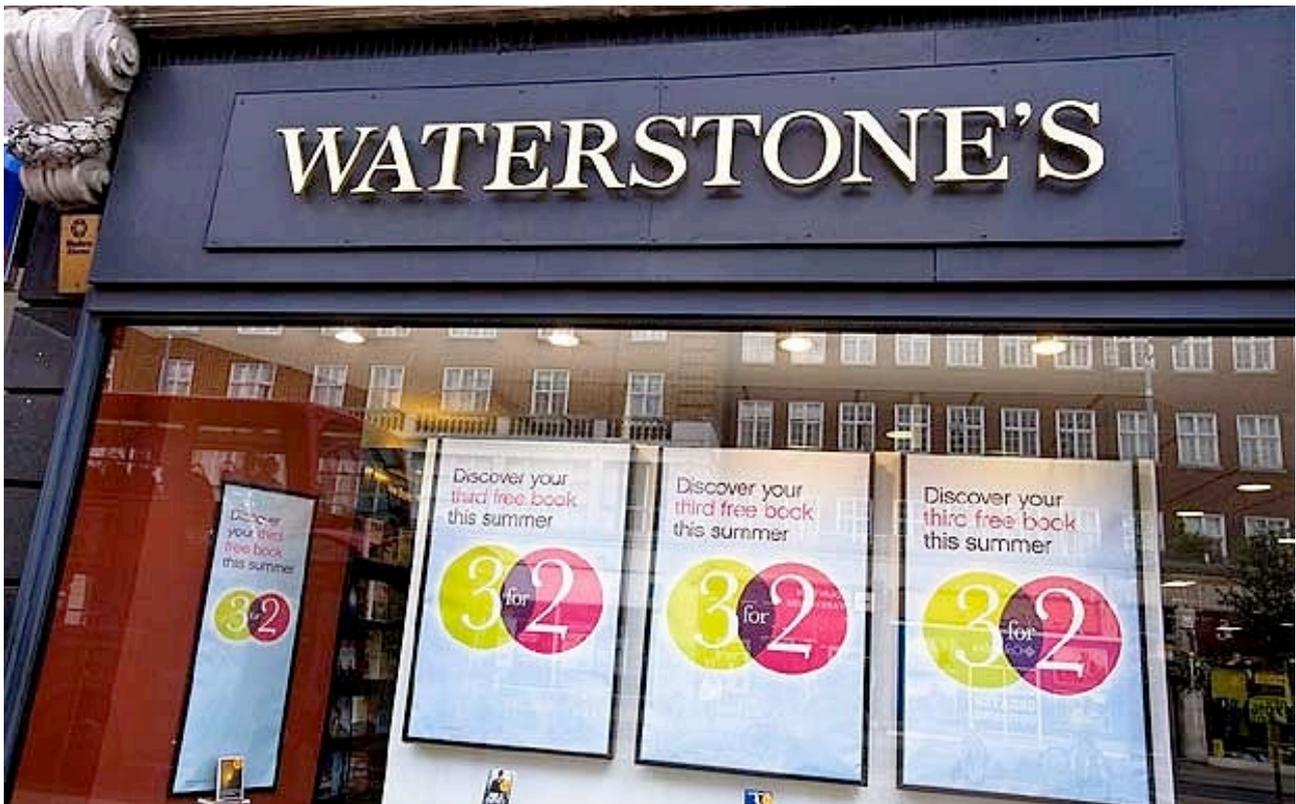


The Telegraph

Leave the apostrophe alone – it makes sense

We should be more possessive about our punctuation, whatever 'Waterstones' thinks.



Farewell to the apostrophe: Waterstone's has become Waterstones as the company says this makes more sense in the digital age Photo: ALAMY

By Philip Hensher

Are you an accurate and correct user of English? Of course you are. Well, answer the following question. Is there an apostrophe in any of the following, and, if so, where? 1) Barons Court; 2) Finnegans Wake; 3) Earls Court; 4) Howards End; 5) the 1960s; 7) Its usually time to give the dog its dinner, before the childrens; 8) Howards Way; 9) Harrods; 10) Goethes Faust; and 11) Waterstones.

