

chicago manual of style for literary apostrophe

The Chicago Manual of Style for Literary Apostrophe: A Comprehensive Guide

chicago manual of style for literary apostrophe is a topic of crucial importance for writers, editors, and scholars aiming for clarity, precision, and adherence to established citation and stylistic norms. This guide delves into the intricacies of using apostrophes in literary contexts as prescribed by The Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS), examining its application in possessives, contractions, and the often-misunderstood Greek and Latin plurals. Understanding these nuances is vital for avoiding common grammatical pitfalls that can detract from the professional presentation of written work, particularly within academic and publishing circles. We will explore the rationale behind CMOS's recommendations, providing clear examples and practical advice to ensure your prose is polished and conforms to these respected standards.

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Understanding the Basics of Apostrophe Use

The apostrophe, a punctuation mark often the subject of grammatical debate, plays a distinct role in English orthography. Its primary functions revolve around indicating possession and marking the omission of letters in contractions. The Chicago Manual of Style, a widely respected authority on American English, provides clear guidelines for its correct application. For literary works and academic writing, adhering to CMOS ensures consistency and professionalism.

At its core, the apostrophe signals a modification or relationship. In possessives, it links a noun to another noun or pronoun, indicating ownership or association. In contractions, it signifies that letters have been removed, as in "don't" for "do not." While these are the fundamental roles, the application becomes more nuanced when dealing with various grammatical structures and exceptions, particularly in literary analysis and the preparation of manuscripts for publication.

Possessives: Singular and Plural Nouns

The rules for forming possessives with singular and plural nouns are foundational to correct apostrophe usage. CMOS provides straightforward directives that, when followed, prevent ambiguity and maintain grammatical accuracy.

Singular Nouns and the Apostrophe

For singular nouns, the possessive is almost always formed by adding an apostrophe followed by an 's'. This applies whether the singular noun ends in a consonant or a vowel. For instance, "the book's cover" indicates that the cover belongs to the book. Similarly, "Alice's car" denotes Alice's ownership of the car. This rule is consistent and generally uncomplicated.

However, CMOS also acknowledges a stylistic preference for certain proper nouns ending in 's', 'x', or 'z'. While adding 's' is still correct (e.g., "Charles's reign"), some style guides, and even CMOS in specific contexts, permit omitting the final 's' after the apostrophe for pronunciation reasons (e.g., "Charles' reign"). The key is consistency within a single document.

Plural Nouns Ending in 's'

Plural nouns that already end in 's' form their possessive by simply adding an apostrophe after the 's'. This is a key distinction from singular nouns. For example, "the students' papers" indicates that the papers belong to multiple students. "The cars' tires" refers to the tires belonging to more than one car.

This rule helps to differentiate between singular and plural possession clearly. For instance, "the dog's bone" refers to one dog's bone, while "the dogs' bones" refers to bones belonging to multiple dogs. The placement of the apostrophe is critical here.

Plural Nouns Not Ending in 's'

Irregular plural nouns that do not end in 's' form their possessive by adding an apostrophe and an 's', just like singular nouns. These often include words of foreign origin or common irregular forms. Examples include "children's toys" (belonging to children) and "men's suits" (belonging to men). "People's opinions" also follows this pattern, as "people" is the irregular plural of "person."

This rule ensures that the possessive form is consistent and recognizable, regardless of the noun's singular or plural form. The principle remains the same: indicate possession by adding 's' after the plural noun, even if it doesn't end in 's'.

Possessives: Proper Nouns and Irregular Forms

The application of apostrophes to proper nouns, especially those with challenging endings, requires careful attention. CMOS offers guidance that prioritizes clarity and established conventions, even when dealing with names that might seem to defy simple rules.

Proper Nouns Ending in 's'

As mentioned, proper nouns ending in 's' present a common point of consideration. CMOS generally recommends adding an apostrophe followed by an 's' for pronunciation purposes. Thus, "James's book" is preferred over "James' book." This approach ensures that the pronunciation is clear and unambiguous. However, for very common historical or biblical names ending in 's', such as Jesus or Moses, CMOS allows for the omission of the final 's' after the apostrophe ("Jesus' teachings" or "Moses' rod").

The choice between "James's" and "James'" can sometimes be a matter of stylistic preference, but consistency is paramount. If one chooses the "add 's'" approach for most such names, they should stick to it throughout their work.

Names Ending in 'z' or 'x'

Proper names ending in 'z' or 'x' are treated like any other singular noun ending in a consonant when forming the possessive. An apostrophe and an 's' are added. For example, "Diaz's restaurant" and "Felix's cat" are the standard forms. There is no special dispensation for these endings in CMOS.

This rule simplifies the process, as it aligns with the general practice for singular nouns, avoiding exceptions that could lead to confusion or require memorization of numerous specific cases.

