



C Rules for Forming Possessives

1. For common or proper nouns, whether singular or plural, that do not already end in the letter *s*, add an apostrophe and *s* to form the possessive. For example:

SINGULAR	man	child	Johnson	Microsoft
SINGULAR POSSESSIVE	man's	child's	Johnson's	Microsoft's
PLURAL	men	children	alumni	
PLURAL POSSESSIVE	men's	children's	alumni's	

2. If the word is a singular common noun that already ends in the letter *s*, add an apostrophe and *s* to form the possessive, unless the next word also begins with an *s*.

the hostess's request	the hostess' seat
the witness's answer	the witness' story

3. If the word is a singular common or proper noun that ends in a letter other than *s* but has an *s* sound (such as *ce*, *ze* and *xe*), add an apostrophe and add an *s*.

the fox's den
Butz's policies
Marx's theories
the prince's life

4. Singular proper nouns that end in *s* add only an apostrophe:

Descartes' philosophy
Hercules' labours
Socrates' execution
Tennessee Williams' plays

5. Plural common and proper nouns ending in *s* add only an apostrophe:

the churches' association
the girls' toys
the horses' food
the Smiths' car
the Williamses' children
the Carolinas' coastline

6. If a term is hyphenated, make only the last word possessive:

SINGULAR	mother-in-law	She is my mother-in-law.
SINGULAR POSSESSIVE	mothers-in-law	It is my mother-in-law's car.
PLURAL	mothers-in-law	The program featured mothers-in-law.
PLURAL POSSESSIVE	mothers-in-law's	The mothers-in-law's cars were damaged.

7. If an object is jointly possessed by two or more people or entities, make only the last noun possessive:

Marie and Edward's entry won a prize.
Acme Co. and Smith Corp.'s joint business is profitable.
My aunt and uncle's home was destroyed by fire.

8. If the objects are not jointly owned—if they are separate objects owned or possessed by different people—make both nouns possessive:

Marie's and Edward's entries won prizes.
The Smiths' and the Browns' luggage was lost.

9. Some special expressions that do not end in *s* but have an *s* sound use only an apostrophe: *for appearance's sake; for conscience' sake; for goodness' sake*. In other expressions, use *'s*: *the appearance's cost*.

10. Indefinite pronouns such as *everyone* follow the same rules. However, personal pronouns have special forms that never use an apostrophe. Personal pronouns include such words as: *his, mine, ours, theirs, whose* and *yours*.

11. Do not add an apostrophe to descriptive phrases ending in *s*: *citizens band radio; teachers college*. The phrase is descriptive rather than possessive if *for* or *by* rather than *of* would be appropriate in a longer form of the phrase: *a radio band for citizens; a college for teachers*. An *'s* is required, however, when the term in the descriptive phrase is a plural that does not end in an *s*: *women's clinic; people's government*.

12. Generally, avoid making inanimate objects possessives. Instead, try to rewrite the passage, either dropping the possessive or converting the passage to an *of* phrase:

AWKWARD: the table's leg
BETTER: the table leg OR the leg of the table

AWKWARD: the book's chapter

BETTER: the book chapter OR the chapter of the book

13. When mentioning the name of an organization, group or geographical location, always use the common or preferred and official spelling. Some names use the possessive case, such as *Actors' Equity Association*, but others, such as *Pikes Peak*, do not.
14. The word *it's*, spelled with an apostrophe, is a contraction of *it is*. The possessive form, *its*, does not contain an apostrophe:

WRONG: Its higher than I thought.

RIGHT: It's higher than I thought OR It is higher than I thought.

WRONG: It's height scares me.

RIGHT: Its height scares me.