

HOW TO USE
APOSTROPHES IN
FICTION WRITING
A BEGINNER'S GUIDE

Louise Harnby
PROOFREADER & COPYEDITOR

Apostrophes confound some authors. Not knowing how to use them doesn't mean you're a bad writer, but getting them wrong can distract a reader and alter the meaning of what you want to say.

This guide shows you how to get it right. In it, you'll find an overview of the following:

1. What an apostrophe looks like and what it does
2. Indicating possession
3. Indicating omission
4. Indicating a plural with an apostrophe
5. Avoiding erroneous apostrophes and possessive pronouns
6. Avoiding erroneous apostrophes in plural forms

1. WHAT AN APOSTROPHE LOOKS LIKE AND WHAT IT DOES



WHAT AN APOSTROPHE LOOKS LIKE

The apostrophe is the same mark as a closing single quotation mark: ' (unicode 2019).

This is worth remembering when you use them in your fiction to indicate the omission of letters at the beginning of a word. More on that further down.

WHAT DOES AN APOSTROPHE DO?

Apostrophes have two main jobs:

1. To indicate possession
2. To indicate omission

And sometimes a third (though this is rarer and only applies to some expressions):

3. To indicate a plural

2. INDICATING POSSESSION



The English language doesn't have one set of rules that apply universally. However, when it comes to possessive apostrophes, the following will *usually* apply:

GENERAL RULES

Add an apostrophe after the thing that is doing the possessing.

- ✓ If there is one thing – one noun – an s follows the apostrophe.
- ✓ If there's more than one noun, and the plural noun is formed by adding an s (e.g. 1 horse; 2 horses), no s is required after the apostrophe.
- ✓ If there's more than one noun, and the plural is formed irregularly (e.g. 1 child; 2 children), an s follows the apostrophe.

Singular (s after apostrophe)	Regular plural (no s after apostrophe)	Irregular plural (s after apostrophe)
The silver gun's bullets lay in a heap.	The three guns' bullets lay in a heap.	
The smell coming from the horse's mouth was woeful.	The smell coming from the horses' mouths was woeful.	
The child's shoes were tiny.		The children's shoes were tiny.
The woman's hair hung limply over her eyes.		The women's hair hung limply over their eyes.
Our kitty's claws are sharp.	Our five kitties' claws are sharp.	

POSSESSIVE APOSTROPHES AND NAMES

Names can be tricky. The most common problem I see is authors struggling to place the apostrophe correctly when family names are being used in the possessive case, even more so when the name ends with an s.

Here are some examples of standard usage to show you how it's done:

First name Family name	Singular possession	Multiple possession	Singular; plural
Louise Harnby	Louise Harnby's house is in a village in Norfolk.	The Harnbys' house is in a village in Norfolk.	1 Harnby; 2 Harnbys
Sarah Field	Sarah Field's shop sells sweets.	The Fields' shop sells sweets.	1 Field; 2 Fields
Melanie Fields	Melanie Fields' shop sells sandwiches. or Melanie Fields's shop sells sandwiches.	The Fieldses' shop sells sandwiches.	1 Fields; 2 Fieldses
Jon Holmes	Jon Holmes's drone is really noisy.	The Holmeses' drone is really noisy.	1 Holmes; 2 Holmeses
Sid James	Sid James's gags are hilarious.	All the Jameses' gags are hilarious.	1 James; 2 Jameses
Anis Brown	Anis Brown's cakes are knockout.	The Browns' cakes are knockout.	1 Brown; 2 Browns

Note that in the Melanie Fields singular-possession example, there are two options. Both are correct, but some readers will find the second more difficult to pronounce because there are three s's a row.

Hart's Rules (4.2.1 Possession) has this advice:

‘An apostrophe and s are generally used with personal names ending in an s, x, or z sound [...] but an apostrophe alone may be used in cases where an additional s would cause difficulty in pronunciation, typically after longer names that are not accented on the last or penultimate syllable.’

If you're unsure whether to apply the final s in a case like this, use common sense. Read it aloud to see if you can wrap your tongue around it and decide whether the meaning is clear. Then choose the version that works best and go for consistency across your file.

Pedantry shouldn't trump prescriptivism in effective writing.

3. INDICATING OMISSION



INDICATING OMISSION WHEN ONE WORD IS CREATED FROM TWO

In fiction, we often use contracted forms of two words to create a more natural rhythm in the prose, particularly in dialogue. The apostrophes indicate that letters (and spaces) have been removed.

Common examples include:

they are – they're
it is/it has – it's
is not – isn't
I am – I'm
do not – don't
was not – wasn't
she is – she's

INDICATING OMISSION AT THE BEGINNING, MIDDLE AND END OF SINGLE WORDS

We can use an apostrophe to indicate that a letter is missing at the end of a word (dancing – dancin'), the middle of a word (cannot – can't) and the beginning of a word (horrible – 'orrible).

Start-of-word letter omissions are commonly used in fiction writing to indicate informal speech or a speaker's accent.

USING THE CORRECT MARK

Make sure you use the correct mark. Microsoft Word automatically inserts an opening single quotation mark (‘) when you type it at the beginning of a word because it assumes you're using it as a speech indicator.

Apostrophes are ALWAYS the closing single quotation mark (’) so do double check if you're indicating omission at the start of a word.

