

## Business Writing: Using Contractions Isn't a Bad Thing

Business writing today is much less formal than it was twenty years ago, mainly due to the influence of email. Most people use email as an alternative to face-to-face conversation where informality is key.

Since we frequently use contractions when speaking, it's certainly acceptable to use contractions in most of our daily business writing. However, confusion over the correct form can complicate the issue.

When we "contract" words, we make one word out of two. To show that letters are missing, we use an apostrophe in place of the missing letters. *Do not* becomes *don't*; *I am* becomes *I'm*; *cannot* becomes *can't*. (Note that *cannot* is actually already one word--an exception to the two-word rule. It is incorrect to write "I can not attend the meeting." It should be written, "I cannot attend the meeting" or "I can't attend the meeting.")

Apostrophes can be confusing because they're also used to show possession: *man's office*; *woman's briefcase*; *executive's decision*. Don't be misled into thinking *theirs* or *hers*, which also show possession, should have apostrophes: They are *personal possessive pronouns* (like *mine*, *his*, *its*), which never have apostrophes. An easy way to remember is this rhyme: "Possessive *its* never splits."

The following sentence shows examples of contractions (missing letters) and a personal possessive pronoun: "*It's* too bad the dog *doesn't* have *its* own house."

When determining whether to use *it's* or *its*, ask yourself if you're *contracting* two words or if you want to show *possession*. In other words, "Do I mean *it is* (or *it has*--as in '*It's* got the biggest window') or am I referring to ownership?"

Remember that although it's okay to use contractions in business writing, it's not always preferable. When you want to emphasize a point, using two words might be a better choice: "Despite the economic downturn, we *are not* planning to downsize our work force in the near future."

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