

chicago style apostrophe usage

The Chicago Manual of Style is a widely respected authority on grammar, punctuation, and style in the publishing world. Understanding chicago style apostrophe usage is crucial for writers, editors, and anyone aiming for polished prose. This guide will delve into the nuances of apostrophe application according to the Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS), covering possessives, contractions, and common pitfalls. We will explore how CMOS handles singular and plural possessives, the proper formation of contractions, and address frequently debated areas like brand names and plurals of abbreviations. Mastering these guidelines ensures clarity, professionalism, and adherence to a standard that significantly impacts readability and credibility.

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Understanding Possessives in Chicago Style

The apostrophe plays a vital role in indicating possession, showing that one noun owns or is associated with another. Chicago style has clear directives for forming possessives, distinguishing between singular and plural subjects, and handling exceptions that can often cause confusion. Accurate possessive formation is not merely a matter of grammatical correctness; it directly impacts the clarity and professionalism of written communication, ensuring that relationships between words are unambiguous.

Singular Possessives

For singular nouns, the general rule in Chicago style is to add an apostrophe and an s ('s) to form the possessive. This applies whether the singular noun ends in a consonant or a vowel. This straightforward rule helps to clearly denote ownership or association for a single entity. For instance, "the dog's bone" or "Maria's car" clearly indicate that the bone belongs to the dog and the car belongs to Maria.

There are, however, specific considerations for singular nouns that end in an "s" sound, particularly those ending in s, x, or z. While the most common practice is to add 's, CMOS allows for flexibility,

especially with names. The manual generally recommends adding 's even if the singular noun ends in s, x, or z, such as "James's book." However, for classical names or names ending in an unstressed syllable followed by s or z, omitting the final s is often preferred to avoid awkward pronunciation, though adding it is not strictly incorrect. Examples include "Moses' staff" or "Jesus' teachings," though "Moses's staff" is also acceptable in some contexts.

Plural Possessives

Forming plural possessives requires a different approach, primarily dictated by whether the plural noun already ends in an s. If a plural noun ends in s, the possessive is formed by simply adding an apostrophe after the s. This rule ensures that the possessive form is distinct and easily identifiable. For example, "the students' papers" clearly indicates that the papers belong to multiple students.

For plural nouns that do not end in s, such as "children," "men," or "geese," the possessive is formed by adding an apostrophe and an s, just as with singular nouns. This maintains consistency in indicating possession for irregular plurals. Therefore, it would be "the children's toys" and "the men's room."

Possessives of Names Ending in S

As touched upon earlier, names ending in s present a common area of debate. Chicago style generally advises adding an apostrophe and s to form the possessive for most names ending in s. This includes proper names like "Charles's" or "the Joneses's house." This preference for adding 's aims for consistency and ease of pronunciation for most English speakers.

However, CMOS acknowledges that for some classical names or names where adding an extra s creates a pronunciation challenge, omitting the final s is acceptable. This often applies to biblical or classical figures, such as "Jesus' followers" or "Socrates's philosophy." The key consideration is often what sounds natural and is least likely to cause confusion. Ultimately, consistency within a single work is paramount.

Contractions and Apostrophes

Contractions, the shortened forms of words or phrases, rely heavily on the apostrophe to indicate omitted letters. Chicago style guides the use of contractions to maintain formality while allowing for natural language flow. The proper placement of the apostrophe in contractions is essential for both grammatical accuracy and clear communication.

When to Use Contractions

In most informal writing, such as personal correspondence, blog posts, or dialogue in fiction,

contractions are perfectly acceptable and often desirable to create a more conversational tone. They mimic natural speech patterns. Examples include "it's" for "it is," "don't" for "do not," and "you're" for "you are." Using contractions appropriately can make writing more accessible and less stiff.

Even in some semi-formal contexts, contractions might be used judiciously, particularly when the writing aims for a slightly less formal feel without sacrificing authority. However, for academic papers, formal business documents, legal texts, and many journalistic pieces, contractions are typically avoided to maintain a higher degree of formality and objectivity. The decision to use contractions often hinges on the intended audience and the overall purpose of the text.

When to Avoid Contractions

In formal writing, the rule is generally to avoid contractions. This includes academic dissertations, scholarly articles, official reports, and formal legal documents. Using full forms like "it is" instead of "it's," "do not" instead of "don't," and "you are" instead of "you're" lends an air of seriousness and precision. This practice is deeply ingrained in many academic and professional writing traditions.

Furthermore, there are specific instances where misusing contractions can lead to significant errors. The most common culprit is the confusion between "its" (possessive pronoun) and "it's" (contraction of "it is" or "it has"). Similarly, "their" (possessive), "there" (place), and "they're" (contraction of "they are") are often mixed up. Adhering to the formal rule of avoiding contractions can, in some cases, help prevent these types of errors by forcing the writer to consider the full meaning of the words.

Special Cases and Common Apostrophe Pitfalls

Beyond basic possessives and contractions, the apostrophe's application extends to more complex scenarios. Chicago style provides guidance on possessives of proper nouns, brand names, and the often-confusing matter of plurals of abbreviations and numbers, all of which are areas where errors frequently occur.

