

# THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS OF WRITING

## The Fourth Deadly Sin: Misuse of the Apostrophe

Use the apostrophe to indicate possession and to mark omitted letters in contractions. Writers often misuse apostrophes when forming plurals and possessives. The basic rule is quite simple: **use the apostrophe to indicate possession, not a plural.** Yes, the exceptions to the rule may seem confusing: *hers* has no apostrophe, and *it's* is not possessive. Nevertheless, with a small amount of attention, you can learn the rules and the exceptions of apostrophe use.

### POSSESSIVES

Form the possessive case of a singular noun by adding 's (even if the word ends in *s*).

**Examples:** Hammurabi's code, Dickens's last novel, James's cello

Form the possessive case of a plural noun by adding an apostrophe after the final letter if it is an *s* or by adding 's if the final letter is not an *s*.

**Examples:** the students' books, the children's toys

**Remember:** The apostrophe never designates the plural form of a noun. A common error is the use of the apostrophe to form a non-possessive plural: the two boy's.

**Compare the following correct sentences:**

The *student's* book was missing. (*singular possessive*)

Several *students'* books were missing. (*plural possessive*)

The *students* searched for their missing books. (*plural*)

**Possessive Pronouns**, such as *yours*, *hers*, *its* and *ours*, take no apostrophe.

**Example:** The decision is yours.

**Indefinite Pronouns**, such as *anyone*, *everybody*, *no one* and *somebody*, use the singular possessive form.

**Example:** Somebody's dog stayed in our room last night.

### CONTRACTIONS

The apostrophe is used to mark omitted letters in contractions.

*Note that contractions are often considered too informal for academic writing.*

**Avoid the dreadful *it's/its* confusion:**

*It's* is a contraction for *it is*. *It's* is *never* a possessive.

*Its* is the possessive for *it*.

As Professors Strunk and White remind us in *The Elements of Style*,

"It's a wise dog that scratches its own fleas." (1)

