

Possessive Forms

1. Forming Possessives

Showing possession in English is a relatively easy matter (believe it or not). By adding an apostrophe and an *s* we can manage to transform most **singular nouns** into their possessive form: the car's front seat, Charles's car, Bartkowski's book, hard day's work.

Some writers will say that the *-s* after Charles' is not necessary and that adding only the apostrophe (Charles' car) will suffice to show possession. Consistency is the key here: if you choose not to add the *-s* after a noun that already ends in *s*, do so consistently throughout your text. William Strunk's *Elements of Style* recommends adding the 's. (In fact, oddly enough, it's Rule Number One in Strunk's "**Elementary Rules of Usage.**") You will find that some nouns, especially proper nouns, especially when there are other *-s* and *-z* sounds involved, turn into clumsy beasts when you add another *s*: "That's old Mrs. Chambers's estate." In that case, you're better off with "Mrs. Chambers' estate."

There is another way around this problem of clunky possessives: using the "of phrase" to show possession. For instance, we would probably say the "constitution of Illinois," as opposed to "Illinois' (or Illinois's ??) constitution."

To answer that question about Illinois, you should know that most words that end in an unpronounced "s" form their possessive by adding an apostrophe + *s*. So we would write about "Illinois's next governor" and "Arkansas's former governor" and "the Marine Corps's policy." However, many non-English words that end with a silent "s" or "x" will form their possessives with only an apostrophe. So we would write "Alexander Dumas' first novel" and "this bordeaux' bouquet." According to the New York Public Library's *Guide to Style and Usage*, there are "certain expressions that end in *s* or the *s* sound that traditionally require an apostrophe only: for appearance' sake, for conscience' sake, for goodness' sake" (268). Incidentally, the NYPL *Guide* also suggests that when a word ends in a *double s*, we're better off writing its possessive with only an apostrophe: the boss' memo, the witness' statement. Many writers insist, however, that we actually hear an "es" sound attached to the possessive forms of these words, so an apostrophe *-s* is appropriate: boss's memo, witness's statement. If the look of the three *s*'s in a row doesn't bother you, use that construction.

When we want the possessive of a **pluralized family name**, we pluralize first and then simply make the name possessive with the use of an apostrophe. Thus, we might travel in the Smiths' car when we visit the Joneses (members of the Jones family) at the Joneses' home. When the last name ends in a hard "z" sound, we usually don't add an "s" or the "-es" and simply add the apostrophe: "the Chambers' new baby."

Many writers consider it bad form to use apostrophe *-s* possessives with pieces of furniture and buildings or inanimate objects in general. Instead of "the desk's edge" (according to many authorities), we should write "the edge of the desk" and instead of "the hotel's windows" we should write "the windows of the hotel." In fact, we would probably avoid the possessive altogether and use the noun as an attributive: "the hotel windows." This rule (if, in fact, it is one) is no longer universally endorsed. We would *not* say "the radio of that car" instead of "that car's radio" (or the "car radio") and we would not write "the desire of my heart" instead of "my heart's desire." Writing "the edge of the ski" would probably be an improvement over "the ski's edge," however.

For expressions of time and measurement, the possessive is shown with an apostrophe *-s*: "one dollar's worth," "two dollars' worth," "a hard day's night," "two years' experience," "an evening's entertainment."

2. Possessives and Gerunds

Possessive forms are frequently modifiers for verb forms used as nouns, or **gerunds**. Using the possessive will affect how we read the sentence. For instance, "I'm worried about Joe running in the park after dark" means that I'm worried about *Joe* and the fact that he runs in the park after dark (the word "running" is a **present participle** modifying Joe). On the other hand, "I'm worried about Joe's running in the park after dark" puts the emphasis on the *running* that Joe is doing ("running" is a gerund, and "Joe's" modifies that verbal). Usually, almost always in fact, we use the possessive form of a noun or pronoun to modify a gerund. More is involved, however.

3. Possessives versus Adjectival Labels

Don't confuse an adjectival label (sometimes called an "**attributive noun**") ending in *s* with the

need for a possessive. Sometimes it's not easy to tell which is which. Do you attend a **writers' conference** or a **writers conference**? If it's a group of writers attending a conference, you want the plural ending, *writers*. If the conference actually belongs to the writers, then you'd want the possessive form, *writers'*. If you can insert another modifier between the -s word and whatever it modifies, you're probably dealing with a possessive. Additional modifiers will also help determine which form to use.