Possessives of Proper Nouns

The principles for forming possessives of proper nouns largely mirror those for common nouns. Singular proper nouns typically take an apostrophe and an s ('s), such as "Alice's hat" or "Washington's legacy." Plural proper nouns ending in s, like "the Smiths," form the possessive by adding an apostrophe after the s: "the Smiths' car." Plural proper nouns not ending in s, like "the Kennedys," would have their possessive formed as "the Kennedys' vacation," though if there was an irregular plural like "the children of the royal family," it would become "the royal family's children."

Possessives of Brand Names and Organizations

When referring to brand names or organizations, the possessive is formed according to the same rules as for general nouns. If the brand name or organization name ends in s, the possessive is formed by adding an apostrophe after the s, e.g., "Google's latest innovation." If the name does not end in s, an apostrophe and s are added, e.g., "Amazon's customer service." Consistency in applying these rules ensures clarity when discussing entities.

In some instances, particularly with established brand names or organizations, the company itself may prefer a specific possessive form or may avoid possessives altogether. While adhering to CMOS is the general rule, it is also wise to check how the entity in question represents itself. However, for general writing, the standard grammatical rules of Chicago style should be applied.

Plurals of Abbreviations and Numbers

This is a critical area where apostrophes are often misused. According to Chicago style, plurals of abbreviations and numbers are generally formed by adding a lowercase s, without an apostrophe. This is to avoid confusion with possessives. For example, the plural of "FAQ" is "FAQs," not "FAQ's." The plural of "1990s" is "1990s," not "1990's." This rule is crucial for maintaining clarity and avoiding misleading grammatical structures.

Similarly, for acronyms, the plural is formed by adding an s. For instance, "CDs" (compact discs) and "DVDs" (digital versatile discs). The only time an apostrophe might be considered in a plural context is for clarity with very short words, particularly single letters, to avoid confusion with other words. For example, "Mind your p's and q's." However, even in these cases, modern usage often favors the apostrophe-free plural, such as "ps" and "qs." For numbers, "the 1980s" is the standard form, indicating the decade, not a possessive form.

Common Apostrophe Errors to Avoid

Several common errors involving apostrophes can detract from the quality of writing. One of the most frequent is the misuse of apostrophes with plural nouns that are not possessive. For example, writing "apple's for sale" instead of "apples for sale" is incorrect. Another prevalent error is the confusion between "its" and "it's," as discussed previously. This fundamental distinction between the possessive pronoun "its" and the contraction "it's" is a recurring challenge.

Another pitfall is the incorrect formation of possessives for names ending in s. While CMOS offers some flexibility, consistently applying one of the accepted methods (adding 's or only an apostrophe) is essential. Finally, remember that apostrophes are generally not used to form plurals of numbers or most abbreviations; a simple s suffices. Diligence in reviewing these common errors can significantly improve the accuracy of one's writing.

Q: When should I use an apostrophe with a singular noun ending in "s" according to Chicago style?

A: According to Chicago style, for singular nouns ending in "s," you should generally add an apostrophe and an "s" ('s) to form the possessive (e.g., "James's car"). However, for classical names or names ending in an unstressed syllable followed by "s" or "z," omitting the final "s" after the apostrophe is acceptable to ease pronunciation (e.g., "Jesus' teachings").

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

A: For plural nouns that already end in "s," you form the possessive by simply adding an apostrophe after the "s" (e.g., "the students' papers"). For plural nouns that do not end in "s" (irregular plurals), you add an apostrophe and an "s" (e.g., "the children's toys").

Q: How does Chicago style handle contractions in formal writing?

A: In formal writing, Chicago style generally advises against the use of contractions. It is preferable to write out the full words, such as "it is" instead of "it's," and "do not" instead of "don't," to maintain a more formal and precise tone.

Q: Is it ever acceptable to use an apostrophe with a plural noun that is not possessive in Chicago style?

A: No, it is not acceptable to use an apostrophe with a plural noun that is not possessive. For example, the plural of "apple" is "apples," not "apple's." Apostrophes are primarily for possession and contractions.

Q: What is the correct Chicago style for forming the plural of numbers, like decades?

A: The correct Chicago style for forming the plural of numbers, including decades, is to add a lowercase "s" without an apostrophe. For example, the decade is referred to as the "1990s," not the "1990's."

Q: How do I correctly form the possessive of a proper noun that ends in "s" in Chicago style?

A: For proper nouns ending in "s," Chicago style generally recommends adding an apostrophe and an "s" to form the possessive (e.g., "Charles's book"). However, similar to common nouns, for classical names where pronunciation might be awkward, omitting the final "s" after the apostrophe is acceptable (e.g., "Pericles'").

Q: What is the Chicago style for forming the plural of abbreviations?

A: Chicago style dictates that the plural of abbreviations is generally formed by adding a lowercase "s" without an apostrophe. For instance, the plural of "FAQ" is "FAQs," and the plural of "CD" is "CDs."

Q: I'm confused about "its" versus "it's." What does Chicago style say?

A: Chicago style, like standard English grammar, distinguishes between "its" (the possessive pronoun) and "it's" (the contraction of "it is" or "it has"). "Its" shows possession (e.g., "The dog wagged its tail"), while "it's" replaces omitted words (e.g., "It's a beautiful day"). This distinction is crucial.

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