

Ask About English

Possessives

Sahid from Bahrain asks:

Can you ever say 'school's principal' or 'bank's manager'?

Martin replies:

No, but! Normally you wouldn't say '**school's principal**' or '**bank's manager**' - you'd say **school principal** and **bank manager**.

Let's have a look at why:

In English, we can use nouns to modify other nouns. So we can say a computer expert - somebody who is an expert, a specialist, in computers, is a computer expert - not a computer's expert! Somebody who's in charge of a company is a company director. A producer who works in radio is a radio producer. And in the same way a person who is the manager of a bank is a bank manager, and a principal of a school is a school principal.

In some languages you can't do this; but in English, you can just put the two nouns together, and that's what we use.

Can we ever say school's principal or bank's manager?

Well the answer really is 'no' but very, very occasionally you might want to talk about the fact that the principal of a school doesn't belong to that school - it belongs to this school, to my school, and in that case I might say 'no, no, no, he's not your school's principal, he's my school's principal'; but notice there we're not really talking about his job, we're talking about which school he belongs to.

Common mistake

The most common mistake that people make with possessives, I think, is to avoid them, and to use 'of'. So, instead of saying 'the dog's bone', people say 'the bone of the dog' or 'the woman's husband' is 'the husband of the woman'.

Sometimes people say 'the book is for my son', as opposed to saying 'it's my son's book'.

It's my son's book! Pronunciation is kind of interesting with possessives, because I think

often we don't pronounce that 's' sound very clearly and so people often don't hear the possessive 's'. One of the problems in learning to use it is that you need to learn to recognize when it's there, because often it's said so quickly that it's easy to miss.

The other thing that is interesting is that the pronunciation changes, depending on the ending of the word. So if the word ends already in an 's' or a 'sh' sound, or a 'ch' sound, or a 'ge' sound, we have to put an 'es' on the end, so we would say the judge, but the judge's wig, or the church, but the church's congregation.

Plural possessives: what are the rules?

The rules are only to do with how they're written down, with the orthography. To really confuse everybody, if it's plural, we put an apostrophe after the 's'. So, if we say 'the girls' boyfriends' and we're talking about several girls, we put the apostrophe after the 's' when we write it. If we're talking about one girl, 'a girl's homework', we put the apostrophe before the 's'.