

Spelling Tips 10 – Apostrophes

Apostrophes inspire terror out of all proportion to their size and frequency of use. Part of the problem seems to be that contracted forms that are so much part of our speech, and so easy to say, are a bit of a worry to us when we come to write them down. We have to work out which bit is missing. This is the basic function of the apostrophe. So *I've* is a contracted form of *I have*, *we'll* is a contracted form of *we will*. Sometimes the contraction is a more marked departure from the original as in *won't* which is short for *will not*, and sometimes it has two expanded forms, such as *we'd* which could be *we would* or *we had*.

And then there is *its* and *it's*, the former a pronoun, the latter a contraction. Remember that it is only the contraction that can be expanded, so if you attempt to expand *its* (as in *its head*) and find that you are not making sense (*it is head???*) then there is no apostrophe. What you have there is the pronoun -- used to indicate who owns the head. *It* does. This is a very confusing pair of words, especially as possession is usually shown by an apostrophe. It is just something you have to learn.

Funnily enough, the apostrophe used to show possession is also indicating a missing letter. It had essentially the same basic function although we don't interpret it that way now. In the phrase *a dog's breakfast* we have the dog owning its breakfast and therefore in the possessive case. In Old and Middle English this was shown by adding the suffix *-es*. And the apostrophe stands for the missing vowel *-e-*. But all this happened long ago. We now stick the 's on the end of nouns to indicate ownership.

Whatever you do, do NOT use the apostrophe to make the plural of a noun. The plural of *horse* is *horses*, as in *The horses are in the paddock*. An apostrophe would indicate possession or a missing letter so would make no sense whatsoever.

This is a list of common contractions using apostrophes:

aren't: a short form of *are not*
can't: a short form of *cannot*
couldn't: a short form of *could not*
didn't: a short form of *did not*
doesn't: a short form of *does not*
don't: a short form of *do not*
haven't: a short form of *have not*
he'd: a short form of *he had* or *he would*
he'll: a short form of *he will*
he's: a short form of *he is* or *he has*
I'd: a short form of *I would* or *I had*
I'll: a short form of *I will*
I'm: a short form of *I am*
isn't: a short form of *is not*
it'll: a short form of *it will*
let's: a short form of *let us*
she'd: a short form of *she would* or *she had*
she'll: a short form of *she will*
she's: a short form of *she is* or *she has*
shouldn't: a short form of *should not*
mustn't: a short form of *must not*
they'd: a short form of *they had* or *they would*
they'll: a short form of *they will*
they're: a short form of *they are*
they've: a short form of *they have*

wasn't: a short form of *was not*
we're: a short form of *we are*
weren't: a short form of *were not*
we've: a short form of *we have*
who'll: the short form of *who will*
who's: a short form of *who is* or *who has*
wouldn't: a short form of *would not*
you'd: a short form of *you had* or *you would*
you'll: a short form of *you will*
you're: a short form of *you are*
you've: a short form of *you have*

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