APOSTROPHE TROUBLE: WHEN TO USE OR NOT

Its or It’s? Whose or Who’s? Your or You’re? There, Their or They’re?

These homophones (sound-alikes) pose vexing questions for many writers: even if we know the difference (but maybe can’t explain it), we often make typographical errors and insert one when we mean the other.

The difference: possessive versus contractions

Possessive pronouns modify nouns and indicate possession of those nouns

Whose car is that? The car belongs to Gary.

Contractions are a written manifestation of spoken language, in which letters are omitted to facilitate pronunciation; the missing letters are replaced with an apostrophe.

Who’s the owner of that car? = Who is the owner (an apostrophe replaces the “i” in “is”)

Examples

Its/It’s

The cat hurt its paw. (the paw of the cat: possessive)
It’s the cat purring. (it is: contraction)

Whose/Who’s

Whose car is that? (to whom does it belong: possessive)
Who’s the owner of this car? (who is: contraction)

Your/You’re

Is that your cat? (to whom does it belong? possessive)
You’re the owner of that cat? (who is: contraction)

Strategies

When in doubt, rephrase!
1. Ask yourself if the word in question can be rephrased as a possessive phrase, “of the [blank],” or a being phrase, “[blank] is”;  
2. “of the [blank],” no apostrophe; “[blank] is,” apostrophe required

Proofread any piece of writing one time through solely for instances of such words.

There, Their or They’re?

The first indicates place or location: Put the box over there.
The second indicates possession: Put their box in a separate place.
The third is a contraction for “they are”: They’re in the kitchen.

They’re (contraction) putting their (possessive) boxes over there (location).