

Apostrophes: feeling possessive?

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Abstract: Apostrophes to denote possession can be controversial, with some authors and editors arguing that we should use them less, or that they should be eliminated altogether. Indeed, there is a trend to prefer the non-possessive form of eponymic terms (eg Down syndrome rather than Down's syndrome). Some medical writing organisations have eliminated apostrophes from their titles (ie the American Medical Writers Association, or AMWA, and the European Medical Writers Association, or EMWA). It has been argued that there is no possession and therefore no need for an apostrophe, but I maintain that this is incorrect. (The word "Writers" in both examples describes the members of the association, thus it is a descriptive genitive and so should have an apostrophe.) Other organisations have circumvented this potential problem, such as the European Association of Science Editors (EASE). Possession is also confused frequently with ownership, but whilst possession encompasses ownership it is a much broader notion. Those eager to avoid apostrophes can sometimes distort meaning, such as changing an event "new members' welcome drinks" to a statement that "new members welcome drinks". If we can understand the simple grammatical concept of possession then possessive apostrophes are simple to use. Moreover, the use of apostrophes enriches the English language, providing extra information and clarity of communication in writing within science and medicine, and in general writing.

Keywords: apostrophe, medical writing, possessive, possession, ownership.

Most discussions about apostrophes cover examples of their incorrect use, the rules of correct apostrophe use, and increasingly, the exploration of reasons to avoid apostrophes altogether. Thus, in this article I will make the case that apostrophes are valuable and informative, easy to use, and certainly nothing to be avoided.

No article on apostrophes would be complete without a mention of the "greengrocer's apostrophe" described by the late Keith Waterhouse (eg "Apple's 50p!" on market stall price signs) when, with a large degree of irony, he founded the AAAA or Association for the Abolition of Aberrant Apostrophes. (His original column on the subject has been reprinted as part of his obituary, and is well worth reading.)¹ These amusing examples are often followed by how, and how not, to use apostrophes. Waterhouse was, however, also concerned about missing apostrophes, as he details:

"The AAAA has two simple goals. Its first is to round up and confiscate superfluous apostrophes from, for example, fruit and vegetable stalls where potato's, tomato's and apple's are openly on sale. Its second is to redistribute as many as possible of these impounded apostrophes, restoring missing apostrophes where they have been lost, mislaid or deliberately hijacked – as for instance by British Rail, which

as part of its refurbishment programme is dismantling the apostrophes from such stations as King's Cross and shunting them off at dead of night to a secret apostrophe siding at Crewe."¹

Certainly apostrophes are not used as frequently in science and medicine as in less formal writing, and this is particularly true for apostrophes denoting contractions (such as "it's" instead of "it is"). The use of apostrophes to denote possession is, however, of particular relevance within science and medicine owing to the widespread use of eponymic terms. Apostrophes have often been used to honour researchers who discover or describe medical conditions, anatomical parts, chemical or biochemical reactions, tests, reagents, or theories. However, the possessive form is not usually used for names incorporating a place or patient's name (eg Minamata disease and Hageman factor) or for hyphenated eponymous terms incorporating two or more names (eg McCune–Albright syndrome).² To complicate matters, there are many exceptions to these rules. For example, we have the Krebs cycle rather than the Krebs' cycle even though Sir Hans Krebs discovered this biochemical pathway. There is also a modern tendency for style guides and some journals to prefer the non-possessive form of eponymic terms (ie Down's syndrome becomes Down syndrome).² Given the variety in use of eponymic apostrophes, when writing and editing we must check carefully whether the traditional format is in the possessive form and/or if the target source requires the non-possessive form of eponymic terms.

More generally, apostrophes can be useful in day-to-day life. Apostrophes used (or not used) in various house and business names in my village include the correctly named "Cookies' Corner", which perfectly describes a house at the corner of my street where I know Dr Cook and his family live. However, I will never visit "Monte Di Vita Pizzas" thanks to its misplaced apostrophe. Likewise, the house sign "Loudons Retreat" has me itching to add an apostrophe (and I don't care if it is before or after the "s" – but it certainly needs one somewhere). On visiting a relative in Bishop's Waltham, Hampshire, I noticed that some signs had an apostrophe and some did not. This got me thinking. What was a Waltham, and what did one (or perhaps more than one) bishop do with it? Apparently, the word Waltham is derived from the Saxon words for wooded area (wald) and settlement (ham).³ Moreover, this wooded settlement was first known as Bishops Waltham after 904 CE, when the king gave the manor to the Bishop of Winchester.³ Presumably, the naming of Bishop's Waltham predates the use of the apostrophe, but the use of an apostrophe is telling us something about the history of the place. The same can be said for the well-known examples of Queen's and Queens' Colleges. Queen's College, Oxford was founded in honour of a solitary Queen of England (Queen Philippa, wife of Edward III), whereas Queens' College Cambridge was

founded by two Queens of England (Margaret of Anjou, wife of King Henry VI and Elizabeth Woodville, wife of King Edward IV).^{4,5} My opinion is that the difference in apostrophes might also reflect Oxford's and Cambridge's colleges efforts to differentiate themselves from one another, as Queens' was always known as Queen's (before 1823) and the official name of the college now incorporates both versions and is an apostrophe lover's delight: The Queen's College of St Margaret and St Bernard, commonly called Queens' College, in the University of Cambridge.⁵

