



Whose?

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The editing staff receives a steady stream of queries—mostly from harassed secretaries—concerning the correct form of the possessive or plural (or plural possessive) of a proper name or title. This is not much of a problem to us in working on drafts because we follow one simple rule that covers nearly all such situations: avoid them. However, when we are asked by phone about a specific problem, our return query “Do you have to use it?” usually is answered “Yes.” This column thus has two aims: (1) to suggest how to handle some of the easiest situations when you can’t avoid them, and (2) to illustrate some of the snares and pitfalls that have to be avoided at all costs. These queries usually arise when someone is trying to put vocal phraseology into writing. Many of the correct forms that sound all right in speech look clumsy—or even ridiculous—on paper. For example, the possessive of Jones is *Jones’s* (not *Jones’*); the plural is *Joneses* (not *Jones’s*); and the plural possessive—if you really must use it—is *Joneses’*!

It is perhaps somewhat harder to avoid the singular possessive than the other forms. Fortunately, the rule for this form is quite simple: add *’s*, regardless of the original ending—thus, *Robert’s*, *Jonas’s*, and even *Bess’s*. This rule has only a few exceptions, and they all deal with names such as those in the classics and

the Bible, which are not likely to turn up in the consulting profession.

Unless the plural of a proper name can be formed simply by adding *s*, it should be avoided, and this is usually easy. Instead of *Joneses*, use *Mr. and Mrs. Jones*, or *the Jones family*, or *the Jones brothers*. The same goes for plural possessives. *The Joneses’ holdings* may be correct, but it looks odd; *the Jones family’s holdings* is much more satisfactory.

One problem comes up often enough to warrant special mention: the possessive form of a term that already contains a possessive—like *Board of Directors*. Here, avoiding the extra possessive is mandatory. Any attempt to add a possessive to the one already involved produces nonsense. *The Board of Directors’ decisions* implies that the Board’s membership comprises something known as “Directors’ decisions.” *The board’s of Directors decisions* would mean that this Board makes certain decisions categorized as “of Directors.” If the group has been labeled in full earlier, your best solution is to suppress half its name—either *the board’s decisions* or *the Directors’ decisions*. As a last resort, you must turn the phrase around—*the decisions of the Board of Directors*.

The more complicated the problem gets, the more important it becomes to avoid it altogether. Take, for instance, the possessive form of a compound title. *The*

vice president for internal relations’s responsibilities may be considered a grammatically acceptable phrase by some authorities, but we feel it looks awful, and we beg you not to use it.

Your editing staff would also like to take this opportunity to frown sternly on the practice of using *whose* as a possessive for anything but people. Writing *a company whose personnel* is not acceptable, even though there is no other convenient possessive pronoun. Either you must use the slightly stuffy but correct construction, *a company the personnel of which*, or (and this is strongly urged) you must avoid the possessive construction altogether.

Finally, let’s pin down once and for all the possessive form of *it*: it’s *its*. ■

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