

Apostrophes



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The apostrophe serves only one function: **it stands in for letters that have been removed.** In modern English, this translates to two main uses—contractions and possessives.

• Contractions •

Contractions leave out letters to make pronunciation more convenient, using apostrophes instead. We use these constantly:

do not → **don't** • cannot → **can't** • I am → **I'm**.

It's important to realize the difference between contracted pronouns and their possessive forms, which can be tricky for the ones that sound the same:

Pronoun	Contraction	Possessive
They	They're (they are)	Their
You	You're (you are)	Your
It	It's (it is)	Its

• Possessives •

It may not seem like it, but the possessive apostrophe rule is the same as the contractions rule: It used to be that possession was indicated by an -es at the end of a word, very similar to how -s and -es denotes plurality today. But that -es was abbreviated to an [s] over time, and we retain the [s] possessive apostrophe rule.

The standard form of possessive apostrophe use is very familiar: **adding [s] indicates plurality.**

the **stone's** coloration • **Marie's** new boyfriend • my **brother's** haircut

When plurals and possessives interact with each other, things get confusing. As we saw above, plurals and possessives function under almost the same rule, except that the **possessive "-es"** is contracted with an **apostrophe** and the **plural "-s/-es"** is not.

For a **singular** noun like **the stone**, the **plural** is **the stones** and the **singular possessive** is **the stone's**.

Putting the two rules together, we might expect the plural possessive to look like **stones's**, but it doesn't. To reduce redundancy, we remove the final -s, making the **plural possessive** **the stones'** (see chart below).

But when the singular noun already ends in an -s, things get complicated. Take a noun like **princess**. According to the general rule, the **singular possessive** should be **princess's**—and this is acceptable. But the **singular possessive** can also be **princess'** without the final -s, to avoid redundancy.

Singular Noun	Singular Possessive	Plural Noun	Plural Possessive
Stone	Stone's	Stones	Stones'
Princess	Princess's/Princess'	Princesses	Princesses'