

A woman with brown hair tied back, wearing a dark blue shirt, is looking upwards and to the right with a thoughtful expression, her hand resting on her chin. Above her head are several colorful, overlapping speech bubbles in shades of orange, green, and purple. A large, semi-transparent dark blue rectangle is positioned behind the text, which is centered within it.

How to spell
Your, You're,
There, They're,
Their, It's and Its

How to spell Your, You're, There, They're, Their, It's and Its

Do you ever struggle with **your and you're**? Do you know when to use **there, they're and their**? What about **it's and its**?

Do you use the apostrophe in “it’s a nice day” or in “the planet had it’s own gravitational force”?* Now, I know you’re getting a teensy little headache just thinking about this, but stay with me, there will be prizes later. You can win the spelling wars, without bloodshed.



Having been a structural and developmental book editor for twenty years, I know perhaps better than many people that there’s more to life than spelling. I’ve been in the spelling trenches, so to speak, and I wouldn’t want to live there.

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But even if you want to zero in on purely publishing concerns, spelling still isn't the be-all and end-all. With non-fiction writing especially, content is much more important than small issues of form. A cracking good how-to book full of fantastic ground-breaking ideas is unlikely to be rejected just because the author has the odd spelling glitch. Spelling, we can fix. So, when the Spelling SAS are massing in their flak jackets, you'll more likely find me having a nice hot cup of tea.

Why does the spelling of these stupid little words matter?

But if you want to be a writer, it does matter that you can spell these words. Here's why:

1. Sadly, not everyone is as tolerant as you and I. Some people will ignore or devalue your good ideas just because you can't spell, especially if you are in the writing field. It will eat away at your credibility.
2. Lower credibility means a shaky author platform. Even if people can see through your lousy spelling to your good ideas, they will be less likely to tweet your writings or recommend you to their friends, because that would in turn undermine their own credibility.
3. If you're planning to self-publish a book, you don't want to pay your editor for the extra hours it will take to fix a lot of little gremlins you could have neutralised yourself.
4. If you're looking for a traditional publisher, in these competitive times bad spelling could just be the tipping point that slides you onto the slush pile. Don't give them the excuse.

Ensure your credibility and your long-term career success by taking a few minutes to get these tricky little suckers right, in your books as well as your blogs.

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But isn't it difficult?

No. Not any more. You **can** do it. Here's an easy chart.

Your, You're

- your – possessive, the thing belonging to you. See how it ends in “our”? Use that as a reminder. When it belongs to us, it's our thing. When it belongs to you, it's your thing.
- you're – a contraction of the words “you are”. The apostrophe is your signal that the word can be split into two words.

There, They're, Their

- there – a location. Think of “where” with the first letter changed.
- they're – a contraction of the words “they are”. The apostrophe is your signal that the word can be split into two words.
- their – possessive, the thing belonging to them. Take the “t” off, and you have “heir”. What does an heir inherit? Something now belonging to them!

It's, Its

These two silly little words have only three letters each and yet they punch far above their weight, apparently breaking all the rules and reducing grown writers to tears of frustration. But they will not defeat **you**.

The reason it confuses us is this: we see the “s” on the end of the word and immediately think about it like a noun. With a noun, the “s” would make it plural (“three dogs”) or with an “apostrophe-s” it would be possessive (“the dog's dinner bowl”). **But “it” is not a noun.** Shake that idea out of your head, and suddenly it becomes clear...**

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- it's – again, like you're and they're above, this is a contraction, in this case of the words “it is”. It is **not** a possessive apostrophe like the ones you see after nouns. **This apostrophe is your signal that the word can be split into two words.**
- its – possessive, the thing belonging to it. Remember it by thinking of the other form, and ask yourself, “Can I break this into two words (“it is”) in this sentence?” If the answer is no, you don't want an apostrophe. Put the apostrophe down, and walk away from the its.

So, don't let the little words gang up on you. They're not as mean as they seem.

What about my prize? You said there'd be prizes

The prize is being a professional and reliable writer, with good and growing credibility, who doesn't have to pay their editor too much. What greater prize than that? Congratulations!

* The first one is correct. “The planet had its own gravitational force” is possessive and has no apostrophe. But you knew that, because you read the whole article!

** “It” is a pronoun. If you don't know what that is, just have a nice cup of tea and don't worry about it. It just means you can't necessarily expect it to behave like a noun.



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