USING THE APOSTROPHE

The apostrophe is used to show

1. omission in contractions
2. plurals of letters, numbers, and words used as words.
3. possession or kinship.

The rules for where to put the apostrophe are very simple.

1. Omission of a letter or letters in words and numerals in contractions
   - who’s (who is)
   - o’clock (of the clock)
   - isn’t (is not)
   - they’re (they are)
   - can’t (cannot)
   - we’re (we are)
   - wouldn’t (would not)
   - the Spirit of ‘76 (the Spirit of 1776)
   - couldn’t (could have)

2. Plurals of figures, letters, and words referred to as words
   - The word “occasion” contains two c’s and one s.
   - It is difficult to distinguish between your 2’s and 3’s.
   - The +’s outnumber the -‘s.
   - There are too many very’s in your essay.

3. Possession indicating ownership or kinship
   - John’s car
   - My mom’s aunt’s husband
   - The boys’ club
   - The women’s club
   - Mary’s house
   - The dog’s house
   - the girls’ dormitory
   - the men’s group
   - Peter’s cat’s claws
   - The sun’s heat
   - The Smiths’ home
   - The children’s toys

The ownership rule is the most complex, but if you learn to add only an apostrophe if the word already ends in s and to add an apostrophe then the s [ s’ ] if the word does not end in s you’ll get by for now.

More detailed rules (i.e.: Never use an apostrophe with a possessive pronoun; collective ownership is shown by using only one apostrophe after the final noun.) can be touched on later.

What is more difficult with regard to the possessive apostrophe is knowing exactly when it is needed.

Students often wind up using as many apostrophes as they can without reasoning why or when an apostrophe should be used.

Think of the possessive apostrophe as a sort of abbreviation: “John’s car” is shorthand for “The car of John.”

It’s a good idea to get in the habit of testing your apostrophes by rewording a possessive phrase. Practice this with the list in the possession list above. (Hint: “The husband of the aunt of my mom.”)

A sentence like this might turn up on a test:

*The Presidents dogs leash was lost when the family left its kennel at their Texas ranch.*

And some incorrect responses will be as extreme as:

*The President’s dog’s leash was’ lost when the family left it’s kennel at there Texas’ ranch.*

OR

*The Presidents’ dogs’ leashes’ was lost when the family left its kennel at they’re Texas ranch.*

To solve the apostrophe puzzle in the original sentence, the first step is to find out what belongs to whom.
The President's dog's leash was lost when the family left its kennel at their Texas ranch.

In the original sentence above four objects are marked for ownership: “dog of the president,” “leash of the dog,” “kennel of the dog (it),” “ranch of the family (them).” (Texas modifies the ranch that already belongs to the family not to Texas.)

Take each of the four objects one at a time. Read the rest of the sentence for necessary context issues.

Presidents dog? How many Presidents are there? Just one, so the word is President and an 's needs to be added.

dogs leash? …a little trickier. There could be more than one dog. How do we know? Can two or more dogs own one leash? It’s not likely, but possible. “its kennel” clinches it. There’s just one dog and we have to add the apostrophe then the “s.”

its kennel? …now this is a little different. Here we have to decide between the contraction for “it is” and the possessive pronoun. Since we’ve already determined that the kennel belongs to the dog, we can rule out the contraction and leave its kennel. Remember that possessive pronouns were created especially to show ownership and that no apostrophe is needed with any possessive pronoun.

their Texas ranch? This phrase is handled the same way as “its kennel.” We’ve already determined that the ranch belongs to the family so the possessive pronoun is called for; “their” is already correct.

This leaves us with the correct version of the original sentence:

The President’s dog’s leash was lost when the family left its kennel at their Texas ranch.

Treat each sentence as an individual logic problem. Punctuation marks are added to make sentences more clear, so it’s not unusual to read a sentence that doesn’t initially make sense to you on a punctuation test. However, each sentence should have the context clues that will allow you to make sense of the sentence.

A few things to watch out for:

Only nouns (and indefinite pronouns) take apostrophes. When students put apostrophes at the end of verbs (Marc was’ walking home,) teachers just hang their heads. Never put a possessive apostrophe on a verb or any part of speech that is not used as a noun.

Possessive pronouns never require apostrophes:

your, yours
our, ours
my, mine
their, theirs
his
hers
its
whose

These sometimes do get confused with certain contractions and homonyms, however. Watch out for these common mistakes:

you’re= you are      they’re= they are      there      it’s= it is      who’s= who is

Joint ownership is shown with a single apostrophe:

“Frank’s and Mark’s books” means that they each have their own books.

“Frank and Mark’s books” means that they each have ownership of a single collection of books.

Family names do not automatically require an apostrophe. Read the sentence carefully and determine usage:

The Smiths have a nice house.
(There’s no ownership; the verb describes the relationship between house and Smiths—more than one person with the name Smith.)

The Smiths’ house is nice.
(The house of the Smiths—more than one person with the name Smith showing ownership of the house)