Ask Mr. Grammar

The Greengrocer's Apostrophe
The State of Capitals
Bewhiched, Bothered, and Bewildered
Combination Explanation
Parenthetically Speaking
Let's Get Possessive

Ask Mr. Grammar

The Greengrocer's Apostrophe

"Punctuation mark's! Getcher punctuation mark's here! Typed fresh daily!"

So shouteth the local text vendor, hawking bushels of extraneous squiggles that may be appetizing but are most certainly not healthful.

Just as you wouldn't want any unnecessary additives in the crisp vegetables at your local market, you shouldn't be tempted to spice up your writing with partially hydrogenated punctuation.

The "greengrocer's apostrophe" (a phrase originating across the pond) refers to the oft-sighted use of the errant mark to create a plural. To wit:

* New and used car's
* Highway's and byway's
* United State's of America

What is it about the letter "s" that so vexing? (See the September 2007 issue of this publication for a related discussion.) This well-meaning little reprobate just can't stop itself from getting into trouble.

To go all-natural and thus savor the flavor of a proper plural, simply leave the apostrophes on the spice rack. That way, you'll have a full supply on hand when you're ready to create a delicious ratatouille of possessives and contractions.

It's really quite simple*: Keep your plurals unadorned, and you won't be singing "Thank's for the Memorie's" the next time you shop.

**That is, unless you want to pluralize a letter that happens to be a vowel. Just ask the Oakland A's baseball team. (There will be time for Q & A's after you've read their FAQs.)*

Have a grammar question?

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PLURAL INCORRECT	PLURAL CORRECT	POSSESSIVE FUNCTION	CONTRACTION FUNCTION
At my local bakery, I'm a regular consumer of their toasty, tasty bagel's.	At my local bakery, I'm a regular consumer of their toasty, tasty bagels.	I like this toasty, tasty bagel's flavor.	This toasty, tasty bagel's delicious!

Ask Mr. Grammar

The State of Capitals

Blame it on E.E. Cummings. Or e.e. cummings. Or k.d. lang. Or blame it on *Blame It on the Bossa Nova*.

Whatever the case, capitalization continues to confound.

Given the limited column inches (and the mind-numbing variants of upper- and lowercase studies), I'd like to focus on three of the usual suspects. Okay? OK. Let's begin.

Job Titles

It was a dark and stormy night. Seven o'clock. Tuesday. Tortellini on special at Marge's Diner. Eats would have to wait, though. I'm an investigative reporter, see, and I'd been sent to interview Detective Ralph DeNada, a rising star with the police department's bunco squad. Something didn't feel right about him—a rookie detective—being assigned to such a high-profile caper: Steve Edmonds, a three-term senator, had been caught embezzling library funds from Mayor Liz Smith's hometown. Didn't make sense. Sure, his approval ratings had been tanking for months, but why would a guy with his ambitions—who thought he was the next President Truman—throw it all away for a measly 3,000 bucks? And DeNada, the greenhorn detective, was going to figure it out?

"Look," said DeNada, uncrumpling a grimy newspaper clipping. "It says here that this chump is also president of Context Publishing Company."

"So?"

"Well, that little publishing company had a pretty sweet ride supplying bootleg books to Purchasing and Acquisitions, a low-profile department at Cloudland Library. That is, until the mayor found out. I think that Senator Edmonds wanted to get back at her."

Titles of Artistic Works

"Seems extreme to me," I muttered.

The detective adjusted his fedora and stroked his chin. "You know what put him over the edge? *New Stories From the Old El Paso Ranch*."

"Huh?"

"Listen. *A Tale of Two Cities* it ain't, but it's been a bestseller for months, and Edmonds stood to make a ton of dough printing knockoffs and shipping 'em to libraries across the country. Mayor Smith was on to it. The senator panicked and figured he could make her look bad. Now instead of *We're in the Money*, he's gonna be singing *In the Jailhouse Now*."

"Detective DeNada," I grinned.

"What?"

"I had you pegged all wrong. You're a real sharpie—no rube. Let me buy you a meal at Marge's. That diner's got the best specials in town. Case closed."

