



Mark Diamond's

Writing to Command Attention! Workshops & Anyone Can Write Books

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Forming Possessives of Singular Nouns

This is one of the most often-confused aspects of writing today: How do you show the possessive form of a singular noun? Is it “the boss’ desk” or is it “the boss’s desk”? Read on, and see if our examples help you today.

To form the possessive of a singular noun *not* ending in an *s* sound, add an apostrophe plus *s* to the noun. (But you knew all these...)

my lawyer’s advice
my child’s teacher
Tulabelle’s haircut
Mr. and Mrs. Snerd’s woodpile
Illinois’s politicians
Arkansas’s former governor
Des Moines’s mayor
the corps’s leadership

To form the possessive of a singular noun that ends in an *s* sound, be guided by the way you pronounce the word.

If a new syllable is formed in the pronunciation of the possessive, add an apostrophe plus *s*.

your boss’s approval
the witness’s reply
Ms. Lopez’s application
Mr. and Mrs. Morris’s plane tickets
St. Louis’s airport
Dallas’s football team
Congress’s failures

If the addition of an extra syllable would make a word ending in an *s* hard to pronounce, add the apostrophe only.

Officer Phillips’ water ski
Judge Hastings’ decision
the Burroughs’ condominium
Los Angeles’ freeways
New Orleans’ restaurants
Jesus’ parables
Moses’ flight from Egypt (it was ‘grounded’ but arrived nevertheless)
for goodness’ sake

Achilles' heel [but: Achilles tendon]

NOTE: Individual differences in pronunciation will affect the way some of these possessives are written. For example, if you pronounce the possessive form of *Perkins* as two syllables, you will write *Mr. Perkins' kindness*; if you pronounce the possessive of *Perkins* as three syllables, you will write *Mr. Perkins's kindness*. The important thing is to listen to your own pronunciation. When you hear yourself pronounce the possessive of *boss* as two syllables (*boss's*) and the possessive of *witness* as three (*witness's*), you will not be tempted to write *your boss' approval* or *the witness' reply*. Naturally, tradition should take precedence over your ear. For example, the U.S. ambassador to Great Britain is appointed to the *Court of St. James's* (not, as you might expect, *Court of St. James*).

When forming the possessive of any noun ending in *s* (for example, *Mr. Hodges*), always place the apostrophe at the end of the original word, never within it.

Mr. Hodges' message (not: Mr. Hodge's message)

Source: The Gregg Reference Manual.