

Society for the Punctuation-Challenged

Miss Hyphen's advice on the use of apostrophes

Dear Miss Hyphen,
I dont know where to put an apostrophe,
so I just dont use them. Whats your advice?
Dont Know,
Utah

Dear Don't,
Don't worry, dear. Most of Great Britain has
the same problem, and they invented the language!
Here are the rules for apostrophes. I hope you're
successful in improving your punctuation.
Sincerely,
Miss Hyphen



This is an apostrophe.
It replaces missing text.
It makes words possessive.
It *always* faces left.
(This is also used as a
single closing quote;
use it to close a quoted phrase
inside another quoted phrase.)



This is an open single-quote.
It opens a quoted phrase inside
an already-running quotation.
It faces right. It **NEVER** substitutes
for missing text. *It is not an apostrophe!*

The simple contraction:

Do not becomes **don't**. The apostrophe replaces the characters that are missing,
(in this case the letter o) and always faces left. **Examples:**

We will becomes **We'll**

You are becomes **You're**

You-all becomes **Y'all**

He will becomes **He'll**.

This also works with numbers like dates, where characters are missing:

Back in the **1950s** (a simple plural) becomes Back in the **'50s**. The missing characters 1 and 9 are replaced
by an apostrophe. It is very common to see 50's, but this is incorrect as 50 in this case does not own anything.
It's also common to see '50s. What on Earth does *that* mean? Don't do this! Use '50s instead.

Possessives:

When a person owns something, the apostrophe is used to connote ownership: **Bill's** bike, **Mary's** avocado,
Samantha's cold-fusion experiment. When two or more people own something, like a house, the possessive
is indicated by an apostrophe after the plural noun: The **Smiths'** house, Ten **years'** time (a *single* year's time
is *singular*). More than one Smith owns the house, ten years own the time.

The Quayles (plural) made punctuation history (along with much of the nation) by putting **The Quayle's**
on their mailbox. The mailbox is owned by the Quayles. But it is not indicated by this bizarre use of punctuation.
The mailbox should read: **The Quayles**. Or, it could read: **Quayle** meaning that this is the residence of a family
named Quayle. In a sentence you could say that there was something (a package from the Unabomber, perhaps)
in the **Quayles'** mailbox; in this case, the Quayles (more than one of them) own the mailbox. The apostrophe
indicates possession. The mailbox indicates that this is the house of **The Quayles** (plural – not possessive).

Some style manuals say that when a person's name ends in s that a singular possessive should be made with
just an apostrophe. **Janis'** hemoglobin (singular). Other style manuals say you should add 's
to this: **Janis's** deoxyribonucleic acid – because that is the way we pronounce it (Janis-es). Curiously, they do it
this way in the United Kingdom, though they don't do it consistently. **Jones's Dark Ale** is a fine, amber example.