

chicago manual of style possessive updates

Navigating the Nuances: A Comprehensive Guide to Chicago Manual of Style Possessive Updates

chicago manual of style possessive updates are a critical aspect of scholarly and professional writing, ensuring clarity, precision, and adherence to established stylistic conventions. The Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS), often referred to as the "bible" of publishing for many in the United States, provides detailed guidelines on a wide array of grammatical and editorial matters, including the often-complex rules surrounding possessives. Understanding these rules is paramount for writers, editors, and academics aiming to produce polished and credible work. This article delves deep into the latest iterations and persistent principles of CMOS possessive style, exploring common challenges, subtle distinctions, and best practices for modern usage. We will examine the historical context of these guidelines, their practical application to singular and plural nouns, proper names, and tricky cases involving conjunctions and compound subjects.

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Understanding the Fundamentals of Chicago Style Possessives

The Chicago Manual of Style provides a clear framework for constructing possessive forms, primarily focused on indicating ownership or a close relationship. At its core, the system hinges on the apostrophe to denote possession. This fundamental principle extends to both singular and plural nouns, although the placement of the apostrophe and the addition of 's' or 'es' follow specific rules. The goal is to avoid ambiguity and ensure that the relationship between the possessive noun and the noun it modifies is immediately apparent to the reader. Mastering these foundational rules is the first step towards confident application of CMOS possessive style.

The essential function of a possessive is to modify another noun, indicating what belongs to or is associated with it. This can manifest in various ways, from tangible ownership, such as "the dog's bone," to abstract relationships, like "the city's history" or "the committee's decision." Chicago style, like most style guides, emphasizes consistency and clarity. Therefore, understanding the grammatical number of the

noun—whether it is singular or plural—is the primary determinant of how the possessive form is constructed.

Singular Nouns and Possessive Forms

For singular nouns, the general rule in Chicago style is straightforward: add an apostrophe and an 's' ('s) to form the possessive. This applies to the vast majority of singular nouns, regardless of whether they end in a consonant or a vowel. For example, "the student's paper," "the company's profit," and "the family's reunion" all correctly employ this rule. The objective is to create a distinct possessive form that clearly signifies ownership or association without altering the noun's pronunciation significantly.

There are, however, some exceptions and nuances to consider even within singular nouns. For instance, some very ancient proper names ending in 's' or 'es' might retain only an apostrophe, though this is less common in modern usage and generally discouraged by CMOS for clarity unless a specific historical pronunciation is being deliberately evoked. The emphasis remains on ease of reading and unambiguous meaning. Most singular nouns, however, fall squarely under the apostrophe-'s' rule.

Singular Nouns Ending in 's'

When a singular noun already ends in 's', Chicago style advises adding another 's' after the apostrophe. This is to maintain the sound and avoid confusion. Thus, "James's car" and "the bus's route" are the preferred forms, rather than "James' car" or "the bus' route." While some might argue for dropping the final 's' for phonetic simplicity, CMOS prioritizes a consistent rule that applies broadly. This adherence to the apostrophe-'s' construction for all singular nouns simplifies the application and reduces the likelihood of errors.

The rationale behind this rule is to ensure that the possessive form is clearly distinguished from the plural form, which typically ends in just an apostrophe for plural nouns ending in 's'. By adding the 's' to singular nouns ending in 's', the visual and auditory distinction is maintained, reinforcing the singular nature of the noun being possessed.

Plural Nouns and Possessive Forms

The construction of possessives for plural nouns in Chicago style depends on whether the plural noun ends in 's' or 'es'. This distinction is crucial for correct application. The primary goal is to accurately reflect the plural nature of the noun while indicating possession.

For plural nouns that already end in 's' (the most common form of pluralization), the rule is to add only an apostrophe after the final 's'. This means no additional 's' is added. Examples include "the students' essays,"

"the companies' stocks," and "the families' traditions." The apostrophe alone signals possession for these plural nouns, distinguishing them from their singular counterparts.

Plural Nouns Ending in 's'

As mentioned, when a plural noun ends in 's', such as "dogs," "cats," or "books," the possessive form is created by adding an apostrophe at the end. So, "the dogs' toys," "the cats' food," and "the books' pages" are the correct constructions. This rule is designed for ease of pronunciation and to maintain a clear visual cue that the noun is plural and possessive.