- Patriots quarterback Drew Bledsoe threw three touchdown passes. (plural as modifier)
- The Patriots' [new] quarterback, Drew Bledsoe, threw three touchdown passes. (possessive as modifier]

4. Possessives of Plurals & Irregular Plurals

Most **plural nouns** already end in *s*. To create their possessive, simply add an apostrophe after the *s*

- The Pepins' house is the big blue one on the corner.
- The lions' usual source of water has dried up.
- The gases' odors mixed and became nauseating.
- The witches' brooms were hidden in the corner.
- The babies' beds were all in a row.

With **nouns whose plurals are irregular**, however, you will need to add an apostrophe followed by an *s* to create the possessive form.

- She plans on opening a women's clothing boutique.
- Children's programming is not a high priority.
- The geese's food supply was endangered.

But with words that do not change their form when pluralized, you will have to add an *-s* or *-es*.

- The seaweed was destroyed by the fishes' overfeeding.

5. Compound Possessives

When you are showing possession with **compounded nouns**, the apostrophe's placement depends on whether the nouns are acting separately or together.

- Miguel's and Cecilia's new cars are in the parking lot.
This means that each of them has at least one new car and that their ownership is a separate matter.
- Miguel and Cecilia's new cars are in the parking lot.
This means that Miguel and Cecilia share ownership of these cars. The possessive (indicated by 's) belongs to the entire phrase, not just to Cecilia.

Another example:

- Lewis and Clark's expectations were very much the same.
This means that the two gentlemen held one set of expectations in common.
- Lewis's and Clark's expectations were altogether different.
This means that the expectations of the two men were different (rather obvious from what the sentence says, too), and that we signify separate ownership by writing both of the compounded proper nouns in the possessive form.

When one of the possessors in a compound possessive is a personal pronoun, we have to put both possessors in the possessive form or we end up with something silly: "Bill and my car had to be towed last night."

- Bill's and my car had to be towed last night.
- Giorgio's and her father was not around much during their childhood.

If this second sentence seems unsatisfactory, you might have to do some rewriting so you end up talking about *their* father, instead, or revert to using both names: "Giorgio and Isabel's father wasn't around much" (and then "Giorgio" will lose the apostrophe +s).

6. Possessives & Compound Constructions

This is different from the problem we confront when creating possessives with compound constructions such as daughter-in-law and friend of mine. Generally, the apostrophe -s is simply added to the end of the compound structure: my daughter-in-law's car, a friend of mine's car. If this sounds clumsy, use the "of" construction to avoid the apostrophe: the car of a friend of mine, etc. This is especially useful in pluralized compound structures: the daughters-in-law's car sounds quite strange, but it's correct. We're better off with the car of the daughters-in-law.

7. Possessives with Appositive Forms

When a possessive noun is followed by an **appositive**, a word that renames or explains that noun, the apostrophe +s is added to the appositive, not to the noun. When this happens, we drop the comma

that would normally follow the appositive phrase.

- We must get Joe Bidwell, the family attorney's signature.

Create such constructions with caution, however, as you might end up writing something that looks silly:

- I wrecked my best friend, Bob's car.

You're frequently better off using the "of-genitive" form, writing something like "We must get the signature of Joe Bidwell, the family attorney" and "I wrecked the car of my best friend, Bob."

8. Double Possessives

Do we say "a friend of my uncle" or "a friend of my uncle's"? In spite of the fact that "a friend of my uncle's" seems to overwork the notion of possessiveness, that is usually what we say and write. The **double possessive** construction is sometimes called the "post-genitive" or "of followed by a possessive case or an absolute possessive pronoun" (from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which likes to show off). The double possessive has been around since the fifteenth century, and is widely accepted. It's extremely helpful, for instance, in distinguishing between "a picture of my father" (in which we see the old man) and "a picture of my father's" (which he owns). Native speakers will note how much more natural it is to say "He's a fan of hers" than "he's a fan of her."

Generally, what follows the "of" in a double possessive will be definite and human, not otherwise, so we would say "a friend of my uncle's" but *not* "a friend of the museum's [*museum*, instead]." What precedes the "of" is usually *indefinite* (a friend, not the best friend), unless it's preceded by the demonstratives *this* or *that*, as in "this friend of my father's."

Plural Nouns Forms

1. Forming Plurals

The plural form of most nouns is created simply by adding the letter *s*.