Lists

So, to review:

Capitalizing the Titles of Jobs

- Uppercase preceding the name
- Lowercase following the name
- Lowercase as a noun without name (e.g., "the director")
- Uppercase job area if referring to a specific organization (e.g., "more funding for the Education Department")
- Lowercase job area if referring to a generic organization (e.g., "more funding for each town's education department")

Capitalizing the Titles of Artistic Works

- Uppercase first and last words, nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, subordinating conjunctions (e.g., "if")
- Uppercase all words of four or more letters (cautionary note: not universally agreed upon)
- Lowercase prepositions, articles, coordinating conjunctions (e.g., "and")

Capitalizing the Items in Lists

- Uppercase headings as in titles of artistic works
- Uppercase first word of bulleted list; lowercase others (if not proper nouns or titles of works)

Clearly, an entire tome could be written on the isms of capitals, but that's all I have room for right now. Perhaps Senator Edmonds can get working on it. He'll have time.

Have a grammar question?

Ask Mr. Grammar

Bewhiched, Bothered, and Bewildered

(With Apologies to Rodgers, Hart, Strunk, and White)

Overheard recently:

"I keep hearing this particular noise, and I can't figure out where it's coming from."

Screeeeeech…

"Which? You mean that?"

"No, no, no. It's different from that. Kind of a low rumble—which usually doesn't bother me—that occurs every night at this time."

"That's annoying, for sure. Maybe it's your neighbor's car, which looks pretty rusty to me, that's making the sound. It belches out some pretty disgusting fumes. That could be caused by a clogged exhaust pipe, which certainly isn't good for the environment."

"But it's a car that he won in a raffle, which means that he'll never get rid of it. He thinks that it was destiny."

"That's silly. Anyone can win a raffle, which is just a matter of luck."

"I know. I once entered a raffle that was rigged, which was very unfair."

"You know which con game gets me? Three-card Monte. Now, *that's* unfair—and costly, as well!"

"I always lose at that. I never can tell which card is where."

"That's how they get you. Which is why it's illegal in some states—though I'm not sure which ones."

Brummmmm…

"There it is! That's the sound! It *is* the car, which is surprising. Now I've got to confront my neighbor—something that will be awkward—which I had hoped to avoid."

"That's life."

Which brings me to the point.

Let's face it. "Which" has a much more, shall we say, *erudite*, ring to it than the rather drab-sounding "that". "Which" is more fun to say; it looks classier in print; it's got that sparkly shine of seriousness.

"That" just does its job and gets on with things.

"That" and "which": They're both pronouns with an adjectival twist. So, when to use which? That's the question.

Put simply, "that" (which also can function as an adverb and as a conjunction) defines, while "which" adds information (and is often preceded by a comma). Sure, the 'twain may meet, but clarity's the thing, and a misplaced "which" muddies the waters. Which is something that should be avoided.

Have a grammar question?

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DEFINITION FUNCTION	INFORMATION FUNCTION	DEFINITION FUNCTION	INFORMATION FUNCTION
I stopped eating their food that bothered me. *(Some food of theirs bothered me, so I stopped eating it.)*	I stopped eating their food, which bothered me. *(It bothered me to stop eating their food.)*	I like food that is expensive. *(I like to eat pricey food.)*	I like food, which is expensive. *(Liking to eat costs me money.)*

Ask Mr. Grammar

Combination Explanation

I do tend to run on, don't I? It's caused more than one run-in with grammarians, I can assure you. Sometimes, my decision making leads them to question my decision-making abilities. I may follow up by apologizing for any foul-up; I figure that a follow-through response is the responsible thing to do. To correct any errors, I may go on line to do more research, or I may decide that there aren't any adequate on-line (or online) sources. In the end, I guess that I'm just a trouble-making troublemaker whose days are filled with trouble making.

Usually, but not always (are you seeing a pattern when it comes to grammar?), the rules for combination word forms work this way:

• For the verb form, use two separate words, with a space (e.g., "team building").

—*They spent the afternoon team building.*

• For the noun and adjective forms, put a hyphen between the two words (e.g., "team-building").

• Eventually, through usage, the noun/adjective forms lose the hyphen (e.g., "teambuilding").

Two oddities gum up the works:

•Often, but not always (grrr!), words with "double" or "second" follow the rules in reverse.

— I double-checked, and, sure enough, he double-crossed me. I second-guessed every thing he did after that.

—After a double check of the record, I found out that I was the victim of a double cross.

