Possessives:

Common Sins of Omission and Commission
These days, many people’s writing is marred by missing or incorrect possessives. Maybe some readers don’t notice when a possessive is missing or incorrect. But your instructor will notice. A couple of missing or wrong possessives in an essay or research paper can make a difference of an entire letter grade.

Possessives matter: use them when you need them, and use them correctly.
The Singular Possessive

In general, make the singular possessive by adding an apostrophe (’ ) and an s to a singular noun.

Instead of saying, “The car that belongs to Rebecca rolled into the swimming pool that Clyde owns,” we can say, “Rebecca’s car rolled into Clyde’s swimming pool.”

That is one of the main uses of the possessive: to indicate ownership.
The Singular Possessive

Sally’s horse means the horse that Sally owns.

Joe’s wrenches means the wrenches that belong to Joe.

The dog’s tail means the tail that is part of the dog.

The cat’s collar means the collar the belongs to and is worn by the cat.
We also use the possessive to indicate relationships other than ownership.

We speak of “Lisa’s husband” without meaning that Lisa owns the man as she could own a car or a lawn mower.

The expression “David’s grandmother” does not suggest that David owns the old lady and is free to sell her.

But we still use the possessive in such expressions to indicate a special relationship between the nouns.
Greek names that end with -es (pronounced eez) take only an apostrophe in the possessive case.

Socrates’ accusers       Sophocles’ plays
Diomedes’ war cry       Aristophanes’ comedies

Traditionally, the possessives of Jesus and Moses have only the apostrophe:

Jesus’ disciples       Moses’ leadership
The Plural Possessive

To make a plural possessive, first make the noun plural, and then add the sign of possession.

Singular possessive: the girl’s hat (girl + ’ + s)
Plural possessive: the girls’ hats (girl + s + ’)

Singular possessive: the dog’s paws (dog + ’ + s)
Plural possessive: the dogs’ paws (dog + s + ’)

Singular possessive: the lady’s purse
Plural possessive: the ladies’ purses
Plural First; then Possessive

Some English nouns become plural by changing vowels or adding endings. For instance, *child* becomes *children*, *woman* becomes *women*, *brother* becomes *brethren*.

With nouns that change to become plural, follow the same rule: Make the noun plural first, and then add the sign of possession.

Singular: the woman’s hat  Plural: the women’s hats
Singular: the child’s toys  Plural: the children’s toys
Singular: the man’s suit  Plural: the men’s suits
Possessive Pronouns

Possessive pronouns do not have apostrophes. **No possessive pronoun has an apostrophe.**

Correct: That car is hers  
**Never:** That car is her’s.

Correct: This car is ours.  
**Never:** This car is our’s.

Correct. Is this car yours?  
**Never:** Is this car your’s?

Remember the rule: **No possessive pronoun has an apostrophe. Ever.**
If you remember that no possessive pronoun has an apostrophe, then you will know whether to use *its* or *it’s*.

**It’s** = contraction of *it is*.
- It’s hot today.
- It’s easy to make mistakes with possessives.

**Its** = possessive case of *it*.
- The puppy chased its tail.
- The state neglected its highways and bridges.
Who’s or Whose?

Who’s = the contraction of who is.
Who’s going to the game tonight?
We don’t know who’s responsible for the bill.

Whose = possessive case of the pronoun who.
Whose car is parked on the lawn?
I couldn’t remember whose homework I had graded.
Possessives with Participles

A participle is also called a verbal noun. It is a verb that, with the addition of the -ing ending, acts like a noun. As Dr. John Opdycke says in *Harper’s English Grammar*, a verbal noun “expresses an action as a thing.”*

A participle or verbal noun can be modified by a possessive. That is, it is correct to say, “We were annoyed by *his* yelling” and incorrect to say, “We were annoyed by *him* yelling.”

Modify a Participle with a Possessive

Correct: I object to your leaving.
Incorrect: I object to you leaving.

Correct: The dog’s barking kept us awake.
Incorrect: The dog barking kept us awake.

Correct: Our success depends on my closing the deal.
Incorrect: Our success depends on me closing the deal.

Correct: We slept through the politician’s blithering.
Incorrect: We slept through the politician blithering.
Permissible Possession

Any noun that names a living thing can have a possessive case.

The horse’s mane    Sue’s books
The squid’s eyes     My brother’s office
The wolves’ territory The children’s dinner
A spider’s web       My aunt’s house
Impermissible Possession

Most nouns that name inanimate things should not be made possessive.

Say “the walls of the house” rather than “the house’s walls.”

Say “the door of the truck” rather than “the truck’s door.”

Don’t say, “the stones’ color.” Instead, say, “the color of the stones.”
Exceptions: Idiomatic Possessives

We have some traditional expressions that use the possessive in strange, idiomatic ways.

For pity’s sake. (The pity doesn’t own the sake.).

An honest day’s work. (The day didn’t do and doesn’t own the work.)

A stone’s throw. (The stone didn’t do the throwing; nor does it own the throw.)
Exceptions: Idiomatic Possessives

Old expressions such as “for pity’s sake” and “a stone’s throw” might not seem logical—saying “for the sake of pity” and “the distance that a stone can be thrown” would make better logical sense—but they are perfectly acceptable parts of the language.
Use As Needed

Using possessives where you need them and using them correctly will make for better grades on writing assignments. Correct possessives also show readers that you know how to use the language and that you care about getting things right.

Instructors aren’t the only people who notice missing and incorrect possessives. Employers, too, care about good language skills.