**5.1 Apostrophes in Plurals**

**key words**: punctuation, apostrophes, plural, writing errors

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.1b Form and use regular and irregular plural nouns. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/1/b>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.2d Form and use possessives. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/2/d>

We know that apostrophes mark possession (also see 5.1a on possessive apostrophe variation), as in the *dog’s bowl,* and contraction or deletion of letters, as in *don’t* from *do not*. Can apostrophes ever be used before a plural *-s*? They certainly used to be. The plural of *potato* was spelled *potato’s* in the 18th century. And the great dictionary writer Samuel Johnson offers *grotto’s* and *innuendo’s* as the plurals of those words in his 1755 dictionary (Crystal, p. 88).

As for how to do it in the 21st century? Well, the jury is out on some words. You find variations, and even grammar and usage guides differ on the recommendations. It used to be the case that an apostrophe was used in plurals when it attached to abbreviations, acronyms, numbers, or letters, so you find examples like the following:

Please bring all your old **CD’s** to the yard sale.

I got 3 **A’s** on my report card!

The **1960’s** was an important decade for equal rights.

This practice of using the apostrophe in such plurals is less common than in used to be, however, so all of the examples above are also ok, and maybe now even preferred, without the apostrophes:

Please bring all your old **CDs** to the yard sale.

I got 3 **As** on my report card!

The **1960s** was an important decade for equal rights.

  
Because we do see apostrophes to mark certain plurals, some other apostrophes slip in where they are not “supposed” to be because, well, some words look odd without a separation of the word from its suffix. We find these especially with words that end in vowels, like *skis* or *menus.*



Go on an apostrophe treasure hunt, collecting examples from your school, your town, your grocery store. Bring in examples of apostrophes that you think may be examples of errors or an example of a variation (where there is more than one correct possibility).

**5.1a More on Apostrophes**

**key words**: punctuation, apostrophes, its/it’s, writing errors

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.1b Form and use regular and irregular plural nouns. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/1/b>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.2d Form and use possessives. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/2/d>

The basic convention of the possessive apostrophe is straightforward: insert an apostrophe before an <s> and before another noun when that noun is owned by or “possessed” by the first noun.

a child’s shoe

your aunt’s house

And when the word is plural, so already ends in -s, the basic rules are still straightforward:

* add -’s to a singular – *cat’s hat*
* unless the word is a plural already ending in <s>, and then, just add an apostrophe – *cats’ hats*

So that seems easy enough – why then do some of us have problems? Because there is variation in how to do it “correctly” with some words. The standards vary. For example, what do you do when the word is singular (or a mass or collective noun), but ends in -s, such as *molasses*, *hippopotamus, walrus, octopus, boss,* or *floss*. Should an <s> be added after the apostrophe when these singular nouns indicate possession? Is it *the boss’ friend* or *the boss’s friend?* It actually depends on who (or whom!) you ask. *The Associated Press Stylebook* recommends omitting the *-’s* after the apostrophe in singular words ending in <s>, but, *The Chicago Manual of Style*, says that if the <s> at the end of a singular word is pronounced, the possessive is formed by adding *-’s*. So pronunciation matters? To some, but not too others, so this leads to confusion about the rule. And what happens, for example, if it’s spelled with <x>, which is of course pronounced “ks”? It should probably be *a fox’s tail*, not *a fox’ tail*, don’t you think?

Is there any rule we can just agree on and follow? Yes, and it’s one of the most common errors in writing - the pronoun *its*, which is often written erroneously as *it’s*. None of the possessive pronouns or possessive determiners use apostrophes: *mine, yours, his, hers, its, ours, theirs*. (See Lesson 1.7a on pronouns and determiners.) Most of us would have no problem with this rule if it weren’t for the contraction of *it* and *is* to *it’s*; so we’re used to seeing the word *it’s*, and we know that apostrophes indicate possession*.* It’s an easy slip to make. Somewhat less common, but also prevalent is *who’s* instead of *whose*: *Who’s hat is that*? might not look so wrong, but the standard version would be *Whose book*, using the possessive determiner.

**Is it *its* or *it’s*?**

1. \_\_\_\_\_ about time you showed up!
2. It was \_\_\_\_\_ first time out of the cage.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ feet were covered with sand.
4. Get up, \_\_\_\_\_ time for school.
5. I’m glad to see you; \_\_\_\_\_ been a long time.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ important to study hard for tests.
7. The bear protected \_\_\_\_\_ cubs.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ my turn to go down the slide.
9. The dog seemed to like \_\_\_\_\_ new hair cut.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ too late to eat dinner.
11. My car is old and \_\_\_\_\_ paint is peeling.
12. The bird realized that the wind had blown \_\_\_\_\_ nest away.

