

# Possessive Nouns

Notice in the following phrases how possessive nouns show ownership, origin, authorship, or measurement.

- Susan Nguyen's computer (ownership)
- Florida's citizens (origin)
- Stephen King's writings (authorship)
- three years' time (measurement)

In expressing possession, speakers and writers have a choice. They may show possession with an apostrophe construction, or they may use a prepositional phrase with no apostrophe:

- the computer of Susan Nguyen
- the citizens of Florida
- the writings of Stephen King
- the time of three years

The use of a prepositional phrase to show ownership is more formal and tends to emphasize the ownership word. The use of the apostrophe construction to show ownership is more efficient and more natural, especially in conversation. In writing, however, placing the apostrophe can be perplexing. Here are five simple but effective steps that will help you write possessives correctly.

## Five Steps in Using the Apostrophe Correctly

1. **Look for possessive construction.** Usually two nouns appear together. The first noun shows ownership of (or a special relationship to) the second noun.

- the woman[ 's] job
- the children[ 's] books
- a year[ 's] rent
- both investor[ 's] accounts
- the musicians[ 's] instruments

2. **Reverse the nouns.** Use the second noun to begin a prepositional phrase. The object of the preposition is the ownership word.

- job of the *woman*
- books of the *children*
- rent of a *year*
- accounts of both *investors*
- instruments of the *musicians*

**3. Examine the ownership word.** To determine the correct placement of the apostrophe, you must know whether the ownership word ends in an *s* sound (such as *s*, *x*, or *z*)

**4. If the ownership word does not end in the *s* sound, add an apostrophe and *s*.**

- the woman's job
- the children's books
- a year's rent

**5. If the ownership word does end in an *s* sound, usually add only an apostrophe.**

- both investors' accounts
- musicians' instruments

However, if an extra syllable can be easily pronounced in the possessive form, most writers will add an apostrophe and an *s* to singular nouns.

- |                              |                    |
|------------------------------|--------------------|
| • station of the waitress[s] | waitress's station |
| • desk of the boss[s]        | boss's desk        |
| • den of the fox[s]          | the fox's den      |

*A word of caution.* Do not use apostrophes for nouns that simply show more than one of something. The sentence *These companies are opening new branches in the West*, no apostrophes are required. The words *companies* and *branches* are plural; they are not possessive. In addition, be careful to avoid changing the spelling of singular nouns when making them possessive. For example, the *secretary's desk* (meaning one secretary) is *not* spelled *secretaries'*.

Pay particular attention to the following possessive constructions. Perhaps the explanations and hints in parentheses will help you understand and remember these expressions.

- a day's work (the work of one single day)
- three days' work (the work of three days)
- a dollar's worth (the worth of a single dollar)
- your money's worth (the worth of your money)
- today's weather (there can only be one day)
- tomorrow's work (there can be only one tomorrow)
- the stockholders' meeting (we usually assume that a meeting involves more than one person)

The guides for possessive construction presented thus far cover the majority of possessives found in business and professional writing.

**Animate versus inanimate nouns.** As a matter of style, some writers prefer to reserve the apostrophe construction for nouns that represent people, animals, and other living entities (such as trees or organizations). For inanimate nouns they use prepositional phrases or simple adjectives.

- roof of the car, or car roof (better than *car's roof*)
- color of the desk, or the desk color (better than *desk's color*)
- heat of the motor, or motor heat (better than *motor's heat*)

**Descriptive versus possessive nouns.** When nouns provide description or identification only, the possessive form is *not* used. Writers have the most problems with descriptive nouns ending in *s* such as *Claims Department*. No apostrophe is needed, just as none is necessary in *Legal Department*.

- Sales Department (not *Sales' Department*)
- the electronics industry (not *electronics' industry*)
- Los Angeles Dodgers (not *Los Angeles' Dodgers*)

**Compound nouns.** Make compound nouns possessive by adding an apostrophe or an 's to the final element of the compound.

- his father-in-law's property
- notary public's seal
- onlookers' interest

**Incomplete possessives.** When the second noun in a possessive noun construction is unstated, the first noun is nevertheless treated as a possessive.

- You'll find bond paper at the stationer's [store].
- Let's meet at Patrick's [home] after the game.
- This year's sales are higher than last year's [sales].

**Separate or combined ownership.** When two names express separate ownership, make both names possessive. When two names express combined ownership, make only the *second* name possessive.

**Separate Ownership**  
landlords' and tenants' rights  
Mike's and Sam's cell phones

**Combined Ownership**  
the husband and wife's business  
my aunt and uncle's house

**Names of Organizations.** Organizations with possessives in their names may or may not use apostrophes. Follow the style used by the individual organization. (Consult the organization's stationery or a directory listing.)

