Apostrophes (‘) are most commonly used to indicate possession, contraction, and/or omission. They are also used to pluralize letters and numbers, to abbreviate years, and to show regional pronunciation. It is not used to show the plurals of nouns.

**Possession**

Apostrophes show who possesses something, how many of them possess it, and what they possess. The following rules apply to nouns as well as to any indefinite pronouns that end with “one” or “body” (e.g. someone or anybody). When using apostrophes for possession, only use them for nouns and not for possessive personal pronouns (e.g. yours, his, her, its, our, their, whose) or third person singular verbs (e.g. she eats).

- Correct: The *cat’s* toys were underneath the fridge.
- Incorrect: *Who’s* toys were underneath the fridge?
  - Correct: *Whose* toys were underneath the fridge?
  - The same is true for *hers, his, theirs, ours,* and *its* (not her’s, his’s, their’s, our’s, and it’s)
- EXCEPTION: Common nouns that are buildings, inanimate objects, or furniture do not need to be made possessive (garage door, not garage’s door)

**Singular Possessive:** When only one noun (e.g. Jesse) owns something, add an apostrophe followed by an *s* to the end of the noun.

- Example: *Jesse’s* cat tried to get underneath the fridge.
- If a singular noun already ends in an *s* (e.g., James), you have two options: to follow the apostrophe plus *s* format (James’s) used for other singular nouns (this is preferred) or to simply add an apostrophe after the final *s* (James’).
  - Be consistent with the format you choose. Be aware that custom calls for just an apostrophe with Zeus, Moses, and Jesus: Zeus’ thunderbolts, Moses’ staff, Jesus’ teachings.

**Plural Possessive:** For plural nouns that end with an *s*, the possessive is formed by adding only an apostrophe.

- Correct: The *two friends’* pets were named Max, Rufus, and Growlie.
- Incorrect: The *two friends’s* pets were named Max, Rufus, and Growlie.

When two people possess something jointly, add an apostrophe and *s* (if appropriate) to the second of the two nouns.

- Example: Jesse and James’ pets were named Max, Rufus, and Growlie
  - Susan and Ann’s pets were named Odie, Kirby, and George.

To show that two people possess two or more things separately, use an apostrophe with *s* (if appropriate) on both of the nouns.

- Example: Susan’s and James’ tests were both well done.
  - Ann’s and Jesse’s cars were both very old.
- LANGUAGE DIFFERENCE: Unlike some other languages like Spanish and French, in English the number of items possessed does not influence plural or singular possession. It doesn’t matter if Jesse has one cat or one hundred cats; it would still read “*Jesse’s* one hundred cats” and not “*Jesse’s* one hundred cats.”
Contractions
Apostrophes are also used to show where one or multiple letters have been removed in contractions. Knowing how to form contractions is important because they can sometimes be misinterpreted (the contraction “I’ll” without the apostrophe is just the word “Ill” as in “sick”).

- Correct: Cannot → Can’t; I will → I’ll; They have → They’ve
- Incorrect: Cannot → Cant; I will → Ill; They have → Theyve
- EXCEPTION: Since contractions are considered less formal, using them in academic papers is often discouraged. Check the assignment or ask your instructor for clarification.

For a list of common contractions and their meanings, visit San Jose State University’s Writing Center: http://www.sjsu.edu/writingcenter/docs/Contractions.pdf

A Note on “Its vs. It’s”
“Its” is a possessive personal pronoun, while “It’s” is a contraction of “it is.”

- Example: “It’s (contraction of “it is”) a pear tree, and its (possessive personal pronoun) flowers are blooming right now.
  - The first “it” refers to what the tree is, while the second refers to something that it possesses.
- EXCEPTION: If you are using the sentence construction “It’s got,” the “it’s” is a contraction of “it has.” Even though the “it” in your sentence possesses something, it is not a possessive personal pronoun. If in doubt, try substituting another possessive personal pronoun to check what form of speech you’re using.
  - Example: “It’s got pies” makes sense, as does “she’s got pies.” However, “her got pies” does not make sense because verbs do not follow possessive personal pronouns.

Pluralizing Letters
Finally, apostrophes can be used to make the plural form of single lowercase letters. To do this, add an apostrophe followed by an s.

- Example: Mississippi has a lot of i's and s's in it.
In these cases, the apostrophe placement signals plurality. This prevents confusion with letters like “i’s,” which, without the apostrophe, would just be “is.” This format is not usually used for capital letters (Gs), symbols (#s), or numbers (the 1920s).

- EXCEPTION: Years can be abbreviated and therefore need apostrophes. If you do this, follow the rules for a contraction and use an apostrophe to indicate where the dropped numerals are.
  - Example: The 1920s → The ’20s
  - Example: Where were you in ’62?
- Keep in mind that years can be used as nouns, which means they can be possessive as well.
  - Example: 1969’s moon landing was a landmark event.

Works Consulted:
Purdue University Online Writing Lab (https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/); Azusa Pacific University Writing Center (http://www.apu.edu/writingcenter/resources/); The Longman Pocket Writer’s Companion, 3rd ed. (Anson, Schwegler, and Muth); Writing: A College Handbook, 4th ed. (Heffernan and Lincoln)