The Apostrophe

Apostrophes serve three purposes:

1. to indicate possession
2. to combine two words into one (i.e., contractions)
3. to add a beginning/ending to a number, a letter, or an abbreviation

1. To indicate possession

Singular noun, add ‘s

Ex: Mary’s house
Ex: John’s new laptop

Plural noun already ending in s, add ’

Ex: Students’ dictionaries
Ex: The boys’ lifejackets

Plural noun not ending in s (irregular nouns), add ‘s

Ex: Women’s restrooms
Ex: Deer’s skins

Possessive nouns in a series of shared ownership, add ‘s to the last noun

Ex: Smith and Lane’s research on recycling
Ex: My mother and father’s house

Possessive nouns in a series of separate ownership, add ’s to each noun

Ex: Burger King’s and Chick-fil-A’s sales reports for 2011
Ex: Spain’s and France’s royal families

Singular proper noun, add ‘s

Ex: Cupid’s arrow
Ex: Dickens’s book

7/3/2012
Plural proper noun, add -'

Ex: The Kennedys’ estate
Ex: The Browns’ home

Singular compound noun, add -’s to the last word in the compound noun

Ex: My mother-in-law’s flower garden
Ex: The attorney general’s decision

Indefinite pronoun, add -’s

Ex: This diet will not improve anyone’s health
Ex: The robber broke in to someone’s car

2. To combine words into one (i.e., contractions)

Although contractions are usually unacceptable in academic writing because they are informal, it is still important to know how to use them. In contractions, the apostrophe takes the place of missing letters. For example:

- They + have = They’ve (the apostrophe represents the missing ha in have)
  - They’ve been to New York three times in the last year

- It + is = It’s (the apostrophe represents the missing i in is)
  - It’s a rainy day

- We + will = We’ll (the apostrophe represents the missing wi in will)
  - We’ll take a vacation in September

3. To add a beginning/ending to a number, a letter, or an abbreviation

Beginning of numbers, add -’

Ex: ’63 (the apostrophe represents the missing 19 in 1963)

The ’12 election (the apostrophe represents the missing 20 in 2012)

End of numbers, add -’s

Ex: 1983’s economic report

2020’s financial outlook
*Plural numbers, add -’s
  Ex: She made three figure 8’s in the ice
  Ex: Joe wrote all 5’s for his phone number

A letter from the alphabet, add -’s
  Ex: three A’s and two B’s
  Ex: x’s and y’s

*To make an abbreviation plural, add -’s
  Ex: Please check their I.D.’s
  Ex: The department graduated three PhD’s

*MLA recommends no apostrophe in plurals of numbers and abbreviations. Exception: if adding an s creates confusion or a new word (e.g., three is, instead of three i’s), use the apostrophe.