[Teacher notes: Proper nouns seem to cause a host of other problems. *Fowler’s Modern English Usage*, first published in 1892, recommends omitting the <s> after the apostrophe only for names ending in an “*iz”* sound, as in *Bridges’*. Do they mean just “an *iz* sound”? What about just “z” as in *Jones*? Is it *the Jones’ house* or *the Jones’s house*? And this example is especially interesting because there is more than one way to pronounce it, with one syllable or two. And we seem to want to make the spelling with an additional <s> correspond to the additional syllable. So if you say “jownziz,” you might feel better spelling it *Jones’s*, but if you say “jownz”, you might want to spell it *Jones’*. And the style guides – some of them – will agree. Some of them try to simplify the rules, giving a single rule, but then you end up with words that just don’t seem to fit. And finally, a very strange rule of many style guides with respect to the possessive of proper names is that ancient names or important, historical, or classical names that end in <s> should end with an apostrophe alone; so, *Moses’* sandals, *Jesus’* friend, *Venus’* name*.* But *The Chicago Manual of Style*, for instance, doesn’t follow this rule, offering *Aristophanes’s plays* and *Zeus’s* wife*.* Such a rule is, of course, subjective too, raising the question of how old is ancient or who should be considered important enough? One of the reasons there are so many “errors” of apostrophe usage is because there is a great deal of variation, even among writers of edited academic English.]

**5.2 Commas with Items in a Series**

(adapted from “Punctuation and Grammar” article (working title), by Kristin Denham, under submission)

**key words**: punctuation, commas, variation

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.2a Use punctuation to separate items in a series <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/2/a>

You may be aware of the two ways of writing items in a series, with either a comma before *and* or no comma before *and.*

I ate the crackers with a banana, peanut butter**,** and jam.

↑

The comma before *and* or another conjunction is known as the Oxford comma (because Oxford University Press uses it) or the serial comma. Opinions vary among writers and editors about whether this final comma should be used. It is more common in American English than in British English writing, but usage varies in the U.S. as well. *The* *Chicago Manual of Style* recommends its use, while *The Associated Press Style Guide* (and therefore most journalistic writing) says to avoid it, unless doing so results in ambiguity. Consider the following sentence:

I went to the LSA meeting with Anne, a linguist, and a horseback rider.

This is ambiguous, of course, because it is not clear whether *a linguist* is an appositive describing Anne, or is the second person in a list of three different people. When we remove the final comma, we lose the possibility that *a linguist* is an appositive, but still have the possibility that we have three separate people attending the meeting.

I went to the LSA meeting with Anne, a linguist and a horseback rider.

And we now have the possibility that Anne is both a linguist and a horseback rider, so there is ambiguity both with and without the final comma. We can, of course, change the wording to remove the ambiguity.

What do you think? Should we always keep the comma before *and* with items in a series to avoid the possibility of ambiguity? Or should we only put it in when the sentence could potentially be misinterpreted?

Semicolons are used to separate items in a series when those items contain commas. For example,

The meeting was attended by Ms. Sue Allen-Schmidt, professor of engineering; Mr. Jorge Rivera, director of marketing; and Ms. Jo Dorling, vice president of manufacturing.

[There are some pretty good online semicolon quizzes that your students might enjoy, after covering this lesson, and the one on semicolons in clauses (Lesson 5.3).

<http://depts.dyc.edu/learningcenter/owl/exercises/semicolons_ex1.htm>]

**5.3 Punctuating Complex Clauses**

**key words:** punctuation, commas, semicolons, independent clause, coordination, coordinating conjunction, conjunctive adverb

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.1h Use coordinating and subordinating conjunctions. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/1/h>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.1i Produce simple, compound, and complex sentences.

<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/1/i>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.1f Produce complete sentences, recognizing and correcting inappropriate fragments and run-ons <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/1/f>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.2c Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction in a compound sentence. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/2/c>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.1a Explain the function of conjunctions, prepositions, and interjections in general and their function in particular sentences. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/1/a>

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.6](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/6/) Acquire and use accurately grade-appropriate general academic and domain-specific words and phrases, including those that signal contrast, addition, and other logical relationships (e.g., *however, although, nevertheless, similarly, moreover, in addition*). <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/6>

There are several different ways to combine two independent clauses into a longer, coordinated clause. Lesson 5.4 introduces the idea of differing punctuation resulting in different meanings. (For a review of how to identify independent clauses, see Lessons 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3.)

One way to conjoin two independent clauses is to use a **coordinating conjunction***.* There is a small group of these in English (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet,* and *so,* which you can remember with the acronym FANBOYS). When you use one of these, you simply put a comma after the first clause and before the conjunction.

[I really want to sleep late this morning], and [I really don’t want to go to school].

[My sister wants a dog], but [she also wants a cat].

However, some usage guides will tell you that when the independent clauses are “short,” commas aren’t necessary. But what’s short enough? It’s not necessarily clear.

Boo ate lunch, but Roo didn’t.

Boo ate lunch but Roo didn’t.

