

Possessives: Avoiding Apostrophe Confusion

In writing, possessives express relationships, and not necessarily ownership. Of course, possession or ownership is also signified, but possessives are much more than that.

Let's take a look:

You generally have a possessive form of a noun if the noun ends in an "s" sound and is immediately followed by another noun:

Bill's birthday
My boss's desk

However, if it is descriptive, don't use an apostrophe:

Sales account
Earnings call

How do you know if it's descriptive? Try using *of*:

Sales account (*sales* describes what kind *of* account)
Earnings call (*earnings* describes what kind *of* call)
Bill's birthday (*Bill's* doesn't describe what kind of birthday)
My boss's desk (*My boss's* doesn't describe what kind of desk)

How do you form a possessive? Here are some rules:

1. If the singular noun doesn't end in an "s" sound, add an apostrophe and "s":
The teacher's classroom
A giraffe's neck
2. For a singular noun that ends in "s", add an apostrophe and "s":
Witness's statement
3. For a plural noun that ends in "s" or "es", simply add the apostrophe:
Investors' concerns
Caines' home
4. For an irregular plural noun that doesn't end in "s" or "es" add an apostrophe and "s":
Children's clothes
Geese's formation
5. To make a singular possessive of a compound noun, add an apostrophe and "s" to the last part of the compound noun:
Daughter-in-law's dress (you have one daughter-in-law and it's her dress)
6. To make a plural possessive of a compound noun, first form the plural. If the plural form ends in "s" add an apostrophe. If it ends in anything but "s", add an apostrophe and "s":

Brother-in-law → brothers-in-law → brothers-in-law's (you have more than one brother-in-law, and they have a possessive relationship, such as brothers-in-law's boat, where they all own the boat)

It would be better to avoid this type of creation by rephrasing: "The boat that belongs to my brothers-in-law."

7. To make a singular possessive of an abbreviation, add an apostrophe and "s". To make the plural possessive, add "s" and an apostrophe to the singular:

IPO stock → IPO's stock → IPOs' stock

HMO doctor → HMO's doctor → HMOs' doctors

Possessives are a common area of mistake by writers. It's not always easy to know if you simply add "apostrophe s", "s apostrophe", or just an "apostrophe". These rules should help you sort it all out, and plural possessives should be easier to navigate!