

Apostrophes

Few English-speakers seem to understand the proper use of apostrophes. Some even advocate for their abolition.

Eradicating the apostrophe would be a big mistake. They make a big difference to the meaning of your sentence, as the following examples shows.

Possession and collective possession

Only the apostrophe placement changes the meaning in the sentences below. The wording is exactly the same.

- *My brother's friend's dogs* (this refers to the dogs belonging to the friend of one brother).
- *My brother's friends' dogs* (the dogs belonging to the friends of one brother).
- *My brothers' friend's dogs* (the dogs belonging to the friend of more than one brother).
- *My brothers' friends' dogs* (the dogs belonging to the friends of more than one brother).

An apostrophe before the "s" indicates that the possessor is singular (e.g. the friend's dog). An apostrophe after the "s" indicates that the possessor is plural (e.g. the friends' dog).

Its vs. It's

The word "it" is the exception: its is possessive (no apostrophe), while it's means it is or it has.

In the examples below, its shows possession:

- Incorrect: *The essay lost it's credibility due to poor punctuation.*
 - "It's" is a contraction of "it is," so it's incorrect here.
- Correct: *The essay lost its credibility due to poor punctuation.*



Tip for its vs. it's

If you're unsure whether "its" needs an apostrophe, use the "it is" / "it has" test: if either fit then form is "it's"; if not, use "its." But remember: in formal academic writing, avoid contractions – write "it is" / "it has" in full.

Apostrophes in English differ significantly from many other languages – including whether they're used at all.