.

✓ Today’s runway models eat almost nothing in an effort to remain thin.

✗ If “love makes the world go round,” then global politics could use more of it.

✓ If love is felt by people in every part of the world, then politicians should try expressing more love.

✗ Picasso was an important “painter” who revolutionized the art world.

✓ Picasso was an important painter who revolutionized the art world.

### Dashes

A dash lets you interrupt a sentence to add information. The presence of the dash emphasizes the information that comes afterwards. It can be put in the middle or at the end of a sentence. Try not to use too many dashes as they interrupt the sentence’s flow. Do not put a space before or after the dash.

## Three ways to use the dash

### 1. Define a term

- ✓ The foundations of English learning—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—must be practiced together to be most effective.
- ✓ Even professional gamers—players who most often train for years on a Massive Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG)—often do not make a large income.

### 2. Provide more information about the noun

- ✓ The most popular cheese in the world—mozzarella—became famous due to the growth of pizza as a global cuisine.

### 3. Establish contrast

- ✓ The greatest advantage—or disadvantage—of the Internet is that anyone can have a voice online.

## Parentheses

Like dashes, parentheses add more information. However, they de-emphasize what they contain.

## Three ways to use parentheses

### 1. Explain

- ✓ I was really upset at their behaviour (they were laughing behind my back), so I took immediate action (I asked them to leave the room).

### 2. Give an example

- ✓ Other cities (Dresden, for example) had to be completely rebuilt after the war.

### 3. Give an aside

- ✓ The good students (from Art History) were interested in improving their writing skills.

## Brackets

Brackets (often referred as “square brackets”) add information in a quotation.

- ✓ He was “thinking about it [the test] all day.”

[the test] tells the reader to what “it” refers.

## Practice Exercises

**Add apostrophes to the following sentences to show possession:**

1. Johns smoking habit was hard to stop so he asked a doctor for help.
2. Janices and Chriss bikes needed washing.

**Do the following sentences use possessive pronouns or contractions? Choose the right one:**

3. When going to a wedding, \_\_\_\_\_ (its / it's) usual to bring a gift.
4. Jenna, the woman \_\_\_\_\_ (whose/ who's) wallet had been found, was so happy that she jumped in the air.

**Determine whether the following sentences have apostrophe errors. If they do, correct them:**

5. Any money left over is their's to spend as they wish.

Correct? Y/N. \_\_\_\_\_

6. A winter's storm can be pleasant if youre indoors sitting in front of a big fireplace.

Correct? Y/N. \_\_\_\_\_

**Put quotation marks around the appropriate parts of the following sentences:**

7. As Jill Harris says, Good healthcare has to think about the patient's entire community, not just the individual's needs.
8. The number of usage errors in everyday speech is very high; even native English speakers mix up the meaning of the words bring and take.

**Add dashes to the following sentences:**

9. When deciding on where to get lunch at a supermarket or a restaurant your budget has to be your first consideration.
10. Being forced to speak in public is one of the best but mainly worst parts of joining a debating club.

## Answers:

1. John's
2. Janice's and Chris's
3. it's
4. whose
5. N; theirs
6. N; you're
7. "Good... needs."
8. "bring" and "take."
9. –at a supermarket or restaurant–
10. –but mainly worst–

### More resources for punctuation

**Guide to punctuation – University of Sussex**

<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/informatics/punctuation/>

**Punctuation guide – University of New South Wales (UNSW Sydney)**

<https://student.unsw.edu.au/punctuation-guide>

**Punctuation basics – Indiana University of Pennsylvania**

<https://www.iup.edu/writingcenter/writing-resources/punctuation/punctuation-basics/>

Develop your academic language, improve your academic skills, and get a Co-Curricular Record notation.

Attend the Professional English Language Skills (PELS) workshops:

<https://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/professional-english-language-skills-pels>

Get feedback on your writing and discuss your thought process. Book an appointment with an instructor:

<http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/appointments-undergraduate>.

**Looking for more learning strategies?** Visit us at: <http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/>.