- more than one snake = snakes
- more than one ski = skis
- more than one Barrymore = Barrymores

Words that end in *-ch*, *x*, *s* or *s-like* sounds, however, will require an *-es* for the plural:

- more than one witch = witches
- more than one box = boxes
- more than one gas = gases
- more than one bus = buses
- more than one kiss = kisses
- more than one Jones = Joneses

In addition, there are several nouns that have irregular plural forms. Plurals formed in this way are sometimes called **mutated (or mutating) plurals**.

- more than one child = children
- more than one woman = women
- more than one man = men
- more than one person = people
- more than one goose = geese
- more than one mouse = mice
- more than one barracks = barracks
- more than one deer = deer

And, finally, there are nouns that maintain their Latin or Greek form in the plural. (See *media* and *data* and *alumni*, below.)

- more than one nucleus = nuclei
- more than one syllabus = syllabi
- more than one focus = foci
- more than one fungus = fungi
- more than one cactus = cacti (*cactuses* is acceptable)
- more than one thesis = theses
- more than one crisis = crises*
- more than one phenomenon = phenomena
- more than one index = indices (*indexes* is acceptable)
- more than one appendix = appendices (*appendixes* is acceptable)
- more than one criterion = criteria

*Note the pronunciation of this word, *crises*: the second syllable sounds like *ease*. More than one base in the game of baseball is *bases*, but more than one *basis* for an argument, say, is

also *bases*, and then we pronounce the word *basease*.

A handful of nouns appear to be plural in form but take a singular verb:

- The news is bad.
- Gymnastics is fun to watch.
- Economics/mathematics/statistics is said to be difficult. ("Economics" can sometimes be a plural concept, as in "The economics of the situation demand that")

Numerical expressions are usually singular, but can be plural if the individuals within a numerical group are acting individually:

- Fifty thousand dollars is a lot of money.
- One-half of the faculty is retiring this summer.
- One-half of the faculty have doctorates.
- Fifty percent of the students have voted already.

And another handful of nouns might seem to be singular in nature but take a plural form and always use a plural verb:

- My pants are torn. (Nowadays you will sometimes see this word as a singular "pant" [meaning one pair of *pants*] especially in clothing ads, but most writers would regard that as an affectation.)
- Her scissors were stolen.
- The glasses have slipped down his nose again.

When a noun names the title of something or is a word being used as a word, it is singular whether the word takes a singular form or not.

- *Faces* is the name of the new restaurant downtown.
- *Okies*, which most people regard as a disparaging word, was first used to describe the residents of Oklahoma during the 1930s.
- Chelmsley Brothers is the best moving company in town.
- *Postcards* is my favorite novel.
- The term *Okies* was used to describe the residents of Oklahoma during the 1930s. (In this sentence, the word *Okies* is actually an appositive for the singular subject, "term.")

2. Plural Compound Nouns

Compound words create special problems when we need to pluralize them. As a general rule, the element within the compound that word that is pluralized will receive the plural -s, but it's not always that simple. *Daughters-in-law* follows the general rule, but *cupfuls* does not. See the special section on [Compound Nouns and Modifiers](#) or, better yet, a good dictionary, for additional help.

3. Problem Children

Many careful writers insist that the words *data* and *media* are Latin plurals and must, therefore, be used as plural words. The singular Latin forms of these words, however, are seldom used: *datum* as a single bit of information or *medium* as a single means of communication. Many authorities nowadays approve sentences like My data is lost. and The media is out to get the President. Even textbooks in computer science are beginning to use "data" as a singular.

Alumni and *alumnae* remain problematic. The plural of masculine singular *alumnus* is *alumni*; the plural of feminine singular *alumna* is *alumnae*. In traditional Latin, the masculine plural form, *alumni*, could include both genders. This does not go over well with some female alums. We note, furthermore, that Vassar College, which now has both, has lists of *alumni* and *alumnae*. Hartford College for Women, we assume, has only *alumnae*. In its publication style manual, Wesleyan University approves of *alumni/ae*. The genderless *graduate* and the truncated and informal *alum* have much to commend them.

4. Special Cases

With words that end in a consonant and a *y*, you'll need to change the *y* to an *i* and add *es*.

- more than one baby = babies
- more than one gallery = galleries (Notice the difference between this and *galleys*, where the final *y* is not preceded by a consonant.)
- more than one reality = realities
- This rule does not apply to proper nouns:
- more than one Kennedy = Kennedys

Words that end in *o* create special problems.

- more than one potato = potatoes
- more than one hero = heroes
- . . . *however* . . .

- more than one memo = memos
- more than one cello = cellos
- . . . and for words where another vowel comes before the o . . .

