

Three rules for selecting the correct 'its'

One of the most frequent errors now made in written English involves the use of "its" — in the forms its, it's or its'.

It is the apostrophe that baffles people; knowledge of what the apostrophe represents and how to use it correctly has become shaky. However, in the case of 'its', the rules are simple.

Here they are, in plain English.

Rule 1

NEVER use its'. There is no such word. If you are ever tempted to such usage, think again. It is wrong. It should be one of rules 2 or 3.

Rule 2

"It's" is a contraction of two words, either:

- It is; or
- It has.

Examples:

It's not my fault that we were late for the appointment.
(It is not my fault that we were late for the appointment)

Try the chilli dip — it's red hot!
(Try the chilli dip — it is red hot!)

It's been a tough week for the whole family.
(It has been a tough week for the whole family.)

There is no possessive usage of "it's"; for example:

The dog gnawed on it's bone. This is incorrect. It should be:
The dog gnawed on its bone.

The rule:

When you use "it's", it is ALWAYS a contraction. If you can't substitute "it is" or "it has" and still have the sentence make sense, you should be using "its".

Rule 3

"Its" is the possessive of "it". Use "its" when referring to a thing or characteristic that is 'possessed' by the entity you are writing about.

(People are 'he/his' or 'she/her'. Entities, organisations, companies, things, plants and often animals are 'it'.)

For example:

Every city has its dark side.
(The city 'possesses' a dark side. It [the city] has its dark side.)

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David Smith's book sharpens its lessons with examples from real life.
(The book 'possesses' lessons with examples from real life. It [the book] sharpens its lessons with examples from real life.)

The dog gnawed on its bone.

(This can be trickier; the dog is anonymous and without gender, so 'its' is appropriate and correct. However, outdated common practice has been to assign male gender in such instances: The dog gnawed on his bone. Either usage would be acceptable, depending on what you wanted to convey; for example, in writing fiction, where you could equally say: The dog gnawed on her bone. A plant or a tree would be an 'it': The massive tree stretched its highest limbs towards the sun.)

The rule:

Use "its" where "it's" [remember, that means "it is" or "it has"] turns the sentence into nonsense.

Every city has *it is* dark side. Nonsense
Every city has its dark side. Correct

Examples of incorrect usage

Examples of incorrect usage abound, even in publications that should know better (e.g. quality newspapers and magazines). Sign writers also make their share of errors. Here are some examples; more will be added as they are collected.

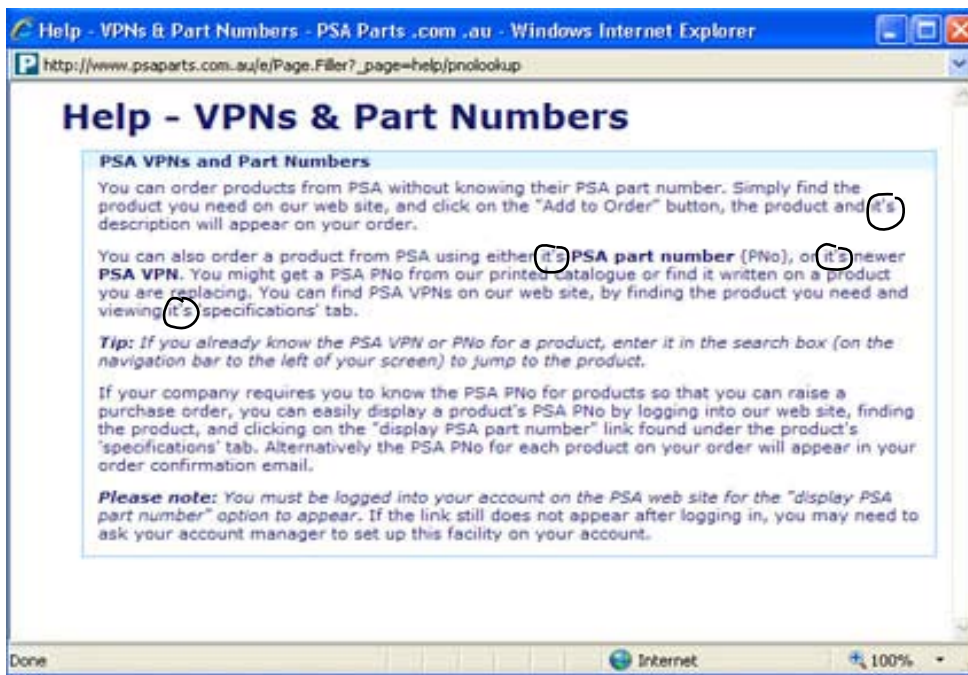


Spotted on the side of an icecream delivery van in Melbourne, Australia — in very large type!

Correct usage is 'its'.

So what that Mom pops pills like circus peanuts? Or that these three sisters would be Chekhov's worst nightmare? Who needs happy marriages and kids who make you proud? Good or bad, family is family. So when the Old Man goes missing, its up to everyone to drop what they're doing and haul their burdens of resentment and their sorry asses back home to Osage County, Oklahoma.

Spotted in the Melbourne Theatre Company's 2009 season brochure. It is a handsome production, with lots of its/it's used correctly. But the proofreader missed this one. It should be it's (or 'it is').



It is hardly worth citing Internet examples; there are so many errors! Here is an example where the writer had no idea. In each instance, correct usage is 'its'.

Contribute to the collection

Do you have any examples of its/it's howlers in respectable publications? Or seen in very large type on public signs? We particularly like articles where every single usage is wrong! Send your contributions (as a JPG or GIF file) to info@profwordservices.com.au and we will add them to this file.