•Adjectives following a verb are not hyphenated.

—The well-known scholar gave a lecture each week.

—The scholar's weekly lectures are well known.

—EXCERPTED FROM "A GRAMMAR PRIMER (OF SORTS)"

Have a grammar question?

Clip 'n Save

VERB COMBINATION FORM	NOUN COMBINATION FORM	ADJECTIVE COMBINATION FORM
As a student, he spent three summers window washing.	One of his summer jobs included window-washing.	For three summers,he had a window-washing job during the summer.

Ask Mr. Grammar Parenthetically Speaking

The tailor took one look at my overcoat and sighed (obviously annoyed). (I've seen such behavior all too frequently as of late, but that's another story.)

"So, what is it?" she asked. "The lapels are ripped, and the lining is shredded. What do you want fixed—the inside or the outside?"

How often has a perplexed writer been faced with a similar dilemma when punctuating a parenthetical? Does a period remain a prisoner within the curved confines, or does it scamper with the freewheeling freedom of a butterfly?

Look at it this way: The parenthetical is a whispered aside. At times, it's a "Psst—come here and listen to this," kind of shadowy being, lurking in the alley against a brick wall of paragraph structure; at others, it simply provides information in a helpful, good-neighborly way. The former keeps its punctuation to itself (inside), while the latter shares it with the outside world.

In other words, a complete sentence is punctuated inside the parentheses, while a phrase is not.

"Ah," you say. "What happens when I need to put one set of parentheses in another? (Not that I expect to anytime soon.) "

Well, in this case, one rule fits all. Whether 'tis a sentence or a phrase, use rectangular brackets for a parenthetical within a parenthetical. (And you can follow a respective alternating pattern for additional items, should your construction require!)

This: Maple trees (tall as they may be [and they often are]) don't provide the best shade.

Not this: Maple trees (tall as they may be (and they often are)) don't provide the best shade.

Treat your parentheticals right, and they'll be your pals forever. They add a conversational tone to any prose, and they can be a delightful alternative to the comma or the em dash.

Now (if you'll excuse me) I've gotta talk to that tailor!

Have a grammar question?

Clip 'n Save

PARENTHETICAL COMPLETE SENTENCE	PARENTHETICAL PHRASE	PARENTHETICAL WITHIN PARENTHETICAL
I like chick peas. (They're especially good with brown rice.)	I like chick peas (especially with brown rice).	I like chick peas (especially with rice [brown]).

Ask Mr. Grammar

Let's Get Possessive

Ok.

So, it's the summer. They're your best friends. They're planning a fabulous event, with exotic catering, a string quartet, and the *hautest* of *haute couture*. And you've been chosen to take care of the invitations. You're creative—writer's block isn't the concern—but something is gnawing at you.

It's their last name.

"Curtis". What could be wrong with a moniker such as that? It's easy to spell, easy to say, and has a nice trochaic rhythm. So what's the problem?

It's cursed with concluding sibilance. Or, to put it more simply, the name ends in an "s". How do you spell the plural? And then—and *then*—how do you make that plural possessive? You can't afford to make a mistake. Not with the price of calligraphy and vellum these days. What to do? Aren't there some rules about this?

It's pretty basic, actually. One Curtis. Two Curtises. One Curtis's. Two Curtises'.

What's the logic? Well, you'd apply "'s" to make a possessive of a nonsibilant-ending singular noun, right? There's a house—the house has a driveway—it's the house's driveway. Same thing with a word ending in "s". Tack on the "'s", and the person, place, or thing has ownership! Now, say you want to talk about a whole neighborhood. There are houses—the houses have driveways—they're the houses' driveways. Again, the standard principle applies. Excepting certain animals (e.g., hippopotamus/i) and Latinates (e.g., alumnus/i), pluralize an "s" word by adding "es". To make a plural possessive, add an apostrophe, and you're good to go.

It's that simple. Now go find yourself a calligrapher!

Have a grammar question?

Clip 'n Save

SINGULAR	SINGULAR POSSESSIVE	PLURAL	PLURAL POSSESSIVE
Curtis	Curtis's	Curtises	Curtises'
Bob Curtis is having a party.	It will be held at Bob Curtis's house.	All the Curtises will be there.	You're invited to the Curtises' party.