It is important to differentiate this from the singular possessive rule. Whereas a singular noun ending in 's' takes an apostrophe and 's' (e.g., "the boss's office"), a plural noun ending in 's' takes only an apostrophe (e.g., "the bosses' offices"). This systematic approach ensures clarity.

Plural Nouns Not Ending in 's'

Irregular plural nouns that do not end in 's' follow the same rule as singular nouns: add an apostrophe and an 's' (s). This category includes words like "children," "men," "women," and "mice." Therefore, the possessive forms are "the children's laughter," "the men's room," "the women's suffrage," and "the mice's squeaks." This consistent application of apostrophe-'s' for irregular plurals maintains parallelism with singular nouns in terms of possessive formation.

The reason for this consistency is to avoid creating awkward or difficult-to-pronounce forms. For example, "the childrens's laughter" would be cumbersome. By treating these irregular plurals like singular nouns for possessive construction, CMOS ensures a more fluid and natural reading experience while still clearly denoting possession.

Possessives with Proper Names

The rules for forming possessives with proper names largely mirror those for common nouns, with a few specific considerations, particularly concerning names ending in 's'. Chicago style generally advises a consistent approach to avoid confusion, emphasizing readability and established practice.

For proper names that do not end in 's', the rule is to add an apostrophe and 's'. This applies to names like "Sarah," "John," and "Chicago." Thus, we have "Sarah's presentation," "John's ideas," and "Chicago's architecture." This follows the standard singular possessive formation.

Proper Names Ending in 's'

When a proper name ends in 's', Chicago style strongly recommends adding an additional 's' after the apostrophe, following the same principle as singular common nouns ending in 's'. This means "Charles's book," "Harris's report," and "the Joneses' car" (referring to the family as a unit, plural possessive) are the preferred forms. While some may opt for the simpler "Charles' book" or "Harris' report," CMOS promotes the apostrophe-'s' for clarity and to prevent ambiguity with plural forms.

The reasoning here is to maintain a clear phonetic and visual distinction. Using "Charles'" might sound like "Charles" and could be confused with a singular noun. Adding the extra 's' ("Charles's") reinforces the possessive nature and singular form of the name.

Possessives with Titles and Surnames

When referring to individuals by their titles and surnames, the possessive is formed by making the surname possessive. For example, "President Biden's speech" or "Dr. Smith's findings." If the surname itself ends in 's', the standard rule applies: "Justice Sotomayor's dissent" (assuming the surname is Sotomayor) or "the Mrs. Davis's invitation" if the surname is Davis. The possessive attaches to the surname, not the title, unless the title itself is being used possessively as a noun.

This ensures that the focus of possession remains on the individual identified by their surname, which is the standard convention in formal and academic writing. It avoids awkward phrasing and maintains a clear attribution of ownership or origin.

Complex Possessives and Compound Subjects

Dealing with possessives that involve multiple nouns or phrases can present challenges. Chicago style offers guidelines for these situations to ensure clarity, particularly when dealing with compound subjects and joint or individual possession.

For compound subjects joined by "and," the placement of the possessive apostrophe indicates whether the possession is joint or individual. If the possession is joint, meaning it is shared by both subjects, the possessive is made only on the last noun in the series. For example, "John and Mary's car" implies they own the car together.

Joint Possession

When two or more nouns are acting as a unit or sharing something collectively, the possessive is placed on the final noun. This applies to names, pronouns, and noun phrases. Examples include "my brother and

sister-in-law's cottage" (implying they share one cottage) or "the president and vice president's joint statement." The single possessive form signifies a single entity or shared possession.

This rule simplifies the construction and clearly communicates the shared nature of the possession. It avoids the redundancy of making each element possessive when they are acting in concert.

Individual Possession

If the subjects possess items separately, then each noun in the series should be made possessive. For instance, "John's and Mary's cars" suggests they each have their own car. This distinction is vital for accurate communication, especially in legal or business contexts where ownership is critical. Similarly, "the author's and editor's notes" implies distinct sets of notes from each individual.

This careful placement of the apostrophe is a hallmark of clear Chicago style writing, allowing for precise distinctions between shared and individual ownership or contribution.

Possessives with Gerunds and Infinitives

Gerunds (verb forms ending in -ing used as nouns) and infinitives (the base form of a verb, often preceded by "to") can also be the antecedents of possessive constructions, though the rules for their possessive forms can be nuanced.

