

Possessive Nouns

Introduction

Possessive nouns indicate the possessor or owner of something. Consider the following:

the programmers' code
the teachers' comments
the students' demands
the bosses' meeting

the programmer's code
the teacher's comments
the student's demands
the boss's meeting
the woman's suggestion
the women's suggestion
the child's mother
the children's mother

Confusion is caused by the fact that ownership is indicated by **'s** or by **s'**. But there is no need for confusion.

There are two simple rules that let you know whether to use **'s** or **s'**.

Rules

Rule 1: For plural nouns that end in **s**, simply add an apostrophe.

Here are some example sentences.

The manager was delighted with the **programmers' code** and rewarded them very well.

Here the **code** belonged to the **programmers** (a plural word ending in **s**).

Several **teachers' comments** last semester were extremely positive.

Here the **comments** belonged to the **teachers** (a plural word ending in **s**).

The **students' demands** were met when they agreed to return to class.

Here the **demands** belonged to the **students** (a plural word ending in **s**).

The **bosses' meeting** went longer than expected because they all presented long reports.

Here the meeting **belonged** to the **bosses** (a plural word ending in **s**).

Rule 2: For all other nouns, whether they are plural or not, add **'s**.

Here are some example sentences.

The manager was delighted with the **programmer's work** and rewarded her very well.

Here the **work** belonged to the **programmer**.

That **teacher's comments** last semester were extremely positive.

Here the **comments** belonged to the **teacher**.

The **student's demands** were met when she agreed to return to class.

Here the **demands** belonged to the **student**.

The **boss's meeting** went longer than expected because she presented a long report.

Here the **meeting** belonged to the **boss**.

The **woman's suggestion** was liked by the entire class.

Here the suggestion belonged to the **woman**.

The **women's suggestion** was very creative.

Here the **suggestion** belonged to the **women**.

The **child's father** arrived at the school before noon.
Here the **father** belonged to the **child**.

The **children's mother** walked to the museum.
Here the **mother** belonged to the **children**.

Trouble Spots

Possessive Pronouns

Note that the rules refer to nouns. They do not refer to pronouns. Possessive pronouns are already possessive and never need an apostrophe.

Here are some example sentences.

The cat licked **its** paw.
That car of **yours** is wonderful.
The idea was **ours**.
I know **whose** artwork was chosen.

Adjectival Phrases

Sometimes words are used to describe a noun but if you are not careful you might think the words form a possessive phrase. Here are some example sentences.

The **information systems** analyst worked throughout the night.
Here **information systems** is an adjectival phrase describing the analyst. The **information system** does not own the analyst and so no apostrophe is required.

The **roadworks supervisor** collapsed in the unbearable heat.
Here **roadworks** is describing the supervisor. The **roadworks** do not own the supervisor and so no apostrophe is required.

The **computer systems** analyst was very conscientious.
Here **computer systems** is an adjectival phrase describing the analyst. The **computer system** does not own the analyst and so no apostrophe is required.

Hint

You can replace possessive nouns (for example **boss's**) with possessive pronouns (for example **her**) but you cannot replace the adjectival phrases with possessive pronouns.

Here are some example sentences.

Instead of writing

The **boss's** meeting went longer than expected because he presented a long report.

you could write

Her meeting went longer than expected because he presented a long report.

So, too, instead of writing

The manager was delighted with the **programmers'** work and rewarded them very well.

you could write

The manager was delighted with **their** work and rewarded them very well.

But, you cannot sensibly change

The **information systems analyst** worked throughout the night.

to

Its analyst worked throughout the night.

Nor can you sensibly change

The **roadworks supervisor** collapsed in the unbearable heat.

to

Its supervisor collapsed in the unbearable heat.

Plurals

Introduction

The plural form of most nouns is formed simply by adding the letter **s**.

an apple	some apples
a book	some books
a day	some days
an edge	some edges
an epoch	some epochs
a face	some faces
a house	some houses
a Jackson	some Jacksons
a Joan	some Joans
a pear	some pears
a Peter	some Peters
a prize	some prizes
a school	some schools
a ski	some skis
a Smith	some Smiths
a stereo	some stereos

There are several other rules for forming plural nouns. Some common rules are given in this lesson. If you are not sure how to form a plural from a singular noun after reviewing this lesson, consult a dictionary for the word you are interested in.

