Grammar Nuggets

Plurals, Possessives, and Surnames Oh My!

By Kathy Sieckman, PP, PLS-SC, ACP

Continuing with an article that appeared in last month's issue of *the NALS docket*, we will talk specifically about using apostrophes with surnames (a person's last name).

The first rule—the most important thing to remember when working with surnames—is DO NOT EVER change a person's name. You cannot add an apostrophe before an "s" when the surname ends in "s." For instance, do not make the name "Andrews" possessive by putting the apostrophe between the "w" and the "s" (Andrew's). That is changing the spelling of "Andrews." A person's name is the most personal thing they have. Do not mess that up! Here are some tips for making surnames plural and possessive.

To make most surnames plural, add an "s."

• The Smiths went to the Halloween party dressed as dice.

That means more than one Smith went to the party. Where the surname ends in s, x, ch, sh, or z, add "es" to make the name plural.

• The Lopezes have been married for 50 years.

However, if adding es makes the name hard to pronounce, just use the "s."

• The Hastings went to the park for a picnic. (In this case Hastingses would be difficult to pronounce, so Hastings is better.)

When it comes to showing possession, to make most surnames possessive, simply add an apostrophe and an "s."

• Mr. Smith's car was repossessed.

For showing family possession with surnames that are plural and possessive, make the name plural first by adding an "s" and then add an apostrophe to make them possessive.

• The Smiths' car was parked illegally. (The car belonged to Mr. and Mrs. Smith.)

Where surnames end in "s," to make them possessive, pronounce the word. If you say the extra "s," add apostrophe and "s."

• Shirley Jones's son flunked algebra.

You would pronounce it "Joneses," so you add the apostrophe and "s." Where the surname ends in "s" and making it plural adds an extra syllable that makes it awkward to pronounce, add only the apostrophe.

• Mr. Andrews' house was broken into.

It is difficult to pronounce it "Andrewses," so you only add the apostrophe. Where you are talking about a surname that ends in "s" and you want it plural and possessive, make it plural first and then follow the rules on making it possessive.

• The Joneses' house was for sale.

You make Jones plural by adding "es" because it ends in "s," but adding an apostrophe and "s" after that would make it difficult to pronounce (Joneseses) so you just add the apostrophe.

Again, the main thing to remember is not to change the basic spelling of a person's name. Start with their name spelled correctly and then figure out how to make it plural and/or possessive.

Do not upset a person by misspelling their most precious possession—their name. Possessives and plurals are not difficult if you think about the base word you are trying to change and work from there.

Kathy Sieckman, PP, PLS-SC, ACP, has been a member of NALS for over 25 years and is currently serving as Co-Chair of the 2015 Las Vegas Conference Task Force and as a member of the NALS Editorial Board. Kathy has a blog on proofreading tips at http://proofthatblog.com. If you have specific grammar issues you would like covered in future issues, please send them to Kathy at proofthatblog@gmail.com.