English language worksheet II

APOSTROPHES

by Sarah Williams

“The lesser spotted apostrophe: a rare bird, whose alighting enlightens.”

This light-hearted worksheet tackles the source of many errors in written English: misunderstanding of the uses of the apostrophe [' '] punctuation sign. Do this worksheet if you do not know when to use “its” or “it’s”, if you are hazy about how to punctuate plurals and contractions, or if you’d just like to know how such a little sign can change the world.

Introductory notes

This worksheet examines the three main uses of the apostrophe sign in English:

- indicating possession such as Sarah’s worksheet;
- marking direct speech in single inverted commas e.g. ‘It was a great worksheet,’ remarked John; and
- showing contractions such as don’t and can’t.

Most of the worksheet is on possessives as these are most likely to be needed in formal writing, but other uses are described briefly. Non-standard or incorrect English examples are marked with a * sign.

Working through the whole sheet, with all the exercises, will take about 60 minutes. There is also a 30-minute revision section at the end. A references section points you to more resources to learn about apostrophes, and other areas of language use and grammar.

You’ll need to print off the worksheet to do the exercises. Space is provided to write, and a key to the exercises is given at the end. Sources of the exercises are the author’s own work, including visuals.

Section 1: why does this tiny sign matter?

The sections above contain about ten apostrophes: quite a few, but the relatively informal English I’ve used includes a lot of contractions. With the exception of its/it’s (which gets a whole section to itself later on), contractions are rarely a problem, although they should be avoided in academic English. Now look at the picture of the bed and breakfast sign on the right.

This sign is on the coastal road from Swansea to Mumbles. If you don’t want to be nervous about parking on the road outside, and sleeping in a ground floor room, where should you request an apostrophe before you agree to stay the night?

I hope you went for Tides’ Reach GUEST HOUSE. This means that the tides now possess the reach (or beach where they rise), and that reach is no longer a verb threatening flooding of the road and the ground floor.

The arrow doesn’t help (is it a warning?) but this is a lovely case of public mismanagement of apostrophes.
Section 2: use of the apostrophe to indicate possession

Where one item is possessed by one owner, put the apostrophe before the possessive s. This is one school and one rule:

The school’s uniform rule will be rigorously enforced.

Where the ownership of one item is plural, the apostrophe is after the s. Now more than one school shares the same rule:

The schools’ uniform rule will be rigorously enforced.

There are exceptions. Where you have a proper noun ending in s, e.g. a surname such as Jones or Williams, you do not need to introduce a second s to create a possessive; just put the apostrophe last e.g. Tom Jones’ car. The rule also applies to groups sharing the same name e.g. The Jones’ house is on the end. American English and more casual British English do, however, add the second s because of the sound. Compare:

Bridget Jones’ Diary (UK).  Bridget Jones’s Diary (US).

Where there is multiple ownership of one item, put the apostrophe before the s on the second name:

Eton and Harrow’s uniform policy is absurdly old-fashioned.

If the same items are owned by several people, British English still has just the one apostrophe at the end:

William and Harry’s Eton uniforms are absurdly old-fashioned.

American English attaches apostrophes to both:

William’s and Harry’s Eton uniforms are absurdly old-fashioned.

Common problems with possessive apostrophes

1. Don’t misplace apostrophes after irregular plural or collective nouns: *The childrens’ playground.

Children are already plural, so it should be: The children’s playground.

2. Don’t forget apostrophes on time possessives: The meeting about this term’s work will take place in six weeks’ time. The next staff meeting will be in one week’s time.

3. You do not need apostrophes to indicate decades: *1980’s is wrong. It should be 1980s: think about it ... does the *1980’s possess anything? This applies to numbers or words: Seventies fashion featured a lot of orange. The 1960s was the decade pioneering space travel. But to refer to a specific year as a possessive, use an apostrophe: 1969’s greatest achievement was the Apollo moon landing.

It’s time for the first exercise. You can check the answers on page 8.

Exercise 2.1 – possessive apostrophes

Each sentence has no possessive apostrophes. Put them in. Some italic hints are given.

