

The apostrophe: Contrary to popular belief, it doesn't swing both ways

By Julie Elman

I admit it. I have a serious apostrophe pet peeve. I hate to see backwards apostrophes used in place of omitted letters.

Example: I'm really into rock 'n' roll, especially from the '60s.

Those reversed marks get me every time. Might as well just stick the sharp end of an apostrophe in my eye. Whenever I see the marks used improperly on television signage, I fire off e-mails to the shows' "contact us" links. I yammer on about the correct use of these marks to my visual communication students. I seek out examples to scan or photograph that illustrate this common mistake.

And recently, after delving into the subject of apostrophes in even greater detail than I ever anticipated, I felt ready to sign up and join the club on some Web sites I stumbled upon, including: The Apostrophe Protection Society (www.apostrophe.fs-net.co.uk, a site "with the specific aim of preserving the correct use of this currently much abused punctuation mark ...") and Apostrophe Abuse (www.apostropheabuse.com, a collection of "links and visuals illustrating an orthographic pet peeve."

Who knew that the apostrophe could generate such impassioned pleas for proper usage?

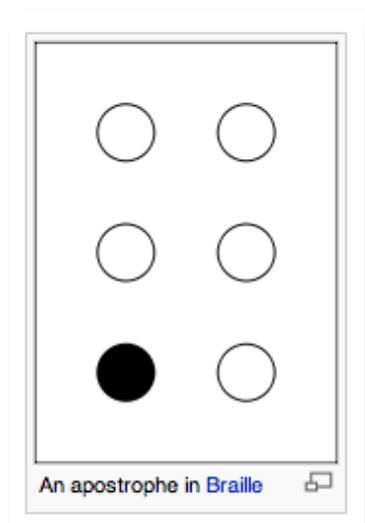
The mark is a simple one, and Wikipedia offers a succinct description of its typographic characteristics: "The apostrophe originates in manuscript writing, as a point with a downwards tail curving clockwise. This form was inherited by the typographic (or typeset) apostrophe ('), also called the 'curly apostrophe.' Later sans-serif typefaces had stylized apostrophes with a more geometric or simplified form, but usually retaining the same directional bias as a closing quotation mark."

For some people, it's difficult to figure out where and when to use an apostrophe to indicate the possessive in nouns and pronouns (Is it the peoples' or the people's clubhouse?), but at least the apostrophes in these cases usually hang correctly (if they're there at all).

An apostrophe is an apostrophe is an apostrophe, I tell my students. When used to indicate omitted letters that fall on the



The apostrophe



An example from Wikipedia



From killtheapostrophe.com



Good thing this is just a piece of cake. Boston Cream Pie, posing as a rogue apostrophe at a restaurant in Boston, Mass.

left side of the letters than remain, *don't* turn it into a right closing quotation mark. It's as simple as that.

Another tidbit found on Wikipedia: "Misused apostrophes are sometimes referred to as '*idiot's apostrophe*,' a literal translation of the German expression 'Deppenapostrophe,' which criticizes the misapplication of apostrophes."

"Idiot!" is exactly what I want to shout out to the professional writers of TV shows who don't have a clue which way the apostrophe swings.

I've witnessed apostrophic ("of or characteristic of apostrophe," says one online dictionary) occurrence on national television a few times recently, which prompted me to fire off a couple of e-mails to Court TV and the E! Channel. (Even The Daily Show with John Stewart used an apostrophe incorrectly in the name of a book title on a sign that sat behind the host's desk – but I let that one go.)

The response to my e-mails (from my perspective, a huge copy editing favor?) Zilch.

Deppenapostrophe!

I'm not over the edge yet. But when I am, I may have to seriously consider joining The Apostrophe Abolition Campaign (www.killtheapostrophe.com), a Web site "for those who want to remove the apostrophe from the English language, on the basis that it serves only to annoy those who know how it is supposed to be used and to confuse those who don't."

flood of '97

10 years later: anniversary brings memories rushing back as a painful time gets revisited.

From the cover of a student-produced college magazine. Seeing this (for me) is like listening to fingernails running down a chalkboard.

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<http://ilovetypography.com>