Incorrect	Correct
✘ Tell ‘em what he said, Johnny.	✔ Tell ’em what he said, Johnny.
✘ I’m a rock ‘n’ roll outlaw.	✔ I’m a rock ’n’ roll outlaw.
✘ ‘E’s a terror, so ‘e is.	✔ ’E’s a terror, so ’e is.

INDICATING OMISSION IN NUMBERS AND DATES

Plural numbers don't usually require an apostrophe because there's no ambiguity.

In fiction writing, it's common to spell out numbers for one hundred and below, but even when numerals are used, no apostrophe is needed for plurals.

Here are some examples:

Non-standard plural numbers (apostrophe)	Standard plural numbers (no apostrophe)
Ayesha was born in the 1970's.	Ayesha was born in the 1970s.
Three 6's were etched onto the surface.	Three 6s were etched onto the surface. (<i>Or more common in fiction: Three sixes were etched onto the surface.</i>)
I can't believe I had a perm in the 80's!	I can't believe I had a perm in the 80s! (<i>Or more common in fiction: I can't believe I had a perm in the eighties!</i>)

Omission-indicating apostrophes at the beginning of dates are acceptable according to some style manuals.

In the example below, the 1970s is abbreviated. It's conventional in UK writing to follow the NHR example below.

In fiction, however, you can avoid the issue by spelling out the dates. This is universally acceptable and my preference when writing and editing fiction.

<i>Chicago Manual of Style (6.117)</i>	<i>New Hart's Rules (11.1.5)</i>
Ayesha was born in the '70s.	Ayesha was born in the 70s.
<i>Acceptable alternative: Ayesha was born in the seventies.</i>	<i>Acceptable alternative: Ayesha was born in the seventies.</i>

4. INDICATING A PLURAL WITH AN APOSTROPHE



When indicating the plural of lower-case letters – for example, if you want to refer to two instances of the letter **a** – it's essential to use an apostrophe because the addition of only an **s** will lead to confusion.

In the non-standard examples below, you can see how the plurals (in bold) form complete words, resulting in ambiguity.

Non-standard	Standard
There are two as in aardvark.	There are two a's in aardvark.
Don't forget to dot the is and cross the ts .	Don't forget to dot the i's and cross the t's .

For that reason, it's considered standard to use an apostrophe (see *The Chicago Manual of Style Online* 7.15 and *New Hart's Rules* 4.2.2).

When indicating the plural of upper-case letters, the apostrophe would be considered non-standard because there's no ambiguity.

The table that follows offers some non-standard and standard examples.

Non-standard	Standard
Some people find it difficult to roll their R's .	Some people find it difficult to roll their Rs .
The students have completed their MA's .	The students have completed their MA s.
I spent the morning checking the URL's on my website.	I spent the morning checking the URL s on my website.

5. AVOIDING ERRONEOUS APOSTROPHES AND POSSESSIVE PRONOUNS



Possessive pronouns are the bane of the apostrophe novice's writing life, especially **its**!

The following possessive pronouns NEVER need an apostrophe: **hers**, **theirs**, **yours** and **its**.

- ✓ **it's** = the contracted form of **it is** (or **it has**)
- ✓ **its** = the possessive pronoun

If you're unsure whether to insert an apostrophe in **its**, say it out loud as **it is**. If it makes sense, you need an apostrophe; if it doesn't, you don't!

Incorrect	Correct
✗ The dog licked it's paws.	✓ The dog licked its paws.
✗ That is not my crown, Your Majesty. It is your's .	✓ That is not my crown, Your Majesty. It is yours .
✗ Their's is not an existence I envy.	✓ Theirs is not an existence I envy.
✗ It's weird that the cat's not eating it's dinner.	✓ It's weird that the cat's not eating its dinner.

6. AVOIDING ERRONEOUS APOSTROPHES IN PLURAL FORMS



The apostrophe novice can fall into the trap of creating plural forms of nouns by adding an apostrophe before the final **s**.

Here's how do plurals correctly.

Incorrect	Correct
✘ Get your MOT's done here.	✔ Get your MOTs done here.
✘ The shop sold apple's and pear's .	✔ The shop sold apples and pears .
✘ The power these agency's have is terrifying.	✔ The power these agencies have is terrifying.
✘ The Harnby's live in a village in Norfolk.	✔ The Harnbys live in a village in Norfolk.

7. SUMMARY



I hope you've found this overview useful. It isn't exhaustive – there are entire books about apostrophes. *Fucking Apostrophes* is one of my favourites.

However, when it comes to fiction writing, it's unlikely that you'll need to worry about more than the basics covered here.

If you're stuck on where to stick your apostrophe, feel free to ask me for guidance.

FURTHER READING

- ✓ *Fucking Apostrophes* (Simon Griffin, Icon Books, 2016)
- ✓ 'How to punctuate dialogue in a novel' (article and free booklet)
- ✓ 'Punctuating dialogue in fiction' (video series on my YouTube channel)
- ✓ *New Hart's Rules* (Oxford University Press, 2014)
- ✓ *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 17th ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2017)

Louise Harnby is a line editor, copyeditor and proofreader who specializes in working with independent authors of commercial fiction, particularly crime, thriller and mystery writers.

She is an Advanced Professional Member of the Society for Editors and Proofreaders (SfEP), a member of ACES, a Partner Member of The Alliance of Independent Authors (ALLi), and an Associate Member of the Crime Writers' Association (CWA).

www.louiseharnbyproofreader.com