When a gerund functions as a noun and is preceded by a pronoun or noun, that pronoun or noun is often made possessive to clarify that it is the agent performing the action. For example, "I appreciate your understanding" is grammatically correct, but CMOS often favors "I appreciate your understanding" for greater clarity, indicating that it is "your" understanding that is being appreciated. Similarly, "their arriving late" is less clear than "their arriving late."

Gerunds and Possessive Pronouns

The general recommendation in Chicago style is to use the possessive form of the pronoun or noun preceding a gerund when that pronoun or noun is the subject of the gerund's action. Thus, "his swimming" is preferred over "him swimming" when referring to the act of swimming performed by "him." This clarifies agency and avoids potential ambiguity. "The dog's barking" is clear; "the dog barking" could refer to a dog that is currently barking without necessarily attributing the sound to it as a characteristic.

This rule helps maintain a consistent subject-verb relationship within the sentence, even when the verb is functioning nominally as a gerund.

Infinitives

Possessive forms are generally not used before infinitives. For instance, you would not say "his to go" or "her to see." The infinitive itself serves as a noun or part of a verb phrase. However, possessive pronouns are used when the infinitive acts as a noun that has an antecedent. For example, "The desire to succeed is strong" does not require a possessive. But in constructions like "his desire to succeed," the "his" clearly modifies the noun "desire."

The core principle here is that possessives precede nouns or noun phrases, and while infinitives can function nominally, they do not typically take a preceding possessive in the same way a gerund does when acting as the object of a verb or preposition.

Common Pitfalls and Clarifications in Possessive Usage

Despite the established rules, writers often stumble over possessive forms, leading to grammatical errors. Understanding common pitfalls and seeking clarification on ambiguous cases is essential for mastering Chicago style possessives.

One frequent error is the confusion between "its" (possessive pronoun) and "it's" (contraction of "it is" or "it has"). Chicago style is unequivocal: "its" is possessive and has no apostrophe, while "it's" is a contraction. Examples include "The company announced its earnings" versus "It's a beautiful day." Similarly, the distinction between "their" (possessive pronoun), "there" (adverb of place), and "they're" (contraction of "they are") is crucial.

Apostrophes in Plurals vs. Possessives

A pervasive error is the misuse of apostrophes in plural words, such as writing "apple's" when referring to multiple apples. As stated earlier, plurals generally do not take apostrophes unless they are already plural possessives. The common rule is: apostrophes indicate possession or contractions, not simple plurals. For example, "The cars were red" is correct; "The car's were red" is incorrect.

This confusion often arises from a misunderstanding of the apostrophe's function. It's not a universal plural marker; its primary roles are possession and contraction. Adhering strictly to the rules for singular and plural possessives will prevent these common mistakes.

Possessives with Time and Measurement

Possessive forms are also used to denote periods of time and measurements that function adjectivally. Examples include "a week's vacation," "two hours' notice," and "a day's work." When the time or

measurement is plural and ends in 's', only an apostrophe is added: "three weeks' notice." When it is singular or an irregular plural, an apostrophe and 's' are added: "a month's salary," "a child's bike."

These constructions are idiomatic and indicate a duration or quantity associated with the following noun. They function much like other possessive phrases, specifying a relation between the time/measurement and the object.

The Evolution of Possessive Rules in Chicago Style

While the fundamental principles of possessive formation in Chicago style have remained remarkably stable, the manual undergoes periodic revisions to address evolving language use and to provide clearer guidance. These updates often refine existing rules rather than introducing radical changes, ensuring consistency and adaptability.

Historically, some stylistic preferences might have varied, particularly concerning proper names ending in 's'. However, the trend in modern style guides, including Chicago, has been towards greater consistency and clarity. The emphasis is on rules that are easy to apply and universally understood, minimizing exceptions that could lead to confusion. The goal of any update is to enhance the usability and authority of the manual.

The most significant "updates" are often less about changing core rules and more about providing more examples, clearer explanations, and addressing contemporary usage patterns. For instance, how electronic media or new forms of naming conventions might interact with possessive rules are areas where periodic clarifications are beneficial. The core grammatical principles, however, remain robust.

Best Practices for Applying Chicago Style Possessive Updates

To effectively apply Chicago Manual of Style possessive updates and guidelines, consistent practice and a thorough understanding are key. Writers and editors should familiarize themselves with the latest edition of the manual and consult it regularly for specific cases.