Final sounds

s/sh/ch/x/z

For words that end in a hissing sound, like **s**, **sh**, **ch**, **x** or **z**, add **es**.

a boss	some bosses
a box	some boxes
a brush	some brushes

a buzz	some buzzes
a church	some churches
a crash	some crashes
a cross	some crosses
a fox	some foxes
a gas	some gases
a Jones	some Joneses
a Kirsch	some Kirshes
a kiss	some kisses
a loss	some losses
a match	some matches
a mess	some messes
a peach	some peaches
a Schultz	some Schultzes
a stitch	some stitches
a tax	some taxes
a wish	some wishes

But beware! Some words ending in just one **z** must have the **z** doubled before the **es** is added. So, the plural of **quiz** is **quizzes**. Also, the word **fish** usually has the plural form **fish** and the plural of **ox** is **oxen**. When in doubt, use a dictionary.

consonant + y

For words that end in a consonant followed by a **y** change the **y** to **i** and add **es**.

a baby	some babies
a city	some cities
a cherry	some cherries
a cry	some cries
a curry	some curries
an enemy	some enemies
a faculty	some faculties
a fly	some flies
a gallery	some galleries
a lady	some ladies
a nappy	some nappies
a party	some parties
a penny	some pennies
a poppy	some poppies
a spy	some spies

But beware! For nouns referring to people or places and ending in a consonant followed by a **y**, form the plural by simply adding **s**. So, the plural of **Kennedy** is **Kennedys**, the plural of **Mary** is **Marys** and the plural of **Albany** is **Albanys**.

Note! The plural form of **soliloquy** is also formed by changing **y** to **i** and adding **es** to make **soliloquies**.

o

For words that end in an **o** you will usually need to add an **s**. Take notice of the following guidelines.

For nouns that end in a vowel followed by an **o**, simply add an **s**

a stereo	some stereos
a studio	some studios
a duo	some duos
a zoo	some zoos
a kangaroo	some kangaroos

For musical terms ending in **o**, simply add an **s**.

a cello	some cellos
a concerto	some concertos
a piano	some pianos
a solo	some solos
a soprano	some sopranos

For most nouns that end in a consonant followed by an **o** also simply add **s**, but note some common exceptions that require the addition of **es**.

a domino	some dominoes
an echo	some echoes
an embargo	some embargoes
a hero	some heroes
a potato	some potatoes
a tomato	some tomatoes

fe/lf/f

For nouns that end in **fe** or **lf**, change the **f** to **v** and add an **s**.

a knife	some knives
a calf	some calves
a life	some lives
an elf	some elves
a wife	some wives
a half	some halves
a shelf	some shelves
a wolf	some wolves

For most other nouns ending in **f** simply add **s**.

a chief	some chiefs
a puff	some puffs
an oaf	some oafs
a bluff	some bluffs

But note some common exceptions where the **f** is changed to **v** and **es** is added.

a leaf	some leaves
a loaf	some loaves
a thief	some thieves
a sheaf	some sheaves

Word Forms

archaic forms

Some nouns are derived from archaic (old) forms of English and maintain their archaic plural form.

a child	some children	a foot	some feet
a man	some men	a goose	some geese
an ox	some oxen	a tooth	some teeth
a woman	some women		
a louse	some lice		
a mouse	some mice		
a person	some people		

foreign forms

us -> i

For most Latin words that end in **us** you can change the **us** to **i**.

a bacillus	some bacilli
a cactus	some cacti
a focus	some foci
a fungus	some fungi
a nucleus	some nuclei
an octopus	some octopi

a radius	some radii
a stimulus	some stimuli
a syllabus	some syllabi
a terminus	some termini

Note! for words that are in common usage it has also become acceptable to simply add **es** to form the plural. So, for example, it is acceptable to write **cactuses**. Some more scientific terms must have the **us** changed to **i** to form the plural. So, for example, it is necessary to write **bacilli** and **stimuli**. If in doubt about a particular word, consult a dictionary.

Beware! the plural of **corpus** can be **corpora** or **corpuses** and the plural of **genus** is **genera**.

is -> es

For Greek words that end in **is** change the **i** to **e**.

an analysis	some analyses
an axis	some axes
a basis	some bases
a crisis	some crises
a diagnosis	some diagnoses
an emphasis	some emphases
a hypothesis	some hypotheses
a neurosis	some neuroses
an oasis	some oases
a parenthesis	some parentheses
a synopsis	some synopses
a thesis	some theses

um, on -> a

For Latin or Greek words that end in **um** or **on** you can change the **um** or **on** to **a** to form the plural. The words below must be changed in this way.

an addendum	some addenda
a bacterium	some bacteria
a criteria	some criteria
an erratum	some errata
an ovum	some ova
a phenomenon	some phenomena

um, on->s

For some of the Latin or Greek words that end in **um** or **on** you can change the **um** or **on** to **a** or simply add an **s** to form the plural. The words below can be changed in this way.

an automaton	some automata	or	some automatons
a curriculum	some curricula	or	some curriculums
a medium	some media	or	some mediums
a memorandum	some memoranda	or	some memorandums
a symposium	some symposia	or	some symposiums
a stratum	some strata	or	some stratums