1. The Head Teachers study is over there. One head teacher.
2. The geography teachers staffroom is on the left. Lots of geography teachers.
3. Jack Davies class was the best in the school.
4. The twins teacher despaired of ever telling them apart.
5. Sadie lost two terms work due to a car accident.
These sentences have apostrophes, but they’re all wrong. Correct the sentences by moving or taking out the apostrophes altogether.

6. A surprise hit song of the late 1970’s was Wuthering Heights.
7. 1978s hit song Wuthering Heights, by Kate Bush, triggered a craze for dance-based pop video’s.
8. The Beatles stock repertoire was established quickly but its’ popularity nearly proved the bands undoing when their own repertoires’ popularity overtook their attempt’s at new work.
9. Yesterday is the worlds most covered song with hundreds’ of versions circulating.
10. John Lennon was the first of the Beatles’ to die.

Jack Dawson has six aunts, a wife, twin sons and one dog. Put apostrophes into the following short description to make sense of his complicated life.

11. Jacks family is large and far-flung. His many aunts live dotted all over the world, but his immediate family lives in a small Cotswolds village. Jacks dogs home is a large kennel and his twins often joke that the kennel is larger than their house. The twins mother is always threatening to move out unless Jack builds on an extra room. The younger twin wants to be an actor while the elder twins hobby is playing with model trains on elaborate sets: these consume lots of space and, with the younger twins agreement, the pair has chosen to share a bedroom, giving up the second bedroom to the trains. The aunts are gathering soon for a special occasion: Jacks silver wedding anniversary. As he is the aunts only nephew, he is used to dealing with these mass invasions. The twins are hoping that their presents will not be yet more model trains and editions of Shakespeares plays!

Section 3: it’s time for its ...

This section shows you the differences between its and its, and why you might find them confusing. Its first.

Its indicates possession but it does not have an apostrophe after it!

The institution reviewed its policies in the light of the recently changed laws.

This shows that the policies belong to the institution. This form of its is the same as other possessive pronouns which also do not have apostrophes:

The car is hers, but the house is his.

It’s indicates a contraction of it is or it has.

It’s time the aging equipment was replaced. \(\Rightarrow\) It’s = it is

Though the computer is new, it’s got a missing component. \(\Rightarrow\) It’s = it has.

 Handy Hints

Here are some ways how to avoid the its/it’s confusion:

1. Think: is it actually a contracted version? Try spelling it out e.g. It’s a tiny bedroom = It is a tiny bedroom. The cat washed its paws = no change; you cannot say: *The cat washed it is paws.
2. Remember that all the other possessive pronouns and adjectives do not use apostrophes either. Sarah’s car is quite old, but the car is not actually hers.
3. Let’s dispel a myth. There is no such construction as its’.
4. A ray of hope. The grammar checker in Microsoft Office is helpful in detecting its/it’s errors, and, provided the sentence is fairly straightforward, suggested corrections are usually correct. So, for once it’s worth right-clicking on the wiggly green line. ☺

Try to do the exercise on the next page, without referring back to this page ... answers are on page 8.
Exercise 3.1 – IT in BT: a case of discrimination

The next ten sentences make up a passage. Each sentence has some underlined words. You need to alter these words to possessive or plural forms, and introduce any required apostrophes (not all plurals will need apostrophes). Throughout the ten sentences, there are also some instances of its. Some of these – not all – need changing to it’s.

Example: It’s been 25 year since the personal computer birth. It’s, years, personal computer’s

1. The same quarter of a century has seen the typewriter death and the advent of blue chip in everything: camera, oven, radio, car and even chair.

2. No-one born in the western world after the 1980 knows a world without computer, but computer literacy is not universal.

3. Not all British home are wired up to a PC and its innumerable peripheral gadget, and not all person, particularly those who finished formal education before the mid eighty, have acquired the user skill to participate in the digital world.

4. This group cannot: access online banking and shopping service; surf the net for instant information; and, perhaps most distressing, relate to or participate in their children elaborate and fast-moving social network.

5. A more insidious impact of the digital divide, as its known, is its unintentional discrimination: those without access to the internet cannot access many company discount and deal available only online.

6. One of the worst perpetrator of online discrimination is British Telecom; its still effectively the national phone provider as many elderly people cannot access its alternative offline.

7. BT customer who have settled bill in cash or by cheque for decade, and who just do not want to set up direct debits, are now hit with what is effectively a fine of £4.50 per quarter.

