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## Spelling and Apostrophes

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# Introduction

There are many words in the English language which are commonly misspelt. Some of these are homophones (words which sound alike but are spelled differently and have different meanings), and others are a result of confusion between verbs ('doing words') and nouns ('things'). Some are simply difficult to spell. Some students also find grammar tricky, such as apostrophes. It's important to check your spelling and to be accurate in your academic work, and when applying for jobs. This guide will show you how to avoid some of the most common errors.

## Some words which people often get mixed up

### **Access / excess**

I was given access to the files.

He always drinks to excess.

### **Accept / except**

I think I will accept the job offer.

I don't like any vegetables, except carrots.

### **Practice / practise**

I was late getting to football practice (noun)

I am going to practise the piano today (verb)

### **Licence / license**

I have a driving licence (noun)

I am licensed to run the pub (verb)

### **Advice / advise**

He gave me some really good advice (noun)

I advise you to think carefully about this (verb)

### **Their / they're / there**

The students sat their exam today.

If they don't hurry up, they're going to be late  
(contraction / short for 'they are')

There were three dogs in the park.

The park is over there.

### **You're / your**

You're going to be late (you are)

Don't forget your keys (the keys belong to you)

### **Who's / whose**

Who's going to the party tonight? (who is)

Whose book is this? (who does the book belong to?)

### **Affect / effect**

How did that affect you? (verb)

What were the effects of that? (noun)

### **Every day / everyday**

I drive to work every day (two words)

I didn't dress up, I just wore my everyday clothes.

### **Were / where / wear / ware / we're**

There were three dogs in the park.

Where did you get that jacket?

Are you going to wear your new jacket?

He had a market stall, selling his wares.

We're going to the park (contraction / short for 'we are')

### **Cite / site / sight**

I am going to cite this author's work in my essay.

That's the site of the new hospital.

He has sight problems and has to see an eye specialist.

**Principle / principal**

The scientific principle states that... (the scientific rule)

The principal finding was that... (the main or most important finding)

**Assure / insure / ensure**

I assure you, these figures are correct.

This policy insures you against accidental damage.

Please ensure that the windows are locked before you leave.

**Whether / weather**

I don't know whether to accept the job offer.

What's the weather like in Salford today?

## Some common misspellings

<b>Academic</b>	Only one C, one D and one M.
<b>Accommodation</b>	Needs two Cs and two Ms.
<b>Achievement</b>	I before E.
<b>Across</b>	Only one C.
<b>A lot</b>	This is two words, not one (not 'alot').
<b>Argument</b>	There's no E after the U.
<b>Definitely</b>	There is no A in definite or definitely
<b>Embarrassing</b>	Two Rs and two Ss.
<b>Necessary</b>	Only one C, but two Ss. Ends – ary, not –ery.
<b>Occurred</b>	Two Cs and two Rs.
<b>Receive</b>	E before I after a C.
<b>Separate</b>	With an A, not an E after the P.
<b>Successful</b>	Two Cs.
<b>Truly</b>	There's no E.
<b>Until</b>	Only one L.
<b>Writing</b>	One T, not two ('written' has two Ts).

# Apostrophes

The apostrophe is a widely misused punctuation mark, and it's important that you use it correctly in your academic work and job applications.

Apostrophes are used to show that somebody owns something, and to show where letters have been omitted from a word. The basics of how to use apostrophes in these circumstances are explained below.

## To show possession of something

The apostrophe is used to show when someone or something owns or possesses something else, such as in these examples:

1. The cat's tail was very long. (the tail belongs to the cat)
2. The boy's bicycle was leaning against the wall. (the bicycle belongs to the boy)
3. Helen's computer was switched off. (the computer belongs to Helen)
4. I was late getting to Steve's birthday party. (the party belonged to Steve)

If something belongs to more than one individual, the apostrophe will be placed after the plural 's', like this:



1. The girls' skirts were rather short. (the skirts belonging to several girls)
2. The dogs' tails wagged. (the tails belonging to several dogs)
3. The Smiths' house was on the market. (the house belonging to the Smith family)

If the 'owner' is already pluralised, such as in the examples below, the apostrophe is placed like this:

1. The children's paintings were very good. (the paintings belonging to several children, 'children' already being plural)
2. The women's group met every Monday night. ('women' is already a plural)

## Missing letters (contractions)

Apostrophes are also used to denote missing letters, such as:

1. We didn't get there in time. (did not)
2. He hasn't been there before. (has not)
3. It really isn't necessary. (is not)
4. The shop won't be open this early. (will not)
5. I don't know why, but I haven't been invited.  
(do not, have not)
6. He'd been waiting all day for the phone to ring. (he had)
7. Julie said she'd meet us at the cinema after work. (she would)

Note that you should not use contractions or shortened versions like this in academic writing or in job applications. Always use the full words.

## Its / it's

This is the exception to the rule, and the only instance where an apostrophe isn't used to show possession of something. You do use an apostrophe, however, to show missing letters.

1. The dog wagged its tail. (the tail belongs to the dog)
2. I sat in the car and revved its engine. (the engine belongs to the car)
3. It's really warm outside today. (contraction / short form of 'it is')
4. I can't believe it's Friday already. (short form of 'it is')

## Common errors with apostrophes

The most common error is the insertion of an apostrophe in a plural. For example:

1. Carrot's and pea's (the correct form is: **carrots and peas**)
2. In the 1980's (this does not need an apostrophe, as it is a plural: in the nineteen eighties. The correct form is: **1980s**)
3. I handed CV's in to three companies (again, this does not need an apostrophe as it is a

plural. The correct way of writing this is: **I handed CVs in to three companies)**

4. I have eight GCSE's (the correct version is: **I have eight GCSEs**).

Another common error is to miss apostrophes out entirely:

1. I borrowed Claires hat for the wedding.  
(Should be: **I borrowed Claire's hat for the wedding**)
2. I wont be going out tonight, Ive got to finish my essay. (Should be: **I won't be going out tonight, I've got to finish my essay**)

## And finally...

Don't forget to use your computer's spellchecker (accessed by pressing the F7 key in Word documents). This is a useful tool which picks up spelling and grammatical errors. However, it won't find everything, and is not a substitute for proof reading your assignment or job application. For example, look at the sentence below:

I attended the pear teaching session.

The writer means to say, "I attended the peer teaching session". However, as 'pear' is a real word, the computer is unable to pick this error up. So, if you have used the incorrect word, but it is still an actual word, spellchecker won't be able to help you. It cannot understand the words themselves or the context in which you are using them. You must proof read your work!

If you struggle with spelling and grammar, you might find the factsheets and self-tests on the BBC's Skillswise website useful. Visit [www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise](http://www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise) for more information.

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