One of the most effective practices is to create a style sheet for projects, noting specific decisions made regarding possessives, especially for proper nouns or recurring terms. This ensures consistency throughout a document or series of documents. Proofreading specifically for possessive errors is also essential, as these are often minor grammatical details that can be overlooked.

Regular review of the latest edition of the Chicago Manual of Style is recommended, as it is the definitive source for these guidelines. Paying close attention to the sections dedicated to punctuation, grammar, and pluralization will provide the most accurate and up-to-date information. Ultimately, the aim is to use

possessives in a way that enhances clarity and professionalism in writing.

Consulting the Manual and Style Guides

The Chicago Manual of Style itself is the ultimate authority. When in doubt, referring to the most recent edition is paramount. Many universities and publishing houses also provide internal style guides that may adapt CMOS principles for their specific needs. Understanding these nuances is part of professional writing.

For writers and editors, maintaining a digital or physical copy of the CMOS and other relevant style guides is a professional necessity. Quick reference can save significant time and prevent errors. Online resources associated with the CMOS are also invaluable for quick lookups and clarifications.

Proofreading for Possessive Accuracy

A dedicated proofreading pass for possessive accuracy can catch many common mistakes. This involves specifically looking for apostrophes, ensuring they are used correctly for possession and contractions, and not for simple plurals. Double-checking the rules for singular and plural nouns, especially those ending in 's' or irregular plurals, is crucial during this phase.

Reading the text aloud can also help identify awkward or incorrect possessive constructions that might not be apparent when reading silently. The sound of the language often reveals grammatical errors that are otherwise missed.

FAQ

Q: What is the most significant change in Chicago Manual of Style possessive rules regarding singular nouns ending in 's'?

A: The Chicago Manual of Style generally continues to recommend adding an apostrophe and an 's' to singular nouns ending in 's' for clarity and phonetic consistency. While some older styles or specific contexts might allow for just an apostrophe, the current emphasis in CMOS is on the apostrophe-'s' for singular nouns, including proper names like Charles's or Harris's.

Q: How does Chicago Manual of Style differentiate between joint and

individual possession for compound subjects?

A: Chicago Manual of Style differentiates between joint and individual possession for compound subjects by the placement of the possessive apostrophe. For joint possession (shared ownership), the apostrophe is added only to the last noun in the series (e.g., "John and Mary's car"). For individual possession (separate ownership), the apostrophe is added to each noun (e.g., "John's and Mary's cars").

Q: Is the use of the possessive before a gerund still strongly recommended in the latest Chicago Manual of Style?

A: Yes, the Chicago Manual of Style generally continues to recommend using the possessive form of a noun or pronoun before a gerund when that noun or pronoun is the subject of the gerund's action. This aids in clarity and avoids ambiguity. For example, "their arriving late" is preferred over "them arriving late."

Q: What is the rule for possessives of plural nouns that do not end in 's', such as "children" or "men"?

A: For irregular plural nouns that do not end in 's' (e.g., children, men, women, mice), Chicago Manual of Style follows the same rule as singular nouns: add an apostrophe and an 's' to form the possessive. Thus, it would be "the children's toys," "the men's room," and "the women's concerns."

Q: How does Chicago Manual of Style handle possessives with proper names ending in 's' or 'z'?

A: For proper names ending in 's' or 'z', Chicago Manual of Style generally recommends adding an apostrophe and an 's' for clarity and consistency, even if it creates an extra 's' sound. For example, "Charles's" and "Jesus's" are preferred over "Charles'" and "Jesus'." This rule applies to both common nouns and proper names for consistency.

Q: Are there any situations where Chicago Manual of Style allows for an apostrophe only for singular nouns ending in 's'?

A: While the general recommendation is apostrophe-'s', Chicago Manual of Style acknowledges that for some classical names or established proper names ending in 's' or 'z' where the additional 's' sounds awkward, an apostrophe alone may be acceptable, especially in historical contexts or for stylistic reasons. However, for clarity and consistency in most modern writing, the apostrophe-'s' is preferred.

Q: How does Chicago Manual of Style address the possessive of abbreviations or acronyms?

A: For abbreviations and acronyms that end in a period, the possessive is formed by adding 's' after the period, but this is generally discouraged in favor of rephrasing to avoid awkwardness. For acronyms that do not end in a period, the rule is to add 's'. For example, if there were an acronym "NATO," its possessive would be "NATO's." However, CMOS advises against making acronyms possessive when possible.

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