8. The non-computer user woes from BT do not end with paying: those who cannot or do not want to access their bill online now pay an additional £1.50 per quarter for “paperless billing”, so a year non-digital user punishment from BT amounts to £24.

9. BT tries to justify its action by claiming that the expense associated with postage and cashing cheques are “astronomical”.

10. Meanwhile its unwanted junk mail pours through the front door of even its most computerised customer, presumably also at “astronomical” cost.

You know where to find the answers by now ...

**Section 4: let’s talk ...

Single apostrophes can be used as single inverted commas in direct speech. These act identically to double inverted commas. Single inverted commas are most usual in published fiction. If you need to write direct speech, just be consistent, using either double or single inverted commas. All punctuation relating to the quote must be inside the marks and any interrupted sentence continued with a lowercase letter:

‘I can’t see the hole,’ whispered Gregg, ‘and the street-lamp isn’t working.’

Sub-quotations will have to use whichever mark has not been used in the initial quotation:

‘I don’t get it,’ continued Gregg. ‘Harper told me distinctly: “The keyhole’s tiny but it’s under the flap.” There’s no keyhole even in this door, if you ask me.’
Exercise 4.1 – talking through the keyhole

Put appropriate direct speech punctuation in this passage. Use single inverted commas where possible.

Yes there is, said a smaller voice nearer Gregg’s feet. You need to look lower down, daddy.
Scott, you’re brilliant! Of course, this door’s meant to be opened by a small child.
Thanks dad, I’m not that small. Mum’s always saying to you: He’s tall for his age.

Section 5: let’s contract ...

Contractions marked with apostrophes occur when we want to shorten the second of a pair of words such as did not or will not in speech or informal writing. The most common shortened word is not: haven’t, didn’t, can’t. Sometimes a spelling alteration occurs i.e. will not = won’t. The other common contractions are will, is, are, were, has and have: I’ll, she’s, he’s, you’re, I’ve1. Rarer contractions such as had and would, which both appear as ‘d in writing, are mainly a feature of spoken English, so we will not cover them here.

Double contractions are rare and they usually appear in direct speech or spoken language: ‘I shan’t [shall not] see him tonight’ and ‘He couldn’t’ve [could not have] seen the accident.’

Contractions are the cause of quite a few confusions: we have already explored the it’s vs. its problem. Look at this group of sentences: what’s wrong with all of them?

*Their’s a log cabin in the woods.
*There going to leave on Saturday.
*They’re house is on the other side of town.

Answer: all have confused the different uses of their/there/they’re, principally because they sound the same. Words like this are called homophones (they sound the same but mean something different) and they are a characteristic of English. Like its/it’s, the solution is to think through what each one means and does.

There refers to place, or introduces a statement:

There’s a log cabin in the woods. The river is over there.

They’re is a contraction of “they are”.

They’re an odd couple.

Their is a possessive:

Their house is on the other side of town.

Confusion frequently arises from who’s and whose. We cover these, and other problems like your/you’re in our worksheets on confusing words: meanwhile expand the contraction to understand the difference:

The man who’s coming to dinner is a surprise guest. → Who’s = who is

The man whose car is parked outside is the surprise guest. → Whose = the car is owned by the man

I hope you would not make the same mistake by trying to contract “who are” in

The women who are coming to dinner wear very few clothes and a lot of jewellery.

Let’s sort out one more contraction confusion before the next exercise: let’s is a contraction of let us. It is not correct to omit the apostrophe: *Let’s party is an error. You can usually rely on the Microsoft grammar checker to pick this up and correct it properly. We emphasise, however, that academic writing should avoid using contractions as these are features of informal and spoken English.

Again, try to do the next exercise without referring back to this page.

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1 The Anglo-Irish playwright and linguist George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) embarked on a lifelong campaign to rid English of apostrophes, and modernise English spelling to his version of it. His innumerable plays are published with no apostrophes on contractions, so you get used to reading don’t, cant, shant etc. The plays are surprising fun to read.
Exercise 5.1 – saving printing costs in Cardiff Met’s learning centres

You’re publishing this set of printing tips for starving Cardiff Met students on tight budgets. To come across as more friendly, introduce at least one contraction per tip. Set a good example by including apostrophes where needed in your contractions.

