



Device #21

Apostrophe:

My friend, if you learn to use apostrophe well, you will surely be a beloved writer.

Apostrophe is a rhetorical device in which the writer breaks out of the flow of the writing to directly address a person or personified object. It should not be confused with the punctuation mark of the same name, to which it has no relation.

The *apostrophe* is a forceful, emotional device. The feeling it evokes is that the writer has become so caught up in what he or she is writing that it is no longer possible to respect the bounds of the narrative. Instead, the text must break free and speak directly to something or someone. The *apostrophe* lets the writer demonstrate this fervor in a way that helps reinforce the central point. The Bible uses *apostrophe* frequently: “*O Death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?*” (1 Corinthians)

You will likely find the most use for *apostrophe* in informal writing contexts. Creative writing and persuasive essays that lean heavily on emotional strength are ideal places for *apostrophe*. In formal persuasive and informative essays, using *apostrophe* might seem a bit melodramatic and distracting. When you do use it, you will probably be directing your speech directly at the reader, rather than personifying a thing or concept, as in the third example that follows.

Example #1: “So the sun set over Paris—Paris, my first love, sultry and secretive, beguiling and shy, how I wanted to hold you forever as the sun went down that summer day.”

Example #2: “So we near our conclusion, and I must ask you, my wise reader, to bear with me for one more small digression.”

Example #3: “Liberty, O glorious triumph of man, O mighty force that ends all tyranny! Wherever man shakes off his shackles, there you dwell!”

Exercise 1:

Over the next week or so, pay attention to the newspapers, magazines, or blogs that you read. Listen closely to people you hear speaking, whether on television, radio, online, or in person. Note any uses of *apostrophe* (direct address of a person or thing, not the punctuation mark) you encounter and list them. Also, decide whether each particular construction was effective or not and explain why. *The first one has been done for you as an example.*

- Apostrophe:** *Critics, beware! There’s a new film maker in town.*
Source: *Independent film blog*
Effective or not: *effective*
Explanation: *The blogger is not addressing any specific critic, but is railing against the group. The direct address is more effective than simply saying, “critics should be aware....”*
- Apostrophe:**
Source:
Effective or not:
Explanation:
- Apostrophe:**
Source:
Effective or not:
Explanation:
- Apostrophe:**
Source:
Effective or not:
Explanation:
- Apostrophe:**
Source:

Exercise 2:

Improve the following paragraph by adding 2 examples of *apostrophe*; then explain how and why the additions are improvements.

"Whoever undertakes to write a biography binds himself to lying, to concealment, to flummery, and even to hiding his own lack of understanding, since biographical material is not to be had, and if it were it could not be used. Truth is not accessible; mankind does not deserve it"—Sigmund Freud.

In less formal writing, *apostrophe* must be handled carefully, or the sentences will seem too flowery and overwrought. This example—or something similar to it—may lead the reader to feel that the writer is too wrapped up in ordinary tasks: "*Cleanliness is the greatest virtue of a kitchen. Oh, cleanliness, with your shining counters and glowing dishes, you are denied to me!*"

When you encounter *apostrophe* in formal writing, which is rare, you should carefully consider how it is used, and whether it truly serves the writer's purpose.

Exercise 3:

The following includes a few *apostrophes*, which we have underlined. What is the emotional impact of each *apostrophe*? To whom is Antony speaking?

ANTONY

O mighty Caesar! dost thou lie so low?

Are all thy conquests, glories, triumphs, spoils,

Shrunk to this little measure? Fare thee well.

I know not, gentlemen, what you intend.

Who else must be let blood, who else is rank:

If I myself, there is no hour so fit

As Caesar's death hour, nor no instrument

Of half that worth as those your swords, made rich
With the most noble blood of all this world.

I do beseech ye, if you bear me hard,

Now, whilst your purpled hands do reek and smoke,

Fulfill your pleasure. Live a thousand years,

I shall not find myself so apt to die:

No place will please me so, no mean of death,

As here by Caesar, and by you cut off,

The choice and master spirits of this age.

It is obvious, astute reader that you are, that using apostrophe can assist in getting your point across.

Apostrophe, most often found in creative writing and emotionally charged essays, does allow persuasive writers to emphasize a point with a fervor that supports it, such as, "*O, brave new world, that has such people in't...*" When overused, however, it can feel melodramatic or forced. *Apostrophe* is a favorite tool of propagandists and demagogues, and as the previous quotation from *The Tempest* shows, it was also used by Shakespeare. Another example of a pointed and necessary *apostrophe* is John Donne's famous heart-rending assertion: "*Death, be not proud, though some have called thee / Mighty and dreadful.*" To speak directly to the idea of death and say that it has no reason to enjoy its reputation requires a powerful device, and *apostrophe* fits perfectly here.

Apostrophe involves changing the direction of the narrative to address a person or object, as in the following two examples: "*O, pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth, / That I am meek and gentle with these butchers!*" and "*Obviously, I would not discuss such a topic with ordinary readers, but you seem like the more intelligent sort and well able to handle this complex concept.*" In the first example, which is from *Julius Caesar*, Antony speaks to Caesar's dead body, calling it "earth." Shakespeare has used both *apostrophe* and a form of *metaphor* in the sentence. In the second example, the writer is speaking to the readers, flattering them by stating that they have the ability



Exercise 4:

Write 3 passages of your own in which you use *apostrophe*.

1.

2.

3.