

The Genitive

We sometimes just add an apostrophe (') to a singular noun ending in -s, especially in literary and classical references.

Socrates' ideas *Dickens' novels*

But 's is more common.

Mr Lewis's dog

We can add 's or ' to a whole phrase.

the man next door's wife *Henry the Eighth's six wives*
the Smiths' new house

Note the difference between, for example:

Joe and Anna's children (one lot of children: Joe and Anna are their parents)
Joe's and Anna's children (two separate lots of children: Joe's and Anna's)

2 pronunciation

The ending 's is pronounced just like a plural ending (► 118).

doctor's /'dɒktəz/
dog's /dɒgz/
president's /'prezɪdənts/
Jack's /dʒæks/
Alice's /'ælis/
Madge's /'mædʒɪz/
James's /'dʒeɪmzɪz/

The apostrophe in a word like *parents'* does not change the pronunciation at all. But with singular classical (ancient Greek and Roman) names ending in s', we often pronounce a possessive 's even when it is not written.

Socrates' /'sɒkrətiːzɪz/ ideas.

124 nouns in combination: *my father's house*

1 possessive 's and other determiners

A possessive 's structure acts as a **determiner** (► Section 12) in a noun phrase. Compare:

a car *this car* *his car* *Jack's car*

A noun cannot normally have an **article or other determiner** with it as well as a possessive word (► 143.3). **Definite articles are usually dropped** when possessives are used.

the car that is Jack's = *Jack's car* (NOT *the Jack's car* OR *Jack's the car*)

But a **possessive word may of course have its own article.**

the car that is the boss's = *the boss's car*

When we want to use a noun with **a/an or this/that, etc** as well as **a possessive**, we usually use the **of mine, etc construction** (► 177).

She's a cousin of Jack's. (NOT . . . *a Jack's cousin.*)

I saw that stupid boyfriend of Angie's yesterday. (NOT . . . *that Angie's stupid boyfriend.* . . .)

2 meanings of the 's structure

We use the 's structure most often to talk about **possessions, relationships** and **physical characteristics**, especially when the first noun refers to a person or animal, or to a country, organisation or other group of living creatures.

That's my father's house. (NOT . . . *the house of my father*)

Emily's brother is a lawyer. (NOT *The brother of Emily.* . . .)

I don't like Alice's friends much. *Dan's eyes are like yours.*

There's something wrong with the cat's ear.

Scotland's climate is getting warmer.

What do you think of the company's management?

We also use the structure to talk about things that people, etc produce.

I didn't believe the girl's story. Have you read Jack's email?

What are Norway's main exports?

The government's decision was extremely unwise.

With some words for people's actions, we can use either 's or a structure with *of*.

the Queen's arrival OR *the arrival of the Queen*

the committee's second meeting OR *the second meeting of the committee*

An **of-structure** is preferred when the **'possessing' expression is very long**.

Compare:

my sister's husband

the husband of the woman who sent you those papers

3 's not used: *the name of the street*

With **nouns which are not the names of people, animals, countries, etc, 's is less common**, and a structure with a preposition (usually *of*) is **more normal**.

the name of the street (NOT *the street's name*)

the back of the room (NOT *the room's back*)

the roof of the house (NOT *the house's roof*)

the top of the page (NOT *the page's top*)

However, both structures are possible in some expressions.

the earth's gravity OR *the gravity of the earth*

the plan's importance OR *the importance of the plan*

the concerto's final movement OR *the final movement of the concerto*

the train's arrival OR *the arrival of the train*

the world's oldest mountains OR *the oldest mountains in the world*

(NOT . . . *of the world*), ► 206.7

Unfortunately, it is not possible to give useful general rules in this area: the choice of structure **often depends on the particular expression**.

4 like a subject

Note that the 's structure often corresponds to a sentence in which the first noun is the subject of *have* or some other verb.

Joe's brother (Joe has a brother) *the dog's tail* (the dog has a tail)

America's gold reserves (America has gold reserves)

the manager's decision (the manager made a decision)

Harris's novel (Harris wrote a novel)

In a few cases, the first noun may correspond to the object of a verb.

the prisoner's release (they released the prisoner)

5 measurement of time: *a day's journey*

The 's structure (or the plural with *s'*) is often used to say how long things last.

a day's journey *twenty minutes' delay*

Noun + noun structures are also possible in expressions with numbers (► 125.3).

a three-hour journey *a twenty-minute delay* →

6 other expressions of time: *yesterday's news*

We can also use the 's structure to talk about particular moments and events.

yesterday's news *last Sunday's match* *tomorrow's weather*

7 worth

Note the use of the 's structure before *worth*.

a pound's worth of walnuts *three dollars' worth of popcorn*

For the 's structure in compound nouns (e.g. *a doll's house, cow's milk*), ► 126.

8 possessive without a noun

We can use a possessive without a following noun, if the meaning is clear.

'Whose is that?' 'Daniel's.'

We often talk about shops, companies, churches and people's houses in this way. The apostrophe is often dropped in the names of shops and companies.

I bought it at Smiths. She got married at St Joseph's.

We had a nice time at Jack and Susan's last night.

In modern English, expressions like *the doctor, the dentist, the hairdresser, the butcher* are often used without 's.

Alice is at the dentist('s).