Contractions and Omissions

Apostrophes are indispensable for indicating where letters have been omitted in contractions, a common feature of informal and sometimes even formal writing. CMOS provides clear guidelines for their use, emphasizing that they should be placed precisely where the letters are missing.

Common Contractions

Most English contractions involve the omission of vowels or parts of words. The apostrophe

marks this omission. For example, "it's" for "it is" or "it has," "you're" for "you are," and "they're" for "they are." Similarly, "can't" for "cannot" and "won't" for "will not" utilize the apostrophe to show the missing letters.

It is crucial to distinguish between possessive pronouns (like "its," "yours," "theirs") and their contracted forms ("it's," "you're," "they're"). The absence or presence of the apostrophe fundamentally changes the meaning and grammatical function of the word.

Omissions in Verse and Dialogue

In literary contexts, particularly in poetry or dialogue intended to reflect spoken language, apostrophes can be used to indicate elisions or dropped sounds. For instance, a character might say "go'n" instead of "going on" or "o'er" instead of "over." The apostrophe here serves a stylistic purpose, mimicking informal speech patterns or poetic meter.

CMOS advises that such uses should be deliberate and serve a clear authorial intent. They are not arbitrary and are typically used to convey character, setting, or a specific tone.

Apostrophes in Plurals: When and Why

One of the most contentious areas of apostrophe usage, and a common source of error, is the formation of plurals. CMOS, like most authoritative style guides, strictly advises against using apostrophes to form simple plurals of nouns.

The "Greengrocer's Apostrophe" Explained

The incorrect use of apostrophes to form plurals, often referred to as the "greengrocer's apostrophe" (e.g., "apple's for sale"), is a common grammatical mistake. CMOS maintains that an apostrophe is never used to make a regular noun plural. If you are selling apples, the sign should read "apples," not "apple's." If you have two cats, you have "cats," not "cat's."

This rule is crucial for maintaining clarity and correctness. The apostrophe's function is possessive or to indicate omission, not pluralization. Confusing these functions leads to widespread grammatical errors.

Exceptions: Plurals of Letters, Numbers, and Symbols

There are specific, limited exceptions where apostrophes are used to form plurals, primarily for clarity when referring to letters, numbers, and symbols. For instance, to distinguish

between the letter 't' and the word 't's', one might write "mind your p's and q's" or "the 1990s." Similarly, to refer to multiple asterisks, one might write "several 's."

CMOS clarifies that this usage is for the purpose of avoiding confusion. In the case of decades, "the 1990s" is the standard and preferred form, though "the nineties" is also acceptable. The apostrophe is employed here to prevent the visual ambiguity of "1990s" looking like a regular word. However, when referring to the plural of numbers as numerals, such as "there were five 7s in the sequence," CMOS also suggests italicizing the numeral for clarity, making the apostrophe optional or less necessary: "there were five *7s* in the sequence." The guiding principle is to ensure readability and prevent misinterpretation.

Plurals of Abbreviations and Acronyms

Generally, plurals of abbreviations and acronyms do not require an apostrophe. For instance, "CDs" (compact discs), "MPs" (members of Parliament), and "NASA's missions." The plural is formed by simply adding an 's'. This aligns with the principle that apostrophes are not for general pluralization.

However, there can be rare instances where an apostrophe might be used if omitting it creates ambiguity or if the abbreviation itself is inherently plural in its common usage. But as a general rule, stick to adding an 's'.

Special Cases and Esoteric Applications

Beyond the fundamental rules, CMOS addresses more specialized scenarios where apostrophes might appear, particularly within academic and literary criticism, or when dealing with specific linguistic phenomena.

Apostrophes with Foreign Words and Latin/Greek Plurals

When incorporating foreign words or phrases into English text, the rules for possessives generally follow English conventions. For example, "the restaurant's menu" where "restaurant" is a foreign word used in English. However, a key area of concern is the pluralization of words derived from Latin and Greek. CMOS advises that when these words have become fully assimilated into English, they should be treated as English words, forming plurals by adding 's'. For example, "octopi" (instead of "octopuses" is acceptable, but "octopi's" is correct for possessive). "Many schools teach Latin," and "The school offers courses in classical languages."

However, for less common or more technical terms, or when emphasizing their foreign origin, writers may retain the original plural. In such cases, CMOS recommends consulting a

dictionary to determine the most appropriate plural form. When forming the possessive of these less assimilated plurals, the standard English rule of adding an apostrophe and 's' typically applies, unless the plural itself ends in 's'. For example, "the analyses' results" (plural of analysis). The principle is to maintain clarity and consistency with established English usage.

Apostrophes in Possessive Adjectives and Pronouns

It is crucial to reiterate the distinction between possessive adjectives/pronouns and contractions. Possessive forms such as "its," "yours," "hers," "his," "ours," "theirs," and "whose" never take an apostrophe. These words inherently denote possession. The confusion often arises with "its" versus "it's." "Its" is the possessive form (e.g., "The dog wagged its tail"), while "it's" is a contraction of "it is" or "it has" (e.g., "It's a beautiful day").

