

chicago manual spelling of possessives

Title: Mastering the Chicago Manual Spelling of Possessives: A Comprehensive Guide

Introduction

chicago manual spelling of possessives governs a crucial aspect of clear and correct writing, ensuring precision in indicating ownership or relationship. Understanding these rules is paramount for anyone aiming for professional and academic writing excellence, especially when adhering to the widely respected Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS). This guide delves deep into the intricacies of forming possessives according to CMOS, covering singular nouns, plural nouns, irregular forms, and the often-confusing cases involving names and abbreviations. We will explore common pitfalls and provide clear, actionable advice to help you navigate these grammatical waters with confidence, enhancing your credibility and the overall impact of your written work. From basic apostrophe placement to advanced scenarios, this comprehensive resource aims to demystify the Chicago approach to possessives.

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Understanding Singular Nouns and Possessives

The fundamental rule for forming the possessive of a singular noun in the Chicago Manual of Style is straightforward: add an apostrophe followed by an 's' (-'s). This applies whether the singular noun ends in a vowel or a consonant. For instance, the possessive of "book" is "book's," and the possessive of "child" is "child's." This principle ensures a consistent and easily recognizable marker of possession for individual entities.

This rule extends to singular nouns that already end in 's' or an 'x' sound. The Chicago Manual of Style generally advises adding -'s to such nouns.

Examples include "bus's," "James's," and "Alex's." While some style guides might suggest omitting the 's' after an existing 's' (e.g., "James'"), CMOS favors the more consistent addition of the apostrophe and 's' for clarity and uniformity across all singular nouns.

Consider the context of idiomatic expressions or established phrases. Even if a singular noun ends in 's', the -'s construction is typically maintained. This applies to common phrases like "for goodness' sake" or "in her boss's shoes." The aim is to maintain a clear indication of possession, even when the pronunciation might be challenging for some.

Plural Nouns and Their Possessive Forms

The formation of possessives for plural nouns under the Chicago Manual of Style depends on whether the plural noun ends in 's' or not. If a plural noun already ends in 's', the possessive is formed by simply adding an apostrophe after the 's'. For example, the possessive of "students" is "students'," and the possessive of "dogs" is "dogs'." This rule is consistent for all regular plural nouns.

When a plural noun does not end in 's', the possessive is formed by adding an apostrophe and an 's' (-'s), mirroring the rule for singular nouns. This typically applies to irregular plural nouns. For instance, the possessive of "children" is "children's," and the possessive of "men" is "men's." Recognizing these irregular plurals is key to correctly forming their possessive counterparts.

It is crucial to distinguish between plural nouns and plural possessives. "Teachers" is a plural noun, referring to more than one teacher. "Teachers'" is the plural possessive, indicating something belonging to more than one teacher, such as "the teachers' lounge." Conversely, "teacher's" is the singular possessive, denoting something belonging to a single teacher, as in "the teacher's desk." Paying close attention to the final character of the word (or its base form for irregulars) is vital.

Irregular Plural Nouns and Possessives

The Chicago Manual of Style handles possessives of irregular plural nouns with the same principle applied to singular nouns that don't end in 's': add an apostrophe and 's' (-'s). These are nouns where the plural form is not created by adding -s or -es. Familiarity with common irregular plurals is essential for accurate possessive formation.

Some common irregular plural nouns include:

- child (singular) -> children (plural) -> children's (possessive)
- man (singular) -> men (plural) -> men's (possessive)
- woman (singular) -> women (plural) -> women's (possessive)
- tooth (singular) -> teeth (plural) -> teeth's (possessive)

- foot (singular) -> feet (plural) -> feet's (possessive)
- mouse (singular) -> mice (plural) -> mice's (possessive)
- ox (singular) -> oxen (plural) -> oxen's (possessive)

The consistent application of the -'s rule for these irregular plurals ensures that the indication of possession is clear and unambiguous, regardless of the noun's base form. This approach simplifies the process for writers, relying on a single, unified rule for most possessive constructions.

Possessives with Names: Common and Uncommon Scenarios

When dealing with proper names, the Chicago Manual of Style generally follows the same guidelines as for common nouns. For singular names, add -'s. So, "John" becomes "John's," and "Maria" becomes "Maria's." This applies irrespective of whether the name ends in a vowel or a consonant, or even if it already ends in an 's' sound.

For names ending in 's' or an 'x' sound, CMOS recommends adding -'s. Therefore, "James" becomes "James's," and "Alex" becomes "Alex's." This consistent application helps avoid confusion and maintains a predictable pattern for possessive formation. While some might opt for omitting the 's' after an existing 's' for pronunciation ease, adhering to the -'s rule is the preferred Chicago method.

Plural names present a different scenario. If a surname is being used to refer to a family, the plural possessive is formed by adding an apostrophe after the 's'. For example, if the family name is Smith, the plural possessive is "the Smiths'." This indicates something belonging to the Smith family as a whole. It's important not to confuse this with the singular possessive of a person named Smith, which would be "Smith's."

Possessive Pronouns: A Different Kind of Ownership

Possessive pronouns are distinct from possessive nouns and do not require an apostrophe to indicate possession. These words inherently show ownership. Examples include "my," "your," "his," "her," "its," "our," and "their." These are used before a noun, as in "my book," "her car," or "their house."

