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CHAPTER 1

Finger's crossed

Apostrophes

The twentieth century saw the rise of the much reviled 'greengrocer's apostrophe', with apostrophes turning up in words such as *tomatoe's* and *banana's*, where they had no business to be. The twenty-first century has gone one further and, in certain circles, called for the apostrophe to be abolished altogether – on the surely-not-very-flattering-to-most-of-us grounds that it is 'too difficult' for people to understand.

Oh, *puh-leeze*.

Shortly after I'd written the above, I came across an advertisement for a ferry company that invited me to *reserve this years' [sic] sailings* by paying a small deposit. A day or two later a colleague wrote to ask if I could help her with something and ended her message *Finger's crossed* (an anatomical impossibility, I'd have thought). So clearly there is confusion out there.

Whole books have been written about the use and misuse of apostrophes, which seems to me to add

fuel to the 'it's all too difficult' fire. The rules can be summarized, in perhaps a rather simplistic way, as 'The apostrophe does two things. It indicates possession or association; and it indicates that a letter is missing.' Yes, of course, there is more to it than that, and you can dig back into Old English if you like, but it'll do as a rule of thumb.

To deal with 'possession' first:

- If you want to show that something belongs to or is in some way connected with a (single) person or thing, add apostrophe + s to the 'owner':

David's football kit (= the football kit belonging to David)

Beethoven's Fifth (= the fifth symphony that Beethoven wrote)

the doctor's surgery (= the surgery where the doctor works)

- If it belongs to more than one person or thing, indicated by a plural ending in s, add an apostrophe after the s:

the boys' football kit (= the kit belonging to the boys; if it was an individual boy it would be *boy's*)

the composers' works (= the works of Beethoven, Bach and all the rest of them; if you are just talking about Beethoven it is *the composer's works*)

the doctors' surgery (there is more than one doctor)

- When a plural doesn't end in s, add apostrophe + s:

children's games (= the games that children play)

the geese's honking (= the honking sound that the geese make)

- This applies even when the plural is the same as the singular:

sheep's clothing could refer to any number of sheep, or to just the one – you have to work this out from the context. The point to remember is that the plural of *sheep* is *sheep*, not *sheeps*, so you can't have *sheeps' clothing*, however many wolves you are trying to fit into it.

Complications arise with names ending in s: do you add apostrophe + s or just the apostrophe? *Dickens' novels* or *Dickens's novels*? *James' style* or *James's style*? There is no hard and fast rule about this, but generally speaking use *apostrophe + s* with words of up to two syllables (*Tess's bank account*, *Thomas's debts*) and just the apostrophe with longer ones (*Coriolanus' mother*, *Demetrius' lover*).

How do you deal with nouns ending in *s*?

If the singular form of a noun ends in *h*, *s*, *x* or *z*, you normally add *-es* to make it plural (*one church, two churches; one address, a book full of addresses; one fox, a pack of foxes; one waltz, a dance programme full of waltzes*). No apostrophe is required unless you want to indicate possession or association: *the fox's howling* (just the one fox), *the foxes' howling* (likely to be pretty noisy). The sign on a hoarding round my local shopping centre advising me that *business's are open as usual* had slipped in a random and unnecessary piece of punctuation.

If a name ends in *-ses*, whether singular or plural, or if the last syllable is pronounced *-eeze*, stick to the apostrophe: *Moses' commandments, the Joneses' party, Socrates' questions*.

And, if it all starts to become a bit of a mouthful, rephrase: *the plays of Aristophanes*; not *Brutus's death* but *the death of Marcus Brutus*.

Something missing

Won't, can't, shan't, isn't, aren't – if you write these words out formally, they all end in *not*: *will not, cannot, shall not, is not, are not*. In speech and in casual writing,

we abbreviate them and the apostrophes indicate that the *o* of *not* is missing.

It's a bit of a challenge, she's standing in the way, he's either going to hit her or drive into the ditch – the apostrophes indicate the missing *i* in *it is, she is* and *he is*.

We're going to be late. I'll phone to see if they've left yet – the apostrophes show that there are letters missing from *we are, I will (or shall), they have*.

Apostrophes also show that something has been left out of dates: *the 1980s and '90s*. But they aren't necessary when an *s* is added to a date or to an abbreviation: *the 1950s, my collection of CDs, PDFs*. Nor, to revert to the subject of greengrocers, are they required simply because a word ends in a vowel: there may well be confusion about whether or not to put an *e* in *avocados, bananas, potatoes* or *tomatoes*, but there is definitely no need for an apostrophe.

If in doubt about whether or not to put in an apostrophe, remind yourself of the rules given above and ask yourself if inserting an apostrophe would serve a purpose. If not, leave it out.