

Answers to practical exercises

Chapter 10: Writing skills

Page 234: Apostrophes

Have a look at the following passage of text and see if you can spot and correct the incorrect use of apostrophes:

In the 1980's, there was an increase in case law that examined the role of the trust in relation to domestic property ownership. It's role was of particular importance in relation to spouse's who had not made a direct contribution to the properties purchase price. This was criticised as unduly harsh on spouse's who's financial contribution had facilitated the property's purchase as it's too generous to husband's and wife's who had not paid towards the price of the property. Many argue that it isn't fair to give a beneficial share in property to a non-contributing spouse.

Misuse	Correction	Explanation
In the 1980's	In the 1980s	This is a very common error. The apostrophe should only be used to denote ownership (so it would be correct to say '1980's case law' as the case law 'belongs to' the 1980s) or to indicate that a letter has been omitted. Neither is the case here.
It's role	Its role	There is no need for an apostrophe here as 'its' is the object version of 'his' and 'hers'. Confusion sometimes arises between 'its' and 'it's' (short for 'it is'). The latter is correct in terms of punctuation but should not be used in an essay because it is too information.
Spouse's	Spouses	This is plural. It refers to more than one spouse. 'Spouse's' would be correct if reference was being made to something belonging to one spouse: 'the spouse's contribution to the purchase price'.
Properties purchase	Property's purchase	Here the apostrophe is missing. There is only one property and 'purchase price' relates to it so there should be an apostrophe to indicate possession.
Who's	Whose	'Who's' is a way of writing 'who is' as the apostrophe indicates that an 'i' has been omitted.
It's too generous	It is too generous	Here, it is correct use of an apostrophe but the use of 'it's' is too informal so should be replaced with 'it is'.
Husband's and wife's	Husbands and wives	As with 'spouses', there is no apostrophe here because it is the plural form of the words 'husband' and 'wife'.

Isn't fair	Is not fair	Again, the apostrophe has been used in a way that is correct because it shows that the 'o' of 'not' is missing but this is too informal for an essay so should be written as 'is not'.
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A good trick to remember, when you are trying to work out if an apostrophe is necessary, is to reword the phrase to see if it can be written as 'the x **of the** y'. For example, 'the properties purchase' can be rewritten as 'the purchase **of the** property' but 'the husbands who had not contributed' cannot be rewritten as 'the who had not contributed of the husbands'. Of course, 'the husband's lack of contribution' is correct as it can be written as 'the lack of contribution of the husband'. It might sound like a confusing test but if you try it you will find that it works very well.