Simple. There's no apostrophe in Barons Court, Finnegans Wake, Howards End, or Harrods; there is at least one apostrophe in Earl's Court, "it's usually time to give the dog its dinner, before the children's", and Howard's Way. There is an apostrophe in Goethe's Faust if you are writing in English, but not in German; there may or may not be an apostrophe in the 1960s (1960's), depending on whom you ask; and there was an apostrophe in Waterstone's

until the other day. If you could answer all of those correctly without checking, you are either slightly obsessive or a sub-editor.

When Waterstones (as we must now call it) decided to drop its apostrophe, its new chairman, James Daunt, explained that it was a matter of simplifying the name to suit its digital presence. The internet has introduced us to a large range of new punctuation, in the form of emoticons and irony-signallers, and popularised previously rare points, such as the reverse solidus, or backslash. It has also, however, found other punctuation difficult to deal with. In particular, the apostrophe.

On hearing of Waterstones's (as we must now say) change of heart over its possessive apostrophe, John Richards, chairman of the Apostrophe Protection Society, said: "It's just plain wrong. It's grammatically incorrect. If Sainsbury's and McDonald's can get it right, then why can't Waterstone's?" But in fact, it's not quite as simple as that. Sainsbury's and McDonald's do indeed preserve the apostrophe on their shopfronts. Their websites' URLs, however, are without it. A web address could, I suppose, include an apostrophe. But if it did, it would turn away anyone who thought the shop might be called Sainsburys' or Sainsburys. Better to omit the apostrophe. The general rule about the apostrophe is fairly straightforward. It indicates omitted letters, as in "fo'shizzle" or "huntin', shootin', and fishin' ". The possessive function is shown before the s in the singular – "my wife's hat" – or in plurals that don't involve an s – "my children's criminal records". It comes after the s for regular plurals of nouns – "all the dogs' dinners" and after rare proper nouns ending in s – "I love P D James' (or James's) books". Oh, and there isn't one in the possessive "its", just to trip you up. Occasionally we disagree over the 1960s. Or an author could decide that he's not going to have one in his title, as Forster or Joyce did. And some Underground stations and shops do and some don't. But apart from that it's perfectly straightforward.

The main point of it is to distinguish a plural noun from a possessive. There is a difference between Roald Amundsen, on his way back from the South Pole, saying "I have no more dinner: I'm going to eat the dogs'," and "going to eat the dogs." But it apparently defeats many people. The "greengrocer's apostrophe", in which vegetables are labelled "carrot's", "pea's" and "potato's" has spread and spread, to the point where some people evidently believe that an apostrophe is what comes before a final s.

It's not just a problem in English, either. Bastian Sick, in his delightful series of grammar-maven books about German usage, "Der Dativ ist dem Genitiv sein Tod", or "The Dative is the Death of the Genitive", has described the spread of the apostrophe. The German language has a perfectly good possessive which goes with a personal pronoun, like this: "Gib mir Claudias Buch", no apostrophe. Under the influence of the English, Germans have in recent

years started writing “Claudia’s Buch” and even, to Herr Sick’s disdain, adding it to plural nouns that end in s. “This sign on the shop window of an antique shop in Dresden changed my life forever,” one horrified correspondent wrote of one imported example of the greengrocer’s apostrophe.

And, yes, these things do matter. Correct usage has become more, not less important with the advent of the computer. We are all submerged by messages by email from institutions and companies, some perfectly genuine, others not. It’s striking that many fraudulent “phishing” emails contain mistakes in language, misspelt words and misplaced apostrophes. Most reputable companies, even now, make a point of rejecting applicants for jobs who can’t write a correct English sentence, and it is a fair bet that any letter pretending to come from a bank which says “inconvinience” or “our customers security” is emanating from a crook. If you weren’t paying attention in school, and don’t know whether a phishing email is written in correct English or not, then let’s face it: you deserve to be robbed.

Nearly 10 years after Lynne Truss mounted her wonderful assault on all slackness in punctuation, Eats, Shoots and Leaves, the best-known bookshop in England decides that it doesn’t want its apostrophe any longer. Well, it is its right to punctuate its name any way it chooses. It could be worse: there is a character in Steve Martin’s L.A. Story, nee Sandy, who rechristens herself SanDeE*. For the rest of us, whatever the URL says, there is always going to be a little missing step before the s, not quite a glottal stop, not quite a breath; just the silent fragment of time that marks a missing apostrophe.