Missing apostrophes annoy me far more than misused apostrophes: omission is more likely to be deliberate, misuse an unintentional mistake. Even worse is deliberate apostrophe omission by organisations connected with writing or literature. Three examples are the bookshop chain Waterstones, the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) and the European Medical Writers Association (EMWA). Waterstones removed the possessive apostrophe from their company title in 2012, arguing that this was a "more versatile and practical" spelling of the name for the digital age.⁶ A quick search of Google using the term "Waterstone's" disproves this theory. AMWA formerly used an apostrophe, but then some bright spark decided that a noun (Writers) was being used as a modifier of another noun (Association), and therefore that "the possessive was unnecessary".^{7,8} This argument is spurious (see Box 1).⁹ The word "Writers" requires an apostrophe, as in our example it is a descriptive genitive (ie there is some degree of possession). Thus, what AMWA (and EMWA, as we shall see later) communicate by not using an apostrophe is clear: AMWA and EMWA members have no degree of ownership or possession over their own organisations! To return to EMWA, a recent article revealed that the reason EMWA is not the European Medical Writers' Association is because "EMWA is an association of medical writers, or equally, that EMWA is not an association that belongs to medical writers and so we do not need to use an apostrophe."¹⁰ Moreover, whilst "one can argue that legally, EMWA does belong to its members and, therefore, that Writers should have an apostrophe...as the arguments [for and against an apostrophe] carry equal weight, we recommend...the most straightforward text, ie without the apostrophe."¹⁰

In the title American Medical Writers Association, is the word "Writers" used only to define the type of association? (If this is true, "Writers" is just an adjective, so no apostrophe is needed.) Alternatively, is the word "Writers" describing members of the association? (If this is true, there is possession, and so an apostrophe is needed.) I concur that in examples such as "games teacher" and "customs examination" the words "games" and "customs" are purely adjectival and thus need no apostrophe – the important technical point to distinguish is between a descriptive genitive (eg busman's in busman's holiday) and an adjectival phrase.⁹ The word "Writers" in our example is clearly a descriptive genitive, and so should have an apostrophe.

Box 1. The descriptive genitive.

As ever, arguments about apostrophes seem to centre on possession. The example I sometimes think of is "the Sun's rays". As the Spring sunshine streams through my study window, I remind myself that the Sun is about 150 million miles away, and that light from the Sun to the Earth has taken just over eight minutes to arrive. Even though the Sun is separated from us by time and space, these are still the Sun's rays not the Suns rays. The Sun doesn't own the rays, but there is certainly some form of possession. In the distant future when our dying Sun goes supernova, the Sun's last rays will be observable from another galaxy a billion years later. Even though the Sun no longer exists, a little apostrophe will signify our Sun's possession of its rays through the enormity of time and space! To return to Earth though, and EMWA's website, EMWA is "run for its members by its members"¹¹ and last time I went to an EMWA conference the members elected the Executive Committee. This suggests some form of ownership, but even if there is no degree of ownership (legal or otherwise), then there is some degree of possession. I am in agreement with John Richards, founder of the Apostrophe Protection Society, who wrote, "As you say, possession does not exactly mean ownership. Possession includes OF and FOR. These are societies of or for writers so should take the apostrophe. In the case of 'The car's colour is too bright' the car doesn't own the colour; it is the colour OF the car."¹² There are also societies of science writers and editors that use "of" in their names, not least the European Association of Science Editors (EASE), the Council of Biology Editors (CBE), and the Association of British Science Writers (ABSW).

The phrase "New members welcome drinks" was mentioned as requiring an apostrophe (after the "s" of "members") by Lynne Truss in her best-selling book on grammar *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*.¹³ Nevertheless, EMWA has changed "New members' welcome drink" to "New members welcome drink" in its conference programme.¹⁴ Apparently, this apostrophe deletion was because "the new members would not be bringing their own drinks."¹⁴ In my opinion the deleted apostrophe made an understandable statement (meaning welcome drinks for new members) change meaning to suggest that new members were in particular need of drinks (or perhaps that they were very thirsty?). Whatever our stance on apostrophes, we need to be careful that our own like or dislike of them does not change the meaning of what we write or edit. One final argument for the omission of apostrophes in titles is that an organisation can decide on its own name, with or without an apostrophe. This is correct. The consequence is that the inclusion or omission of apostrophes conveys the intentions of those running the company. What if EMWA were to change its title to "Medical Writing Я Us" as in the UK toy retailer in the UK "Toys Я Us"? Would that still be acceptable? Is it fine for an association representing medical writers to flout a basic grammatical rule?

What is clear is that some people don't like apostrophes. Perhaps they just don't see the point; certainly those that favour using apostrophes (and using them correctly) are often told they are being fussy or pedantic. I disagree. What if it is your written work that is being read, reviewed, or assessed by a

literate person, and you either don't use apostrophes or don't use them correctly? The reader may need to second-guess the meaning of your text as apostrophes can help eliminate ambiguity. Even if your writing is understandable, poor use or absence of apostrophes will give the impression that you are careless, and perhaps even ignorant or uneducated. Some people will go to great lengths to write or rewrite text to eliminate apostrophes, even if the result is both lengthy and inelegant, but perhaps this is because "some people have simply not learned to use them correctly."¹⁰ Perhaps we could all learn something from the example of Queens' College Cambridge?

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Erratum to “Common statistical mistakes in manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals”

In the article “Common statistical mistakes in manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals”,¹ the last line of page 92 should have read “...between 88 (90 – 2×1) mg/dL and 92 (90 + 2×1) mg/dL; the 95% CI for the mean for the 900-participant study is 89 to 91 mg/dL. It is now clear that the 95% CI for the mean for 900 participants (2 = 91–89 mg/dL) is half of that for 225 participants (4 = 92–88 mg/dL)...”

When writing the text, I was uncertain which to choose between 100 and 90 mg/dL for the value of the mean glucose level. I decided to choose 90 mg/dL so that readers would not confuse this value with the “100 times” we performed our studies. In the next lines of the text, I mistakenly used the value of 100 mg/dL in the calculations while it should have been 90 mg/dL.

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European Association of Science Editors

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