- Malibu West Homeowners Asn.
- State Teachers' Retirement System
- Ben & Jerry's Homemade
- Sears

**Abbreviations.** Make abbreviations possessive by following the same guidelines as for animate nouns.

- AMA's ruling
- NBC's coverage
- all R.N.s' credentials
- Levi Strauss & Co.'s jeans

**Awkward possessives.** When the addition of an apostrophe results in an awkward construction, show ownership by using a prepositional phrase.

**Awkward:** my sister's attorney's advice  
**Improved:** advice of my sister's attorney

**Awkward:** your neighbor's doctor's telephone number  
**Improved:** telephone number of your neighbor's doctor

**Awkward:** my instructor, Valerie Rodgers', office  
**Improved:** office of my instructor, Valerie Rodgers

**Individual Names.** Of all possessive forms, individuals' names—especially those ending in *s* sounds—are the most puzzling, and understandably so. Even experts don't always agree on the possessive form for singular proper nouns.

Traditionalists, as represented in *The Chicago Manual of Style* and *The Modern Language Association Style Manual*, prefer adding an apostrophe and *s* to troublesome singular proper nouns that end in *s* sounds. On the other hand, writers of more popular literature, as represented in *The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual*, prefer the simpler style of adding just an apostrophe to singular proper nouns. You may apply either style, but be consistent. Please note in the following examples that the style choice applies *only to the singular* names ending in *s* sounds. Plural names are *always* made possessive with the addition of an apostrophe only.

Singular Name	Singular Possessive-- Traditional	Singular Possessive— Popular	Plural Possessive
Mrs. Ross	Mrs. Ross's	Mrs. Ross'	the Rosses'
Mr. Morris	Mr. Morris's	Mr. Morris'	the Morrises'
Mrs. Lopez	Mrs. Lopez's	Mrs. Lopez'	the Lopezes'
Mr. Horowitz	Mr. Horowitz's	Mr. Horowitz'	the Horowitzes'

Here's a summary of the possessive rule that should be easy to remember: If an ownership word does not end in an *s*, add an apostrophe and *s*. If the ownership word does end in an *s*, add just an apostrophe—unless you can easily pronounce an extra syllable. If you can pronounce that extra syllable, add an apostrophe and *s*.

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**Directions.** Select an acceptable possessive form.

1. All (employees, employee's, employees') salaries will be reviewed next quarter.
2. Search engines can find only a fraction of the (Webs, Web's, Webs') vast content.
3. Customers expect a (dollars, dollar's, dollars') worth of value for a dollar spent.
4. In just one (days, day's, days') e-mail, a manger receives as many as 250 messages.
5. Most (students, student's, students') difficulties lie in recognizing possessives.
6. Many management first will tailor their services and charges to a (clients, client's, clients') needs.
7. Success depends on a (company, company's, companys', companies', companies) capacity to deliver.
8. Three (months, month's, months') interest will be due in four days.
9. Some (companies, company's, companies') are cutting expenses by requiring employees, customers, and vendors to communicate by e-mail.
10. At each (buyers, buyer's, buyers') expense, quality upgrades may be substituted.
11. The (car's brakes, car brakes) are worn.
12. The (St. Louis', St. Louis) Cardinals considered building a new stadium.
13. (Jennifer, Jennifer's) and (Jason, Jason's) new care was very expensive.
14. This (company, company's) product line is superior to that (companys, company's).
15. The first (runner-ups, runner-up's, runner-ups') prize of \$200 went o Chandra Lewis.
16. Small aircraft sales were stimulated by the (FAAs, FAA's, FAAs') new ruling.
17. All teachers contribute to the State (Teacher's, Teachers') Retirement System.
18. A notary (publics, public's, publics') seal is required on these documents.

19. All (lady's, ladies, ladies') and (mens, men's, mens') raincoats are reduced in price.
20. Is your (sister-in-laws, sister-in-law's) job downtown?
21. Have you seen Annie (a) Leibovitz' or Leibovitz's, (b) Leibovitzes' photographs.
22. We can't locate (a) Russes', (b) Russ' or Russ's employee record.
23. Is that a realtor's sign on the (a) Morris' or Morris's, (b) Morrises' home?
24. Only one (a) waitress's, (b) waitresses' service was criticized.
25. Anh Le took Dr. (a) Fox' or Fox's, (b) Foxes' prescription to a pharmacy.
26. All (a) creditor's, (b) creditors' claims will be honored.
27. Several of the (a) seamstresses', (b) seamstress's machines were broken.
28. Please verify Mrs. (a) Lopezes', (b) Lopez's or Lopez' hours.
29. Have you noticed that the (a) Horowitzes, (b) Horowitzes' have anew car? (Tricky!)
30. Are you using a computer to schedule your (a) bosses', (b) boss's appointments?  
(One boss)