

## How to use the apostrophe

Although you may not think this is important, some people live their lives acting as quality control inspectors, spotting the incorrect use of the apostrophe in others' writing. That may seem a sad endeavor on their part, but the correct use of the 'A' is important in both creating clarity for the reader and, more importantly, establishing your own credibility as a copywriter. This is why it matters and here are the rules..... I blame teachers for never instilling this when we were young

It's nothing to do with grammar. It has everything to do with punctuation. Punctuation is just a set of marks/squiggles invented by printers to make reading easier. It all began around the time of Shakespeare, and most early 'punctuation marks' – comma, colon, semi colon, full stop (period for Americans) – were just a way play-writers could indicate to actors when to take a breath, a longer breath, or a real pause. It made it easier to read a script. Making things easy for your readers is just as important today.

The apostrophe entered the English language in the sixteenth century and its role was to aid clarity. We shall see how shortly.

## ***What has that got to do with writing in the 21st Century?***

1. As copywriters, we should ***always be striving to make it easier for people to read our copy***
2. Older readers (who are often our audience – managing directors, for example) believe that anyone who can't use basic punctuation properly must be ignorant. Incredibly, they have mostly come to terms with the horrors copywriters inflict on punctuation, but one thing they cannot forgive is misuse of the apostrophe.

Disagree if you like, but as a copywriter, your first objective is to display your client's work in the best possible light. Making the client look ignorant to 30% of the population (a particularly influential part of the client's audience) is a major disservice.

Not understanding the apostrophe, people feel obliged to scatter them around their copy almost every time they come to the letter 'S'. **There are significantly more misused apostrophes than correctly used ones.**

### **Apostrophe rule 1 - Stop selling banana's!**

The apostrophe is **never ever, ever, ever** used to indicate more than one item (plural). So:

- the plural of **banana** is not **banana's** (it should simply be **bananas** – no apostrophe)
- When talking computers, more than one PC is not **PC's**, it is **PCs** (no apostrophe)
- The library does not have lots of **book's** - it has lots of **books**
- Misusing the apostrophe to make a plural is the biggest single mistake. So, get this simple lesson right and you should avoid 60% of apostrophe errors! Easy.

*Apostrophes are used to signify just one of two things:*

### **Apostrophe rule 2 – showing abbreviation**

**Abbreviation** – dropping a few letters from a word, or joining two words together (and losing some letters in the process). It is often used when writing in ‘conversational’ English, rather than formal English. For example:

- **Did Not** becomes abbreviated to **didn't**
- **Let us** becomes abbreviated to **let's**
- **I have** becomes **I've**
- **That has** becomes **That's**
- **The town** Peterborough can be abbreviated to **Peterboro'**

### **Apostrophe rule 3 – Ownership – This one is a lot more tricky.**

In Old English, if King Ethelbert owned a book, he might write on it:

***Ethelbert, his book.*** Over time that would become a much simpler ***Ethelbert's book.*** The apostrophe simply shows it belongs to him.

It has become customary (to make it easier to read/interpret the written word) to indicate if there is more than one owner. ***That is achieved by putting the apostrophe either before or after the 'S'***

- The ***boy's*** books (one boy)
- The ***boys'*** books (more than one boy)
- The ***nation's*** strategy (one nation)
- The ***nations'*** strategy (more than one nation, sharing a strategy)

### ***Its and it's***

Life isn't easy. I said that the apostrophe is often used to denote ownership (the boy's book). Some words already denote ownership – ***his, her, their*** etc

**There are two very similar looking words – *its* and *it's***

- ***Its*** is an ownership word
- ***It's*** is an abbreviation of ***it is***

**For example,** we may say of a nation *Its culture is very interesting* (the culture is owned by the nation, so no need for an apostrophe there).

**Second example:** we may say *Do not go in there, it's dangerous* (an abbreviation of *it is* dangerous).

### ***More confusion***

***You're*** is an abbreviation (eg *you are* late)

***Your*** is ownership (eg *your* book is open)

***Who's*** is an abbreviation (eg *who is* there?)

***Whose*** is ownership (eg *Whose* book is this?)

Sorry if that was tedious but it really does have to be mastered.

Mature Directors and CEOs will judge you by your grammatical skills.

And that's how clients will evaluate your abilities alongside your creative flair.