1. Do not just print entire websites: there is no point paying to print unwanted advertising. Cut and paste required text into a Word document instead so you are printing only what is needed.

2. If you cannot read articles online in the learning centre, save them on your memory pen so you can read them later on your laptop or offline, when you are not so pressed for time.

3. You have got huge margins on the pages of your printed and downloaded e-journal article? You could have used the two pages to a page feature on the printing menu.

4. Who is in charge of your budget? You are! Be mean: learn to read on screen and take proper notes, or just do not print out at all.

5. “A problem shared is a problem halved.” It is easy to set up a reading group with students from your module. Print the reading list just once, split up the reading, each do some, then meet to discuss. You would save a fortune, as well as engaging in valuable discussion and feedback.

Conclusion and revision

I hope that’s sorted out the apostrophe for you. You’ll encounter countless exceptions which will leave you either curious or just plain annoyed. Half the fun of English is its continual (apparent) contradiction of itself. Here’s a private bugbear of mine. How often have you see lists like these?

DOS and DONTS
DO’S and DONT’S
DO’s and DON’T’S

If you haven’t got eye-ache, I certainly have. Would you create a heading called PRO’S and CON’S? If you must use awkward pluralised words in capitalised headings, do the logical thing and treat words as objects:

DOs and DON’Ts

After the references and further resources section, you can find additional revision exercises challenging you to extend the knowledge you have so far gained.

Author’s challenge: let’s cure Cardiff Met of its apostrophe errors

Are you fed up with badly punctuated, careless signs? War is declared on illiterate English. If you see an official Cardiff Met sign with an apostrophe mistake – in fact, any misuse of grammar or spelling – let me know: sjwilliams@cardiffmet.ac.uk. I’ll consult the team; if you’re right you get a Dolce & Vita coffee on us.

References and further resources

Go to our website for a huge range of language resources: student.uwic.ac.uk/academicskills. There are links to many online sites and quizzes where you can practise using apostrophes.


Woods’ book is probably the best hands-on apostrophe practice we have found. She doesn’t bombard with terminology but provides you with entertaining exercises to find out for yourself how English works. The book’s greatest virtue is the lengthy explanation given in the answer keys.

2 In case you’re asking, I’ve already pointed out that Italian does not spell ‘dolce’ with an h.
Section 6: revision exercises

Exercise 6.1 – the British and the apostrophe

Put in the apostrophes needed to make sense of the following passage.

To account for the British publics exasperating inability to know where (and where not) to put an apostrophe in written English, its not a bad idea to start with education: weve had 40 years teaching since the 1960s which hasnt paid attention to punctuation and grammar, with many English teachers just telling pupils: write as you speak! We know now that written languages conventions are very different to speaking. Many people also wrongly flaunt ignorance: Im rubbish at spelling and punctuation is frequently voiced as an excuse for carelessness amongst students whose written work looks like a dogs breakfast. The internet and mobile telephony havent helped: search engines, such as Google, ignore apostrophes, and text-messagings lack of punctuation has also negatively reinforced the idea that apostrophes are only for the fussy.

For students, apostrophe errors give a terrible impression in important documents such as CVs and job application statements. Like most punctuation, the apostrophes role can be critical for clear meaning. Imagine youve written this sentence: My teams budgets were equally divided. If the apostrophe precedes the s then its just one team with many budgets: after the s and its many teams sharing many budgets.

The rules for apostrophe use, unlike spelling, are almost entirely unambiguous and within anybodys grasp. While its always useful to get an objective reader to look over a final essay draft, at the end of the day youre responsible for your own language! Its not your teachers, parents, friends or partners job to be a constant sub-editor or proof-reader.

Exercise 6.2 – the corrections

Correct the apostrophe use in the sentences below (there may be more than one possibility).

1. The gentleman who’s car was impounded last week complained to the police.
2. Her hairs’ ghastly in that style.
3. The National Health Services need is for urgent overhauling but its social significance is’nt in doubt.
4. Brown’s and Jones’s evaluation of the governments policy is flawed.
5. 1970’s style is characterised by clashing colour’s and loud print’s, such as leopard’s paws.

