Rules for Forming Possessives

1. For common or proper nouns, whether singular or plural, that do not already end in the letter s, add an apostrophe and s to form the possessive. For example:

   SINGULAR
   man  child  Johnson  Microsoft

   SINGULAR POSSESSIVE
   man’s  child’s  Johnson’s  Microsoft’s

   PLURAL
   men  children  alumni

   PLURAL POSSESSIVE
   men’s  children’s  alumni’s

2. If the word is a singular common noun that already ends in the letter s, add an apostrophe and s to form the possessive, unless the next word also begins with an s.

   the hostess’s request
   the hostess’ seat
   the witness’s answer
   the witness’ story

3. If the word is a singular common or proper noun that ends in a letter other than s but has an s sound (such as ce, z and x), add an apostrophe and an s.

   the fox’s den
   Butz’s policies
   Marx’s theories
   the prince’s life

4. Singular proper nouns that end in s add only an apostrophe:

   Descartes’ philosophy
   Hercules’ labors
   Socrates’ execution
   Tennessee Williams’ plays

5. Plural common and proper nouns ending in s add only an apostrophe:

   the churches’ association
   the girls’ toys
   the horses’ food
   the Smiths’ car
   the Williamses’ children
   the Carolinas’ coastline

6. If a term is hyphenated, make only the last word possessive:

   SINGULAR
   mother-in-law  She is my mother-in-law.
SINGULAR POSSESSIVE  |  mother-in-law's |  It is my mother-in-law’s car.
PLURAL               |  mothers-in-law  |  The program featured mothers-in-law.
PLURAL POSSESSIVE    |  mothers-in-law's|  The mothers-in-law’s cars were damaged by vandals.

7. If an object is jointly possessed by two or more people or entities, make only the last noun possessive:

Mary and Fred’s entry won a prize.
Acme Co. and Smith Corp.’s joint business is profitable.
My mother and father’s home was destroyed by fire.

8. If the objects are not jointly owned—if they are separate objects owned or possessed by different people—make both nouns possessive:

Mary’s and Fred’s entries won prizes.
The Smiths’ and the Browns’ luggage was lost.

9. Some special expressions that do not end in s but have an s sound use only an apostrophe: for appearance’ sake; for conscience’ sake; for goodness’ sake. In other expressions, use ‘s: the appearance’s cost.

10. Indefinite pronouns such as everyone follow the same rules. However, personal pronouns have special forms that never use an apostrophe. Personal pronouns include such words as: his, mine, ours, theirs, whose and yours.

11. Do not add an apostrophe to descriptive phrases ending in s: citizens band radio; teachers college. The phrase is descriptive rather than possessive if for or by rather than of would be appropriate in a longer form of the phrase: a radio band for citizens; a college for teachers. An’s is required, however, when the term in the descriptive phrase is a plural that does not end in an s: women’s clinic; people’s government.

12. Generally, avoid making inanimate objects possessives. Instead, try to rewrite the passage, either dropping the possessive or converting the passage to an of phrase:

AWKWARD: the table’s leg
BETTER: the table leg OR the leg of the table

AWKWARD: the book’s chapter
BETTER: the book chapter OR the chapter of the book

13. When mentioning the name of an organization, group or geographical location, always use the common or preferred and official spelling. Some names use the possessive case, such as Actors’ Equity Association, but others, such as Pikes Peak, do not.

14. The word it’s, spelled with an apostrophe, is a contraction of it is. The possessive form, its, does not contain an apostrophe:

WRONG: Its higher than I thought.
RIGHT: It’s higher than I thought OR It is higher than I thought.

WRONG: It’s height scares me.
RIGHT: Its height scares me.