The indefinite possessive pronouns also function without apostrophes. Words like "everyone," "somebody," "nobody," and "anyone" form their possessives by adding -'s. For instance, "everyone's opinion," "somebody's coat," and "nobody's fault." The only exception here is "its," which is the possessive form of "it" and does not take an apostrophe. This is often confused with the contraction "it's," which means "it is" or "it has."

Similarly, interrogative possessive pronouns like "whose" do not take apostrophes. "Whose book is this?" is the correct construction. Understanding the distinction between possessive pronouns and nouns, and the proper use of contractions versus possessives, is crucial for grammatical accuracy. The Chicago Manual of Style emphasizes clarity and adherence to established conventions for these elements.

Possessives with Abbreviations and Acronyms

When forming possessives with abbreviations and acronyms, the Chicago Manual of Style generally follows the same rules as for regular nouns. If the abbreviation or acronym ends in 's', add -'s. For example, "the USA's foreign policy" or "the FBI's investigation." This maintains consistency in the application of possessive rules.

If an abbreviation or acronym does not end in 's', then -'s is added. This applies to many acronyms, such as "NASA's new mission" or "the UN's resolution." The key is to treat the abbreviation or acronym as a word and apply the standard rules of possessive formation. There are no special exceptions for most common abbreviations and acronyms in this regard.

In cases where an abbreviation or acronym is already plural and ends in 's', you would simply add an apostrophe, similar to plural nouns. For example, if referring to multiple entities represented by an acronym that ends in 's', you would use the apostrophe. However, this scenario is less common in standard usage. The primary focus remains on singular abbreviations and acronyms where the -'s rule is consistently applied.

When Not to Use the Possessive: Avoiding Common Errors

A common area of confusion is the misuse of the apostrophe with plural nouns that are not possessive. For instance, writing "apple's" when referring to multiple apples is incorrect. The plural of "apple" is simply "apples." Apostrophes are for possession or contractions, not for forming general plurals.

Another frequent mistake involves the distinction between "its" (possessive pronoun) and "it's" (contraction of "it is" or "it has"). The Chicago Manual of Style is very clear on this: "its" shows ownership and never has an apostrophe, while "it's" is a contraction. For example, "The dog wagged its tail" is correct, whereas "It's a beautiful day" uses the contraction.

The possessive of certain nouns that denote time, measure, or degree may sometimes be treated differently, especially in idiomatic expressions. However, the general rule for forming possessives of nouns ending in 's' is to add -'s. For example, "a day's work" and "a week's vacation" follow the standard singular possessive formation. Writers should always refer to the Chicago Manual of Style for specific nuances if in doubt, but the core principles of adding -'s or just an apostrophe after 's' are robust.

The Role of Possessives in Specific Contexts

In academic and formal writing, particularly in footnotes and endnotes as outlined by the Chicago Manual of Style, precise possessive forms are crucial for citation and referencing. Whether referring to an author's work or a publication's title, correct possessive formation ensures accuracy and professionalism. For instance, "Smith's analysis" clearly indicates ownership of the analysis.

Legal and historical documents may also present unique challenges or conventions regarding possessives. While the core CMOS rules generally apply, context can sometimes influence usage, particularly in established legal terminology or historical titles. However, for most contemporary writing, the standard rules of adding -'s or an apostrophe are the governing principles.

The clarity provided by correct possessive usage extends to avoiding ambiguity. A phrase like "the students' papers" clearly indicates that the papers belong to multiple students, distinguishing it from "the student's papers," which implies papers belonging to a single student. This precision is fundamental to effective communication and is a hallmark of writing that adheres to the Chicago Manual of Style.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What is the basic rule for forming the possessive of a singular noun in Chicago style?

A: The basic rule for forming the possessive of a singular noun in the Chicago Manual of Style is to add an apostrophe followed by an 's' (-'s). This applies whether the singular noun ends in a vowel or a consonant.

Q: How does Chicago style handle possessives for plural nouns ending in 's'?

A: For plural nouns that already end in 's', the Chicago Manual of Style dictates that the possessive is formed by simply adding an apostrophe after the 's'. For example, "dogs" becomes "dogs'".

Q: What is the rule for irregular plural nouns in Chicago style possessives?

A: For irregular plural nouns that do not end in 's', the Chicago Manual of Style follows the same rule as for singular nouns: add an apostrophe and an 's' (-'s). For example, "children" becomes "children's."

Q: Does Chicago style require an apostrophe for

possessive pronouns?

A: No, possessive pronouns such as "my," "your," "his," "her," "its," "our," and "their" do not require apostrophes. The word "its" is the possessive form of "it" and is distinct from the contraction "it's."

Q: What is the Chicago Manual of Style's stance on forming possessives for names ending in 's'?

A: The Chicago Manual of Style generally recommends adding -'s to names ending in 's' or an 's' sound. For example, "James" becomes "James's," and "Alex" becomes "Alex's."

Q: How are possessives formed for family names in Chicago style?

A: When referring to a family as a unit, the plural possessive of a surname is formed by adding an apostrophe after the 's'. For example, "the Smiths'" refers to something belonging to the Smith family.

Q: Is there a difference between "its" and "it's" in Chicago style, and how does it relate to possessives?

A: Yes, there is a significant difference. "Its" is the possessive form of "it" and never takes an apostrophe. "It's" is a contraction meaning "it is" or "it has." The Chicago Manual of Style strictly adheres to this distinction.

Q: When should I avoid using the possessive form?

A: You should avoid using the possessive form when simply indicating plurality. For example, the plural of "car" is "cars," not "car's." Apostrophes are for possession or contractions.

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