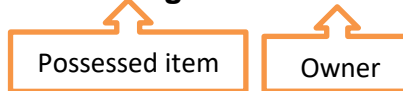


The Possessive Apostrophe

In many languages, possession is indicated by specific words placed after the thing possessed and before the possessor of that thing.

Ex. the engine of the car



In this example, 'the engine' is the thing possessed by 'the car', and the words indicating this relationship are 'of the'. This same configuration is also used in English, particularly in proper names or when we want to emphasize the item over the owner.

Ex. the march of the penguins and the University of Notre Dame



However, the more common way of indicating possession in English is by using the apostrophe ('). The apostrophe is a marker of possession that is connected to the owner/possessor of a thing. In this way, the owner (usually the subject of the sentence) can remain at the beginning of the phrase.

Ex. the car's engine



As in the example above, singular nouns and plural nouns that do not end in -s are immediately followed by an apostrophe and then the -s.

Ex. the person's room

and

the people's room

Indicates a single room belonging to a specific person

Indicates a public room used by many people but belonging to no one in particular

If the possessor of the thing is a plural noun, ensure that the apostrophe is placed after the -s and not before:

Ex. the participants' answers

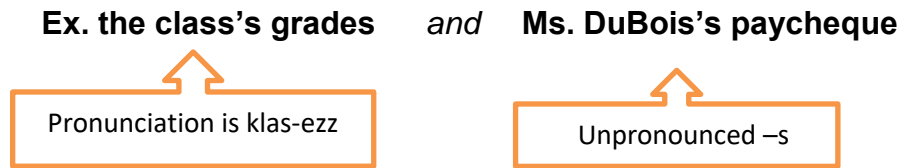
and

the participant's answers

Indicates many participants with many answers

Indicates only one participant with many answers

Because English speakers use the apostrophe with an –s to indicate possession, they invariably run into problems forming the possessive with singular nouns that end in –s or an –s sound, such as the proper names ‘Jones’ and ‘Schultz’. There are two schools of thought on how to deal with these problems. On one hand, there are those who argue that all singular nouns should adhere to the same rule and that, in most cases, the possessive –s creates an additional –s sound even with nouns that end in –s.



On the other hand, some suggest that the additional –s adds unnecessary length to the word and that there are cases when the possessive –s is unpronounced, as in “**Davy Jones’ Locker**”. In this example, “Davy Jones” is one person, and therefore singular, but the pronunciation of the possessive form is almost invariably “jownzz” rather than “jownz-ezz”. Both approaches are considered acceptable in university writing.

For compound nouns, show possession at the end of the compound.

Ex. My mother-in-law’s cooking is delicious. *and* **Abraham Lincoln’s speech was applauded.**

When deciding how to express ownership by more than one noun, first determine if the ownership is joint, in which case, show possession on only the last noun:

Ex. Jessica and Tom’s contribution to the project ← Together made one contribution

Alternatively, the ownership may be individual, in which case, show possession on all of the nouns:

Ex. Jessica’s and Tom’s contributions to the project ← Separately made individual contributions

Note: Never use the possessive apostrophe with possessive pronouns, such as *theirs*, *yours*, *ours*, and especially *its*. The word *it’s* is a contraction of the two words “*it is*”. Contractions should be avoided in academic writing.

Practice Exercise

Example	Answer
the cabinet of Dr. Caligari	
the degrees belonging to the graduates	
the house of Clark and Diana	
the laptops that belong to Joe and Mike	
the conference of the Attorney General	
the letter of Ms. Banks	

Answers: Dr. Caligari’s cabinet; the graduates’ degrees; Clark and Diana’s house; Joe’s and Mike’s laptops; the Attorney General’s conference; Ms. Banks’s letter *or* Ms. Banks’ letter