Apostrophes

- Possession
- Contraction

The Dalhousie Writing Centre
Possession: Singular Nouns

To signify the possession of a singular noun (person, place, or thing) add an ‘s to the noun.

For example:  “Sally’s chair”
              “the book’s pages”
Singular Nouns that end in s

- Keep in mind that even when a singular noun ends in s, the ‘s rule still applies.

For example:  “Gus’s hat”
“the bus’s doors”
Plural Nouns that end in s

- To indicate the possession of a plural noun that ends in s, add only an ‘

  For example:  “your parents’ car”
                “a librarians’ lounge”
                “the buses’ doors”
Plural Nouns that do not end in s

- If the plural doesn’t end in an s already, add an ‘s.

For example:  “the children’s tears”
“your cattle’s hooves”
“hippopotami’s teeth”
Compound Nouns

Some nouns are composed of multiple words. To make these words possessive, add an ‘s or an ‘ to the last word.

Examples:
- “Student Council’s policy”
- “sea captains’ ships”
- “sisters-in-law’s cars”
Never use an apostrophe to indicate that a pronoun is possessive. Use instead the correct forms of possessive pronouns: *mine*, *ours*, *yours*, *his*, *hers*, *theirs*, and *its*.

The following forms are incorrect: *me’s*, *our’s*, *your’s*, *his’s*, *her’s*, *their’s*, or *it’s*. 
Indefinite Pronouns

- Treat singular indefinite pronouns like singular nouns: add an ‘s.

The following indefinite pronouns are always singular: another, anybody, anyone, anything, each, either, everybody, everyone, everything, neither, no one, nobody, nothing, one, somebody, someone, and something.

For example:
“another’s work”
“a piece of either’s cake”
Joint Possession

To denote the possession of a noun that belongs to more than one person or thing, make only the last person or thing possessive.

For example:

“Julie, Brent, and Moira’s house”
“the doctors and nurses’ shifts”
“my chairs and table’s carpenter”
Individual Possession

- If each person or thing possesses its own noun, make each of these people or things possessive.

For example:

“Julie’s, Brent’s, and Moira’s favourite flavours”
“the cats’ and dogs’ dishes”
“the WHO’s and other NGOs’ policies”
Joint Possession and Individual Possession

- Be careful! Make sure to keep in mind how many nouns are owners and how many nouns are being owned.

Notice the differences among these examples:

- “Julie and Brent’s house” (they own one house together)
- “Julie and Brent’s houses” (they own more than one house together)
- “Julie’s and Brent’s houses” (they each own one or more houses)
- “Julie’s and Brent’s house” (NOT CORRECT)
### Model Possessives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Possessor Type</th>
<th>Possessing Type</th>
<th>Possessive Formulation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>any singular noun</td>
<td>any singular noun</td>
<td>add ‘s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a plural noun not ending in –s</td>
<td>a plural noun not ending in –s</td>
<td>add ‘s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a plural noun ending in –s</td>
<td>a plural noun ending in –s</td>
<td>add ‘</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a possessive pronoun</td>
<td>a possessive pronoun</td>
<td>add nothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a singular indefinite pronoun</td>
<td>a singular indefinite pronoun</td>
<td>add ‘s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>joint possessors of one or more thing(s)</td>
<td>one owner, nothing, another owner</td>
<td>add ’ or ‘s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>individual possessors of different things</td>
<td>one owner, ‘ or ‘s, another owner</td>
<td>and ’ or ‘s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Possession and the “of” test

- Possession includes more than ownership.

- “boy’s mother” → “the mother of the boy”
- “hour’s time” → “an hour of time”
- “money’s worth” → “the worth of your money”
In a contraction, an apostrophe is used to replace—to stand in for—letters that have been removed.

(Note: Most academic writing does not permit the use of contractions.)
Common Contractions

- auxiliary verb + *not*
  - In this type of contraction, the apostrophe stands in for the *o* in *not*.

  \[
  \begin{align*}
  \text{is} + \text{not} &= \text{isn’t} \\
  \text{do} + \text{not} &= \text{don’t} \\
  \text{could} + \text{not} &= \text{couldn’t} \\
  \text{should} + \text{not} &= \text{shouldn’t} \\
  \text{will} + \text{not} &= \text{won’t}
  \end{align*}
  \]
Common Contractions

- subject (the person or thing performing an action) + verb (forms of to be)
  - In this type of contraction, the apostrophe stands in for the initial vowels in am, are, and is.

  - I + am = I’m
  - You + are = you’re
  - He + is = he’s
  - She + is = she’s
  - We + are = we’re
  - They + are = they’re
Contraction Tips

An apostrophe can stand in for several different letters, depending on the verb being contracted. Do not contract a subject with the past tense of the verb *to be* (such as *was* or *were*) because they can be confused with contracts of *is* and *are*.

we + are = we’re  correct
we + were = we’re  incorrect
she + is = she’s  correct
she + was = she’s  incorrect
Avoiding Unnecessary Apostrophes

- **Possessive pronouns**: some pronouns like *your* are already in a possessive form and don’t need an ‘s.

- **Homonyms**: some possessives and contractions sound the same but are spelled differently.

For example:

*your* vs. *you’re*
*there* vs. *their* vs. *they’re*
References and Resources

- For tips on making your writing more concise through apostrophe usage, visit [http://grammar.about.com/od/punctuationandmechanics/a/aposexsc.htm](http://grammar.about.com/od/punctuationandmechanics/a/aposexsc.htm)

- For tips on apostrophe usage along with a brief quiz, visit [http://www.ucalgary.ca/UofC/eduweb/grammar/course/punctuation/3_7.htm](http://www.ucalgary.ca/UofC/eduweb/grammar/course/punctuation/3_7.htm)

- For a quick and dirty version of tips on apostrophe usage, visit [http://grammar.about.com/od/punctuationandmechanics/tp/GuideApostrophe.htm](http://grammar.about.com/od/punctuationandmechanics/tp/GuideApostrophe.htm)

- For apostrophe tips that include the very rare cases in which an apostrophe is used to pluralise, visit [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g_apost.html](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g_apost.html)