

## APOSTROPHE TROUBLE: WHEN TO USE OR NOT

### Its or It's? Whose or Who's? Your or You're? There, Their or They're?

These homophones (sound-alikes) pose vexing questions for many writers: even if we know the difference (but maybe can't explain it), we often make typographical errors and insert one when we mean the other.

#### The difference: possessive versus contractions

Possessive pronouns modify nouns and indicate possession of those nouns

*Whose car is that? The car belongs to Gary.*

Contractions are a written manifestation of spoken language, in which letters are omitted to facilitate pronunciation; the missing letters are replaced with an apostrophe.

*Who's the owner of that car?* = Who is *the owner* (an apostrophe replaces the "i" in "is")

#### Examples

Its/It's

*The cat hurt its paw.* (the paw of the cat: possessive )

*It's the cat purring.* (it is: contraction)

Whose/Who's

*Whose car is that?* (to whom does it belong: possessive)

*Who's the owner of this car?* (who is: contraction)

Your/You're

Is that your cat? (to whom does it belong? possessive)

You're the owner of that cat? (who is: contraction)

#### Strategies

When in doubt, rephrase!

1. Ask yourself if the word in question can be rephrased as a possessive phrase, "of the [blank]," or a being phrase, "[blank] is";
2. "of the [blank]," no apostrophe; "[blank] is," apostrophe required

Proofread any piece of writing one time through solely for instances of such words.

### There, Their or They're?

The first indicates place or location: *Put the box over **there**.*

The second indicates possession: *Put **their** box in a separate place.*

The third is a contraction for "they are": ***They're** in the kitchen.*

**They're** (contraction) putting **their** (possessive) boxes over **there** (location).