Plurals of words that end in *-f* or *-fe* usually change the *f* sound to a *v* sound and add *s* or *-es*.

- more than one knife = knives
- more than one leaf = leaves
- more than one hoof = hooves
- more than one life = lives
- more than one self = selves

There are, however, exceptions:

- more than one dwarf = dwarfs
- more than one roof = roofs

When in doubt, as always, consult a dictionary. Some dictionaries, for instance, will list both *wharfs* and *wharves* as acceptable plural forms of *wharf*. It makes for good arguments.

5. Collective Nouns, Company Names, Family Names

There are, further, so called **collective nouns**, which are singular when we think of them as groups and plural when we think of the individuals acting within the whole (which happens sometimes, but not often).

audience	family	kind
band	flock	lot
class	group	[the] number
committee	heap	public
crowd	herd	staff
dozen	jury	team

Thus, if we're talking about eggs, we could say "A dozen is probably not enough." But if we're holding a party, we could say, "A dozen are coming over this afternoon." The jury delivers its verdict. [But] The jury came in and took their seats. We could say the Tokyo String Quartet is one of the best string ensembles in the world, but we could say the Beatles were some of the most famous singers in history. Generally, band names and musical groups take singular or plural verbs depending on the form of their names: "The Mamas and the Papas were one of the best groups of the 70s" and "Metallica is my favorite band."

Note that "the number" is a singular collective noun. "The number of applicants is steadily increasing." "A number," on the other hand, is a plural form: "There are several students in the lobby. A number are here to see the president."

Collective nouns are **count nouns** which means they, themselves, can be pluralized: a university has several athletic teams and classes. And the immigrant families kept watch over their herds and flocks.

The word following the phrase *one of the* (as an object of the preposition *of*) will always be plural.

- One of the reasons we do this is that it rains a lot in spring.
- One of the students in this room is responsible.

Notice, though, that the verb ("is") agrees with *one*, which is singular, and not with the object of the preposition, which is always plural.

When a **family name** (a proper noun) is pluralized, we almost always simply add an "s." So we go to visit the Smiths, the Kennedys, the Grays, etc. When a family name ends in *s*, *x*, *ch*, *sh*, or *z*, however, we form the plural by added *-es*, as in the Marches, the Joneses, the Maddoxes, the Bushes, the Rodriguezes. Do *not* form a family name plural by using an apostrophe; that device is reserved for creating possessive forms.

When a proper noun ends in an "s" with a hard "z" sound, we don't add any ending to form the plural: "The Chambers are coming to dinner" (not the Chamberses); "The Hodges used to live here" (not the Hodgeses).

The **names of companies and other organizations** are usually regarded as singular, regardless of their ending: "General Motors has announced its fall lineup of new vehicles." Try to avoid the inconsistency that is almost inevitable when you think of corporate entities as a group of individuals: "General Motors has announced their fall lineup of new vehicles." But note that some inconsistency is acceptable in all but the most formal writing: "Ford has announced its breakup with Firestone Tires. Their cars will no longer use tires built by Firestone." Some writers will use a plural verb when a plural construction such as "Associates" is part of the company's title or when the title consists of a series of

names: "Upton, Vernon, and Gridley are moving to new law offices next week" or "Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego & Associates have won all their cases this year." Singular verbs and pronouns would be correct in those sentences, also.

The **names of sports teams**, on the other hand, are treated as plurals, regardless of the form of that name. We would write that "The Yankees have signed a new third baseman" and "The Yankees are a great organization" (even if we're Red Sox fans) and that "For two years in a row, the Utah Jazz have attempted to draft a big man." When we refer to a team by the city in which it resides, however, we use the singular, as in "Dallas has attempted to secure the services of two assistant coaches that Green Bay hopes to keep." (This is decidedly not a British practice. In England, the city names by which British newspapers refer to soccer teams, for example, are used as plurals — a practice that seems odd and inconsistent to American ears: "A minute's silence will precede the game at Le Stadium today, when Toulouse play Munster, and tomorrow at Lansdowne Road, when Leinster attempt to reach their first European final by beating Perpignan" [report in the online *London Times*].)

6. Plurals and Apostrophes

We use **an apostrophe to create plural forms** in two limited situations: for pluralized letters of the alphabet and when we are trying to create the plural form of a word that refers to the word itself. Here we also should italicize this "word as word," but not the 's ending that belongs to it. Do *not* use the apostrophe+s to create the plural of acronyms (pronounceable abbreviations such as laser and IRA and URL*) and other abbreviations. (A possible exception to this last rule is an acronym that ends in "S": "We filed four NOS's in that folder.")

