

By popular request (well, I like it, anyway):

THE FAN-FIC WRITER'S GUIDE TO PUNCTUATION – Part 1 by Hazel Köhler

Introduction

Punctuation can be a minefield, but an aberrant apostrophe or a misplaced comma can, at best, render your story a little confusing, or, at worst, make it incomprehensible.

What sometimes makes matters worse is that no-one has ever accused the English language of consistency. For every rule, there are a dozen exceptions, and that's only the UK English variety! In my several years as a fan-fic reader and writer, I've noticed that there are several differences between accepted usage in the UK and the US. I've written this guide from the point of view of a UK English user – Americans and other foreigners, please talk amongst yourselves if you see something that you learned differently, then let me know, so I don't annoy non-British writers for whom I beta-read!

The Aberrant Apostrophe

Of all punctuation marks, the apostrophe is the most widely misused. A little while ago, I read a lovely description of how to work out the correct placing of an apostrophe – it's the dirty fingerprint left over after a letter or two were wiped away from between two words.

So, taking that as our starting point:

1 – *It's* versus *its*

I wish I had a pound for every time I've corrected this one. I'd be sitting on a beach in the Seychelles right now, sipping some luscious drink or other from a coconut shell.

It's, with an apostrophe, is short for *it is*. The *I* of *is* has been wiped away, and the apostrophe has taken its place.

Its (without an apostrophe), on the other hand, means '*belonging to it*'. You'd be hard-pushed to just wipe out a letter or two from that!

Cloudbase was just ahead, its unmistakable shape silhouetted against the sun. "It's beautiful..." Harmony whispered.

If in doubt, substitute *it is* for the *it's/its* that you're trying to work out. Does *it is* make sense? If so, use *it's*. If not, use *its*.

2 – Short stuff

I gave *it's* a section of its own because that is by far the most common mistake people make in writing fan-fic. But as I said, the apostrophe is standing in for a missing letter. This is very, very common, and is known as 'contraction'. You use contractions in speech all the time (unless you're Commander Data, or the Voice Of The Mysterons, of course) so there's no real reason why you should be scared of them in writing.

The trick is to locate the missing letter:

You are = *you're*. The apostrophe replaces the *A*

I am = *I'm*. Again, an apostrophe instead of the *A*

He is = *he's*

We are = *we're*

They are = *they're*

And so on.

Sometimes the apostrophe replaces more than one letter, such as in *we'll* instead of *we will*. But it's all the same principal. The principal for working out whether you need an apostrophe or not is

exactly the same as for *it's* – imagine (or write) the full-length phrase instead, and see where the letters are ‘missing’. That’s where the apostrophe will go.

Some people are nervous about using contractions in descriptive text. There’s no real need to be. At one time, contractions in narrative text were very much frowned on, but these days, they are perfectly acceptable, and in fact, writing “do not” or “cannot” instead of “don’t” and “can’t” is starting to look a little stilted. Still, it’s often a matter of personal choice and style.

3 – Possessives versus plurals

Apostrophes never, ever make plurals. No matter how odd the word looks, if you mean that there’s more than one of something, there’s no apostrophe. Not in this first example, anyway:

The colonel’s jaw dropped in astonishment. There must be two Scarlets.

Yep, two Scarlets all right, but this sentence doesn’t mention anything that might belong to the two Scarlets, so no apostrophe. There is only one colonel, and the dropped jaw belongs to him, so therefore, the colonel DOES get an apostrophe.

It might help to think of this use of the apostrophe as a short version of ‘*The colonel, his jaw dropped....*’ Awkward phrasing, isn’t it? No wonder an apostrophe is preferable...

But what do you do if there IS more than one of something, and all of those somethings own the same thing? Consider this sentence:

The lieutenant’s desk drawer was stuffed with paper.

Just one lieutenant, just one desk drawer, and the desk is his. Shift the apostrophe sideways, though, and this is what you get:

The lieutenants’ desk drawer was stuffed with paper.

Still just the one desk drawer, but this time, being shared by more than one lieutenant.

So we can work out a rule from this: the apostrophe goes right at the end of the owner of the thing. One lieutenant, or more than one lieutenants? If it’s only one, think of the sentence as ‘*the lieutenant, his desk drawer...*’ and put the apostrophe after *lieutenant*. If it’s more than one, think of it as ‘*the lieutenants, their desk drawer*’ and stop for a minute. Ever seen *lieutenants’r*? No. That would be silly.

And just to make it all a little clearer (I hope):

The Mysterons’ home planet is Mars – all the Mysterons live there (possibly)

The Mysteron’s face was very pale – just talking about one Mysteron agent here

4 – Words that end in S anyway

I have to make a confession here – I got this wrong for YEARS. I still think it LOOKS wrong, but alas, it isn’t. I’m talking about adding an extra S to words that already end in S, when needing to use an apostrophe.

Rhapsody Angel is Lord Simms’s daughter

Magnolia Jones’s codename is Melody Angel

And I’m afraid it gets worse, if there’s more than one Simms or Jones, and they all own something:

The Simmses’ house in the country = the house is owned by several members of the Simms family

The Joneses’ cotton farm = the farm is owned by Melody’s whole family

(This is why I always try to avoid using Original Character names that end in S. I’d also re-phrase the example sentences to avoid having to use the apostrophe!)

5 – There are always exceptions

Sad, but true. In the previous section, I hinted that possessives, the ‘owners’ of things, always have an apostrophe after them. Alas, not so. But you’ll be glad to know that there is a fairly simple way of working out what these exceptions are.

One of the most commonly-used words in Scarlet fiction, and I dare say in all fiction, is ‘*his*’.

Whether you know the grammatical term or not, I’m sure you recognise ‘his’ as a possessive,

meaning '*belonging to him*'. So from that, we can safely assume that all the similar possessives, where another word is used instead of a name, rank, species, etc., also don't have apostrophes. And you'd be quite right:

His – belonging to him

Hers – belonging to her

Theirs – belonging to them

Ours – belonging to us

Its – belonging to it

All possessives, but no apostrophes.

Another exception that springs to mind is the use of apostrophes on words that change their spelling when they become plural. *Child* becomes *children* in the plural. *Woman* becomes *women*. There are no such words as *childs* or *childrens*, *womans* or *womens*.

If in doubt, look at the word without the apostrophe for a minute. Does it look like a proper word? No? It probably isn't, then, so the apostrophe goes before the S.

Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons was supposed to be a children's programme, but that doesn't stop adults liking it too. So there.