Either of these ways of punctuating is acceptable, but since they each contain two independent clauses and a conjunction, it’s always going to be considered correctly punctuated to have the comma.

Coordinating conjunctions don’t only conjoin clauses, they conjoin all of the other content categories, such as nouns (*dogs and cats*), adjectives (*big and tall*), adverbs (*quickly but sloppily*), verbs (*running or skipping*). And conjunctions always conjoin two phrases of the same category. Similarly, correlative conjunctions (like *either…or,* see Lesson 2.9) compare two like categories.

Semicolons too can be used to conjoin independent clauses, but then a **conjunctive adverb** comes in between them, not a conjunction. Conjunctive adverbs are words like *however, therefore, thus, consequently, hence, furthermore, indeed,* or *likewise*. Such clause linkers are common in formal academic English.

Boris attempted to climb the wall; however, he failed.

You can also use a semicolon without a conjunctive adverb.

Boris attempted to climb the wall; he failed.

But you **cannot** have simply a comma with the coordinating conjunction. That is called a **comma splice** or a **run-on** sentence, and is considered a fairly serious error in most forms of writing.

not ok: Boo ate lunch, Roo did not.

Using the following pairs of simple clauses, combine them in two different ways, using first a semicolon and a conjunctive adverb and then a comma and a conjunction.

We walked to the store. We bought marshmallows.

It is important to always wear a seatbelt. Seatbelts save lives.

Walking to work is good for the environment. It is good for your health.

My cousins arrived from Missoula. We were excited about their visit.

**5.4 Choosing Punctuation for Effect**

**key words**: punctuation, commas, meaning, semicolon

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.3b Choose punctuation for effect <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/3/b>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.1a Explain the function of conjunctions, prepositions, and interjections in general and their function in particular sentences. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/1/a>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.3a Expand, combine, and reduce sentences for meaning, reader/listener interest, and style. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/3/a>

There is not always a single correct way to punctuate a sentence. There are, for example, a great many ways to combine two independent clauses to make a coordinated complex clause.

Recall that an independent clause is a clause that has a subject, and you can use the Tag Question test (Lesson 2.1) and the Subject-Auxiliary Inversion test (Lesson 2.2) to find the subject of the independent clause.

Now, let’s take two independent clauses:

I went to the store. I forgot to buy bread.

And combine them into a single sentence.

There are many correct ways to do it. Here are just a few.

I went to the store, but I forgot to buy bread.

I went to the store; however, I forgot to buy bread.

I went to the store; I forgot to buy bread.

Discuss how the various ways of punctuating convey different meaning and focus.

**5.5 Commas and Relative Clauses: Restrictive and Non-Restrictive Relative Clauses**

**key words**: punctuation, relative clauses, restrictive and non-restrictive, commas

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.2](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/2/) Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

Relative clauses are clauses (so they contain a subject and a predicate) that describe, or modify, a noun. They fall into two classes, **restrictive** and **nonrestrictive.** The restrictive ones limit, or “restrict” what the noun refers to.

The realtor who is selling our house is really nice.

The place where we go on vacation is usually San Juan Island.

The child who is juggling wants to be in the circus.

Nonrestrictive relative clauses, on the other hand – though they might provide similar information – do not **restrict** the reference of the noun in the same way as restrictive relative clauses. In writing, nonrestrictive relative clauses are set off by commas, and you can also usually detect “comma intonation” in a speaker’s voice, distinguishing the two types.

**restrictive**: The toys which we bought recently from a friend were not too expensive.

**nonrestrictive**: The toys, which we bought recently from a friend, were not too expensive.

The restrictive relative clause, *which we bought recently from a friend*, limits which toys we’re referring to, to the ones we bought recently from a friend. The non-restrictive relative clause, on the other hand, does not restrict the reference of the noun *toys;* it isn’t information that distinguishes those toys from other toys. That we bought the toys from a friend is simply extra information.

Identify the relative clauses in the following sentences and then determine whether they are restrictive or non-restrictive by putting commas around the non-restrictive ones. Many of them could be both, but the meaning would be slightly different. If that’s the case, briefly explain the difference.

The child from your class who has that new backpack is walking towards us.

The store only allows returns that are less than 30 days old.

The shoes which I had bought five weeks ago could not be returned.

The money is in my wallet which is on my desk.

The girl who is going to buy our Wii is coming over later today.

Sue who is going to buy our Wii is coming over later today.

**Teacher Notes:** There is a rule of writing that suggests that *which* should be used with non-restrictive relative clauses and *that* with restrictive relative clauses. This rule, however, varies, by style guides and editors, and is also a fairly recent restriction. Both *which* and *that* are and have been common for centuries with restrictive relative clauses. Most speakers and writers would agree that it sounds odd, however, to use *that* in a non-restrictive relative clause.

Cupcakes, that I love, are on sale at the bakery.