

Contractions Versus Possessive Pronouns

avoiding a common confusion

a special publication from Firebelle Productions

It is not uncommon for people to confuse contractions and possessive pronouns. In the pages that follow, we'll define both and identify how to avoid confusing the two. Then you'll have an opportunity to test your knowledge.

What Are Contractions?

Most contractions are expressions formed by condensing two words into one. One or more letters are removed from the original words, and an apostrophe is added to take their place. The following are some common contractions.

I'd	you'd	they'd	he'd	here's	isn't	couldn't
I'll	you'll	they'll	he'll	there's	aren't	shouldn't
I'm	you're	they're	he's	where's	don't	wouldn't
I've	you've	they've	she'd	what's	doesn't	won't
it'll	we'd	we're	she'll	who'll	didn't	weren't
it's	we'll	we've	she's	who's	can't	let's

Contractions may be used for ease of reading, for effect, or simply to squeeze more information into a limited space.

Original: You **should not** be driving.

Contraction: You **shouldn't** be driving.

Many experts say contractions are appropriate only for informal writing and speech, not for formal writing. However, if words such as **it is**, **do not**, or **let us** make a sentence stiff, overly formal, or difficult to read, it may be appropriate to substitute **it's**, **don't**, or **let's**. Used in moderation, contractions can be an effective tool.

Avoid nonstandard contractions. The first example below is confusing because most readers will anticipate that **dog's** is being used in the possessive sense and will be expecting you to say something about the dog's injured nose, paw, or whatever.

Confusing: The **dog's** injured.

Clear: The **dog is** injured.

**Most
contractions
are formed by
condensing two
words into one.**

***You've had too
much to drink.
You shouldn't
be driving.***



***We'll take
you home.***

What Are Possessive Nouns and Pronouns?

A **noun** is a word that names a person, place, thing, quality, or idea. There are several types of nouns. A **common noun**, for example, names a **general** person, place, thing, quality or idea, while a **proper noun** names a **specific** person, place, or thing. **Possessive nouns** indicate ownership or possession.

Common Noun: Nancy spotted the **suspect**.
Possessive Noun: Nancy spotted the **suspect's** car.

Proper Noun: Nancy spotted **Roy**.
Possessive Noun: Nancy spotted **Roy's** car.

A **pronoun** is a word that in most cases can be used in place of a noun. **Possessive pronouns**, like possessive nouns, show ownership or possession.

Pronoun: Nancy spotted **him**.
Possessive Pronoun: Nancy spotted **his** car.

How Can I Distinguish Between Contractions and Possessive Pronouns?

Possessive **nouns** are formed by adding **'s** to the original noun, as shown in the first two sets of examples above (**suspect's** car, **Roy's** car). Possessive **pronouns**, on the other hand, show possession already, without the addition of anything else (**his** car, **her** car, **my** car).

Four possessive pronouns are particularly troublesome because ~~their~~ they're often confused with contractions that sound alike and have similar spellings.

Possessive Pronoun	Contraction
its	it's
their	they're
whose	who's
your	you're

Its and **it's** are the most confusing pair because they contain exactly the same letters. And while adding **'s** usually indicates the possessive form of a word, the opposite is true with the word **it**. **Its** is the possessive form of **it**, whereas **it's** is the contraction of **it is**. One of the most frequent mistakes made in writing is to confuse **its** for **it's** and vice versa. However, ~~its~~ it's easy to determine which word is correct by substituting **it is** into your sentence. If **it is** makes sense, use **it's**. If not, use **its**.

Possessive: The car landed on **its** roof.
Contraction: **It's** (it is) going to be difficult to extricate her.

You can use the substitution test with the other words as well. Use **they're** if you can substitute **they are**, **who's** if you can substitute **who is**, and **you're** if you can substitute **you are**. If you can't make the substitution, use the possessive pronoun.

One of the most common mistakes writers make is to confuse *its* and *it's*.

***Its* is the possessive form.**

The car landed on its roof.



***It's* is the contraction of *it is*.**

It's (it is) going to be difficult to extricate the victim.

The other word that deserves a brief mention is **there** since it is sometimes confused with their and they're. **There** is a word sometimes used to introduce the subject of a sentence: **There is an accident up ahead.** **There** is neither a contraction nor a possessive pronoun.



Test Your Knowledge

Circle the correct word in each of the sentences below. Check your answers on the following page.

Example: The car landed on its/it's roof.

1. Their/there/they're home was destroyed by fire.
2. Your/you're never going to believe what happened.
3. Do you know whose/who's in command?
4. Its/it's not too late to stop smoking.
5. Do you know where their/there/they're going?
6. Have you finished your/you're report?
7. Whose/who's helmet is this?
8. The dog injured its/it's paw.
9. Their/there/they're were no witnesses to the accident.
10. We'll host the drill if its/it's all right with everyone.



A simple substitution test reveals whether to use a contraction or a possessive pronoun.

Their (they are) child was abducted.



They're (they are) very upset.

Check Your Answers

The following are the answers to the quiz on the previous page.

1. their
2. you're
3. who's
4. it's
5. they're
6. your
7. whose
8. its
9. there
10. it's



For More Information

This newsletter is adapted from Chapter 2 of *Take Command of Your Writing* by Jill Meryl Levy. *Take Command of Your Writing* is the first comprehensive guide to more effective writing geared specifically for emergency services personnel. It is an essential resource for anyone who wants to present ideas more effectively, write more accurate reports, and create more readable and user-friendly documents of any kind. It is also an excellent tool for anyone who wants to place higher on promotional exams requiring any kind of writing exercise.

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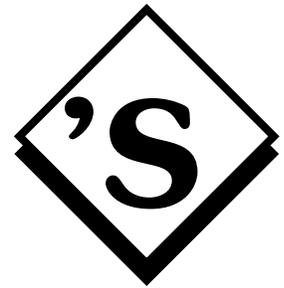
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**While adding 's
usually indicates
the possessive
form of a word . . .**



**. . . it is not
appropriate
with possessive
pronouns.**