- Jeffrey got four A's on his last report card.
- Towanda learned very quickly to mind her *p*'s and *q*'s.
- You have fifteen *and*'s in that last paragraph.

Notice that we do not use an apostrophe -s to create the plural of a word-in-itself. For instance, we would refer to the "ins and outs" of a mystery, the "yeses and nos" of a vote (NYPL *Writer's Guide to Style and Usage*), and we assume that Theodore Bernstein knew what he was talking about in his book *Dos, Don'ts & Maybes of English Usage*. We would also write "The shortstop made two spectacular outs in that inning." But when we refer to a word-as-a-word, we first italicize it — I pointed out the use of the word *out* in that sentence. — and if necessary, we pluralize it by adding the unitalicized apostrophe -s — "In his essay on prepositions, Jose used an astonishing three dozen *out*'s." This practice is not universally followed, and in newspapers, you would find our example sentence written without italics or apostrophe: "You have fifteen ands in that last paragraph."

Some abbreviations have embedded plural forms, and there are often inconsistencies in creating the plurals of these words. The speed of an internal combustion engine is measured in "revolutions per minute" or **rpm** (lower case) and the efficiency of an automobile is reported in "miles per gallon" or **mpg** (no "-s" endings). On the other hand, American baseball players love to accumulate "runs batted in," a statistic that is usually reported as **RBIs** (although it would not be terribly unusual to hear that someone got 100 **RBI** last year — and some baseball commentators will talk about "ribbies," too). Also, the U.S. military provides "meals ready to eat" and those rations are usually described as **MREs** (not MRE). When an abbreviation can be used to refer to a singular thing — a run batted in, a meal ready-to-eat, a prisoner of war — it's surely a good idea to form the plural by adding "s" to the abbreviation: RBIs, MREs, POWs. (Notice that no apostrophe is involved in the formation of these plurals. Whether abbreviations like these are formed with upper- or lower-case letters is a matter of great mystery; only your dictionary editor knows for sure.)

Notice, furthermore, that we do *not* use an apostrophe to create plurals in the following:

- The **1890s** in Europe are widely regarded as years of social decadence.
- I have prepared **1099s** for the entire staff.
- Rosa and her brother have identical **IQs**, and they both have **PhDs** from Harvard.
- She has over 400 **URLs*** in her bookmark file.

*The jury still seems to be out on whether URL (acronym for Uniform [or Universal] Resource Locator), the address of a website on the World Wide Web, should be pronounced like the name of your Uncle *Earl* or as a series of letters: U*R*L. In either case, though, the plural would be spelled URLs.

7. Singular Subjects, Plural Predicates, etc.

We frequently run into a situation in which a singular subject is linked to a plural predicate:

- My favorite breakfast is cereal with fruit, milk, orange juice, and toast.

Sometimes, too, a plural subject can be linked to singular predicate:

- Mistakes in parallelism are the only problem here.

In such situations, remember that the number (singular or plural) of the subject, not the predicate, determines the number of the verb. See the section on [Subject-Verb Agreement](#) for further help.

A special situation exists when a subject seems not to agree with its predicate. For instance, when we want each student to see his or her counselor (and each student is assigned to only one counselor), but we want to avoid that "his or her" construction by pluralizing, do we say "Students must see their counselors" or "Students must see their counselor"? The singular *counselor* is necessary to avoid the implication that students have more than one counselor apiece. Do we say "Many sons dislike their *father* or *fathers*"? We don't mean to suggest that the sons have more than one father, so we use the singular *father*. Theodore Bernstein, in *Dos, Don'ts and Maybes of English Usage*, says that "Idiomatically the noun applying to more than one person remains in the singular when (a) it represents a quality or thing possessed in common ("The audience's curiosity was aroused"); or (b) it is an abstraction ("The judges applied their reason to the problem"), or (c) it is a figurative word ("All ten children had a sweet tooth") (203). Sometimes good sense will have to guide you. We might want to say "Puzzled, the children scratched their head" to avoid the image of multi-headed children, but "The audience rose to their foot" is plainly ridiculous and about to tip over.

In "The boys moved their car/cars," the plural would indicate that each boy owned a car, the singular that the boys (together) owned one car (which is quite possible). It is also possible that each boy owned more than one car. Be prepared for such situations, and consider carefully the implications of using either the singular or the plural. You might have to avoid the problem by going the opposite direction of pluralizing: moving things to the singular and talking about what each boy did.