Possessives

Possessives show ownership. Forming possessives is a complex issue on which experts disagree. If you follow the rules below, we believe this issue will be less confusing.

Rule #1:

Form the possessive only on nouns or pronouns that represent living things, celestial bodies, time, distance, or value. DO NOT form the possessive of an inanimate object; use an adjective or an "of" phrase.

Examples of Rule #1:

- Elizabeth's business card (living thing)
- the plant's leaves (living thing)
- the moon's light (celestial body)
- three months' rent (time)
- a day's journey (distance)
- a penny's worth (value)
- The desk drawer is stuck. OR The drawer of the desk is stuck.

Rule #2:

Form the possessive of most singular common or proper nouns by adding an apostrophe and an –s.

Examples of Rule #2:

- student's notebook
- witness's statement
- Charles's car

EXCEPTION: Use only an apostrophe to form the possessive of the names Jesus and Moses and other ancient classical names.

- Moses' law
- Jesus' followers
- Achilles' heel
- Ramses' tomb
- Euripides' plays
- Xerses' army

EXCEPTION: Use only an apostrophe in the following expressions.

for goodness' sake
for appearance' sake
for convenience' sake

Rule #3:

Form the possessive of plural nouns that do not end in an –s or an –s sound by adding an apostrophe and an –s. Form the possessive of plural nouns that end in an –s or an –s sound by adding only the apostrophe.

Examples of Rule #3:

- children's books
- the people's princess
- men's clothing
students' lounge my two brothers' cars teachers' union

Rule #4:

To make a word plural and possessive, form the plural first, then add an apostrophe.

Examples of Rule #4:

- managers' offices
- the Rainses' house NOT the Rains house or the Rain's house
- the Gomezes' car NOT the Gomez car or the Gomez's car

Rule #5:

To show joint ownership, form the possessive on the last word; to show individual ownership, form the possessive on both words.

Examples of Rule #5:

- Jon and Kathy's dogs (The dogs belong to both of them.)
- Jon's and Kathy's dogs (Each person owns one or more dogs individually.)

Rule #6:

Use a possessive noun or pronoun before a verb that ends in –ing (gerund).

Examples of Rule #6:

- Jill was pleased by Natalie's returning on time.
- I appreciated his calling me before he placed the order.

Rule #7:

With a compound word or phrase, form the possessive by adding an apostrophe and an –s to the last word.

Examples of Rule #7:

- my brother–in–law's car
- chairman of the board's name

Rule #8:

Add an apostrophe and an –s to form the possessive of the pronouns anyone, anybody, everyone, everybody, someone, somebody, no one, and nobody. DO NOT use an apostrophe to form the possessive of its, whose, hers, his, ours, yours, or theirs.

Examples of Rule #8:

- Anyone's guess is as good as mine.
- Somebody's keys were left on the counter.
The dog lost its bone.
My car was clean; hers was very dirty.

Rule #9:

Use a possessive if ownership is implied, even if the possession itself is not stated in the sentence.

Example of Rule #9:

We will all meet at Alice's for dinner.

Rule #10:

Businesses, organizations, and educational institutions may or may not use apostrophes with their names to show possession. Follow the organization's format or usage.

Examples of Rule #10:

St. John's College Regents College

Rule #11:

Use the rules above to form the possessive of abbreviations.

Examples of Rule #11:

The M.D.'s stethoscope Brooks Bros.' sale