University of South Australia

Punctuation: apostrophes (')

The apostrophe is used in two ways: *as a deleting mark* to abbreviate or shorten words (where letters or a letter has been omitted) and *to show possession*.

1. Use an apostrophe when two words are joined with letters left out, as in abbreviations or contractions

Examples:
- cannot = can't
- do not = don't
- I am = I'm
- of the clock = o'clock
- it is = it's

Note:
In formal academic writing it is best to avoid contractions and abbreviations.

2. Use an apostrophe to show possession

Examples:
- Michael Bridges' sons (meaning: the sons who belong to Michael Bridges)
- The student's exams (meaning: the exams for one student)
- The students' exams (meaning: the exams for more than one student)
- The company's huge losses (meaning: the huge losses made by one company)
- The children's books (meaning the books belonging to more than one child)

Common mistakes
- Rock and Roll began in the 1950s (*Not* 1950's)
- The teachers attended a meeting (*Not* teachers')
- Apples for sale (*Not* Apple's).
- Gmail is amazing for its ease of use (*Not* it's).

Activity
Decide where the apostrophes need to be placed in the following sentences.

1. I think (its, it's, its') an elephant but (its, it's, its') too far away.
2. I (can't, cant, ca'nt) see (its, it's, its') trunk.
3. Communication theory was only beginning to become popular in the 1980s.
4. Charles books were due back at the library last Tuesday.
5. The four companies accounting practices were not done correctly.

See answers on next page

Answers

1. I think **it's** an elephant but **it's** too far away.
2. I **can't** see **its** trunk.
3. Communication theory was only beginning to become popular in the **1980s**.
4. **Charles'** books were due back at the library last Tuesday.
5. The four **companies'** accounting practices were not done correctly.