

The Tractable Apostrophe

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The English language first assimilated the apostrophe in the 16th century. In Ancient Greek, the word “apostrophe” means “turning away,” hence its now-frequently adopted modern meanings and usages, “omission” or “elision.” When English printers first adopted the apostrophe, its only function was marking dropped letters, such as this line from Hamlet, “’Tis a consummation devoutly to be wish’d” (’Tis = It is, wish’d = wished).

Life became complicated for the long-suffering apostrophe, however, in the 17th century, when printers began using it before the “s” in singular possessive cases (“the girl’s dress”). From then on, apostrophe use quickly spiraled into madness, as the apostrophe was used for plural possessives as well “the girls’ dresses.”

So, what are the current jobs of the patient, hardworking apostrophe?

- 1) It indicates a possessive in a singular noun:

The boy’s hat

- 2) It indicates a possessive in plural nouns:

When the possessor is a regular plural (i.e., ending in “s”), the apostrophe follows the “s”:

The boys’ hats

When the possessor is plural, but does not end in “s,” the apostrophe precedes the “s.”

The children’s playground

- 3) It indicates time or quantity:

In one week’s time

Two weeks’ notice

- 4) It indicates the omission of figures in dates:

The summer of '12

- 5) It indicates the omission of letters:

**“’Tis a consummation devoutly to be wish’d”
(‘Tis = It is, wish’d = wished).**

- 6) It indicates, strange, non-standard English:

A forest of apostrophes in dialogue (often, though not always accompanied by unusual spellings and capitalization) conventionally signals the author’s use of *dialect* for a particular character, typically characters from a lower or distinctive social class (i.e. peasant, cockney, or Southerner).

- 7) It features in Irish names such as O’Neill and O’Casey.

- 8) It indicates the plurals of letters:

How many “f’s” are there in baffle?

- 9) It also indicates plurals of words:

What are the do’s and don’t’s?

Are there too many but’s and and’s at the beginnings of sentences these days?

A caveat: apostrophes are not to be used with either “possessive determiners” (my, your, his, our, your, their, her, its, their) or “possessive pronouns” (mine, yours, his, hers, its, ours, yours, theirs).