Exercise 6.3 – location location location

3. How does the position of the apostrophe change the meanings of the sentences below?

   This is a painting of our son’s.
   This is a painting of our sons’.
   This is a painting of our sons.
Answers to exercises

Exercise 2.1 – possessive apostrophes

1. The Head teacher’s study is over there.
2. The geography teachers’ staffroom is on the left.
3. Jack Davies’ class was the best in the school.
4. The twins’ teacher despaired of ever telling them apart.
5. Sadie lost two terms’ work due to a car accident.
6. A surprise hit song of the late 1970s was Wuthering Heights.
7. 1978’s hit song Wuthering Heights, by Kate Bush, triggered a craze for dance-based pop videos.
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9. Yesterday is the world’s most covered song with hundreds of versions circulating.
10. John Lennon was the first of the Beatles to die.

Exercise 3.1 – IT in BT: a case of discrimination

1. The same quarter of a century has seen the typewriter’s death and the advent of blue chips in everything: cameras, ovens, radios, cars and even chairs.
2. No-one born in the western world after the 1980s knows a world without computers, but computer literacy is not universal.
3. All British homes are wired up to a PC and its innumerable peripheral gadgets, and not all people/persons particularly those who finished formal education before the mid-eighties have acquired the user skills to participate in the digital world.
4. This group cannot: access online banking and shopping services; surf the net for instant information; and, perhaps most distressing, relate to or participate in their children’s elaborate and fast-moving social networks.
5. A more insidious impact of the digital divide, as is known, is unintentional discrimination: those without access to the internet cannot access many company discounts and deals available only online.
6. One of the worst perpetrators of online discrimination is British Telecom: it still effectively the national phone provider as many elderly people cannot access its alternatives offline.
7. BT customers who have settled bills in cash or by cheque for decades, and who just do not want to set up direct debits, are now hit with what is effectively a fine of £4.50 per quarter.
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Exercise 4.1 – talking through the keyhole

“Yes there is,” said a smaller voice nearer Gregg’s feet. ‘You need to look lower down, daddy.’

“Scott, you’re brilliant! Of course, this door’s meant to be opened by a small child.”

“Thanks dad, I’m not that small. Mum’s always saying to you ‘He’s tall for his age.’”

Exercise 5.1 – saving printing costs in UWIC’s learning centres

1. Don’t just print entire websites: there’s no point paying to print unwanted advertising. Cut and paste required text into a Word document instead so you’re printing only what’s needed.
2. If you can’t read articles online in the learning centre, save them on your memory pen so you can read them later on your laptop or offline, when you aren’t if you’re not so pressed for time.
3. You’ve got huge margins on the pages of your printed and downloaded e-journal article? You could’ve used the two pages to a page feature on the printing menu.
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Revision

Exercise 6.1 – the British and the apostrophe

Please note this passage is not in academic English, as it uses many contractions. There are also some alternative answers where both options are right: however, consider how the meaning is changed with each choice.

To account for the British public’s exasperating inability to know where (and where not) to put an apostrophe in written English, it’s not a bad idea to start with education: we’ve had 40 years’ teaching since the 1960s which hasn’t paid attention to punctuation and grammar, with many English teachers just telling pupils: ‘write as you speak!’ We know now that written language’s conventions are very different to speaking. Many people also wrongly flaunt ignorance: ‘I’m rubbish at spelling and punctuation’ is frequently voiced as an excuse for carelessness amongst students whose written work looks like a dog’s breakfast. The internet and mobile telephony haven’t helped: search engines such as Google ignore apostrophes, and text-messaging’s lack of punctuation has also negatively reinforced the idea that apostrophes are only for the fussy.

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Exercise 6.2 – the corrections

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2. Her hair’s ghastly in that style.
3. The National Health Service’s need is for urgent overhauling but its social significance isn’t in doubt.
4. Brown and Jones’ evaluation of the government’s policy is flawed.
5. 1970s style is characterised by clashing colours and loud prints, such as leopards’ paws.

Exercise 6.3 – location location location

The apostrophe placement changes the meaning entirely in each case. This is a painting of our son’s. = the son is in fact the painter. This is a painting of our sons’. = two or more sons were the painters. This is a painting of our sons. = now two or more sons are the subject of the painting.