CMOS emphasizes this distinction repeatedly, as it is a common point of error that can significantly alter the meaning of a sentence. Proper grammar demands the correct use of these words, especially in formal writing.

Common Apostrophe Errors and How to Avoid Them

The astute use of apostrophes is a hallmark of polished writing. Many errors stem from misapplying the basic rules or misunderstanding the exceptions. Awareness of these common pitfalls is the first step toward avoiding them.

Confusing Possessives and Plurals

The most prevalent error is using an apostrophe to create a simple plural. As established, apostrophes are not for general pluralization. If you see "banana's" on a fruit stand, it's incorrect. Always ask if the word denotes possession or indicates an omission. If it's simply a plural noun, add 's' or 'es' without an apostrophe.

To avoid this, mentally parse the sentence. Does the word show ownership? Is a letter missing? If neither is true, it's likely a simple plural that should not have an apostrophe.

Misusing "Its" and "It's"

This error is so common that it warrants its own category. Remember: "it's" is a contraction (it is/it has), and "its" is possessive. When in doubt, try substituting "it is" or "it has" into the sentence. If it makes sense, use "it's." If not, use "its."

For example: "The bird is building its nest." (Does "The bird is building it is nest" make sense? No. So, "its" is correct.) "It's raining today." (Does "It is raining today" make sense? Yes. So, "it's" is correct.)

Incorrectly Forming Possessives of Names Ending in 's'

While some flexibility exists for names ending in 's' (e.g., "Charles's" vs. "Charles'"), consistency is key. CMOS generally favors the "add 's'" approach for clarity unless it creates an awkward pronunciation. For literary analysis or academic papers, adhering to the "add 's'" rule for most names ending in 's' is a safe and standard practice, e.g., "James's work," "Travis's analysis."

When in doubt, consult a dictionary or a style guide. However, for proper nouns ending in 's', the most straightforward advice is to add an apostrophe and an 's', unless it sounds truly awkward or is a very established historical exception.

The Chicago Manual of Style for literary apostrophe usage is designed to promote clarity and precision in writing. By understanding and applying these detailed guidelines, writers can significantly enhance the professionalism and readability of their work, ensuring that their intended meaning is conveyed without grammatical ambiguity.

FAQ

Q: When should I use an apostrophe with a name ending in 's' according to the Chicago Manual of Style?

A: The Chicago Manual of Style generally recommends adding an apostrophe followed by an 's' to form the possessive of singular proper nouns ending in 's' (e.g., "James's book," "Travis's research"). This is to ensure clear pronunciation. However, for very common historical or biblical names, CMOS allows for omitting the final 's' after the apostrophe (e.g., "Jesus' teachings"). The key is consistency within your own work.

Q: Is it ever correct to use an apostrophe to make a noun plural?

A: No, it is almost never correct to use an apostrophe to make a regular noun plural. This is a common error known as the "greengrocer's apostrophe." The only exceptions are for clarity when referring to plurals of individual letters (e.g., "mind your p's and q's"), numbers (e.g., "the 1990s"), or symbols (e.g., "several 's'").

Q: What is the difference between "its" and "it's"

according to CMOS?

A: According to CMOS, "its" is the possessive form of the pronoun (e.g., "The cat chased its tail"), and it never uses an apostrophe. "It's" is a contraction of "it is" or "it has" (e.g., "It's a sunny day"). The apostrophe in "it's" indicates the omission of letters.

Q: How does CMOS handle apostrophes with foreign words that are pluralized?

A: CMOS advises that when foreign words have become fully assimilated into English, they should be treated as English words, forming plurals by adding 's'. If the assimilated plural noun ends in 's', the possessive is formed by adding an apostrophe after the 's' (e.g., "the analyses' results"). For less common foreign plurals or when emphasizing their foreign origin, writers may retain the original plural and then add 's' after the apostrophe to form the possessive, if the plural doesn't end in 's'.

Q: Should I use an apostrophe for decades, such as the 1990s?

A: Yes, CMOS recommends using an apostrophe to form the plural of decades for clarity (e.g., "the 1990s"). This helps to distinguish the plural from the numeral itself. While "the nineties" is also acceptable, "the 1990s" is the standard form when using numerals and an apostrophe.

Q: What is the general rule for forming possessives of plural nouns that do not end in 's'?

A: For irregular plural nouns that do not end in 's', the possessive is formed by adding an apostrophe and an 's', just like with singular nouns. Examples include "children's toys," "men's shoes," and "people's opinions."

Q: Are there any exceptions to the rule for pluralizing abbreviations and acronyms?

A: Generally, plurals of abbreviations and acronyms are formed by adding an 's' without an apostrophe (e.g., "CDs," "MPs," "URLs"). CMOS does not typically recommend apostrophes for these, as it can create confusion with possessives. Consistency is key, and avoiding apostrophes in these cases is the standard practice.

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