Note! The word **data** is the plural form of **datum**. However, the use of **data** as the both the plural and singular form is now accepted practice.

ex, ix -> ices

For Latin words ending in **ex** or **ix** change the ending to **ices**. However, you can also simply add **es**.

an index	some indices	or	some indexes
an appendix	some appendices	or	some appendixes
an apex	some apices	or	some apexes
a matrix	some matrices	or	some matrixes
a vortex	some vortices	or	some vortexes

Unchanging

same Form

Some nouns have the same form for the singular and the plural. Here are some examples:

an aircraft	some aircraft
a deer	some deer
a fish	some fish
that headquarters	some headquarters
a moose	some moose
an offspring	some offspring
a sheep	some sheep
a species	some species
a trout	some trout

a swine

some swine

Note! For nouns referring to animals with a variety of species, a different plural form is sometimes given when referring to several species. So, you can write **This stream contains several fishes** if you mean that there are different species of fish in the stream.

look plural-singular verb

Some nouns look as though they are plural but they take a singular verb and they have no special singular form. Here are some examples:

billiards

Billiards is fun.

gymnastics

Gymnastics is a wonderful sport to watch.

linguistics

Linguistics is a fascinating topic.

mathematics

Mathematics has many applications.

news

The news is all bad today.

Look plural-plural verb

Some nouns refer to one thing, but look plural and take a plural verb. Here are some examples:

binoculars

Those binoculars are very expensive.

glasses

Harry Potter's glasses broke.

jeans

My jeans are very comfortable.

pyjamas

Her pyjamas are red.

pants

Those pants match your shirt.

scissors

These scissors are blunt.

shorts

His shorts are too loose.

spectacles

My new spectacles are tinted.

tongs

Tongs are very handy.

trousers

Those trousers are better than the black ones.

Compounds

For nouns that consist of a noun subpart followed by a qualifier, change the initial noun subpart in its usual way.

attorney-general

attorneys-general

daughter-in-law

daughters-in-law

father-in-law

fathers-in-law

heir apparent

heirs apparent

man-of-war
mother-in-law
notary public
son-in-law

men-of-war
mothers-in-law
notaries public
sons-in-law

Note! You can also write **attorney-generals**.

Plurals and Possessives Quizzes

Try the quizzes below to test your understanding.

Plurals and Possessives 1

For each of the following sentences, choose the appropriate word or words to fill in the blank.

One must take....into account.

- a users requirements
- a user's requirements
- a user requirements
- a user's requirements

The....early notification.

- users require
- user's require
- users' require
- users require

Fred is a computer

- system's analyst
- systems analysts
- systems analyst
- systems' analyst

The store lists several....for that.

- criteria
- criterias
- criterion
- criterions

Several....were undertaken.

- analysts
- analysis
- analyses
- analysies

A firm....was given for that.

- bases
- basis
- basers
- basus

Plurals and Possessives 2

Give the plural form of each of the following words.

box

crisis

phenomenon

reality

hero

memo

Give the possessive form of each of the following words.

client

clients

women

it

workers

worker

Answers

Plurals and Possessives 1

One must take....into account.

- a users requirements **X**
- a user's requirements **✓**
- a user requirements **X**
- a user's requirements **X**

✓ You're right. The requirements belong to "a user" and so the 's goes after "a user"

X Not correct. Try again please.

The....early notification.

- users require ✓
- user's require ✗
- users' require ✗
- users require ✗

- ✓ That's right. The plural form of user is required here.
- ✗ Not correct. Try again please.

Fred is a computer

- system's analyst ✗
- systems analysts ✗
- systems analyst ✓
- systems' analyst ✗

- ✓ That's correct. The computer system does not own the analyst and so there is no possessive element in this sentence. The phrase "computer systems" is describing the analyst.
- ✗ Not correct. Try again please.

The store lists several....for that.

- criteria ✓
- criterias ✗
- criterion ✗
- criterions ✗

- ✓ Correct. The word "criteria" is the plural form of "criterion".
- ✗ Not correct. Try again please.

Several....were undertaken.

- analysts ✗
- analysis ✗
- analyses ✓
- analysies ✗

✓ Correct. The word "analyses" is the plural form of "analysis".

✗ Not correct. Try again please.

A firm....was given for that.

- bases
- basis
- basers
- basus

✓ Correct. The word "basis" is singular and the plural form is "bases".

✗ Not correct. Try again please.

Plurals and Possessives 2

Making plurals

box - boxes

crisis - crises

phenomenon - phenomena

reality - realities

hero - heroes

memo - memos

Making plurals

client - client's

clients - clients'

women - women's

it - its

workers - workers'

worker - worker's