

Grammar mistakes that make you look like a dork: its vs. it's

Hi and welcome to the first grammar edition of the Better At English Podcast. Lori here, comin' atcha from the humble B@E studios here in southern Sweden.

Usually I focus on vocabulary and conversational English in these podcasts. But even if you've got an impressive vocabulary and are an amazing conversationalist, you'll still look like a total dork if you make careless grammar mistakes in your writing. And by "mistake" I mean things that are errors by anyone's definition of standard English, not contested usage points where expert opinion is divided (for example, the serial comma).

Some grammar mistakes are surprisingly frequent even among educated native speakers of English. When it comes to written English, a lot of these mistakes involve words or phrases that *sound* the same but are *spelled* differently. Usually these mistakes are obvious when someone points them out to you, but when you are busy focusing on what you're trying to say rather than worrying about grammatical accuracy, it's easy to let the sound you hear in your head trick you into writing the wrong form. Unfortunately, if you make this kind of mistake, you run the risk of making a really bad impression with your writing. But luckily, some of these mistakes are really easy to fix if you just know what to look for.

One of the most notorious of these grammatical pet peeves is when people write the wrong form of **its/it's**. That's what I will try to help you with today. This may be a bit difficult to follow if you are just listening, so I suggest you go to the website and have a look at the transcript.

Its/it's has two forms. One form has an apostrophe, spelled **I-T-apostrophe-S**, and is a contraction of it is or **it has**.

Here's an example where **it's** means **it is** : "Hooray! **It's** time for grammar!"

This means "Hooray, **it is** time for grammar."

Here's an example where **it's** means **it has**: "Wow! **It's** been a long time."

This means, "Wow! **It has** been a long time."

I can combine these two examples like this:

"Wow, **it's** been a long time since I heard a student say, 'Hooray, **it's** time for grammar!'"

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That means, "Wow, **it has** been a long time since I heard a student say, 'Hooray! **It is** time for grammar!' "

The other form of **its** has no apostrophe, it's spelled **I-T-S**, and is the possessive form of the pronoun **it**, which you can use when you're talking about something of or belonging to an "it."

Here are some examples:

- 1) Sweden is famous for **its** social welfare system and hot blonde chicks.
- 2) Volvo is famous for **its** boxy-but-safe car design.

Neither of those sentences would make sense if you replaced **its** with **it is** or **it has**.

Luckily, when you are speaking nobody can hear whether or not your brain is putting in apostrophes where they don't belong. Writing is where you will get in trouble.

Here is how you can avoid writing the wrong form of **its/it's** when you have an important piece of writing where you cannot possibly afford to look like a dork.

- 1) So here's step one. When you write, ask yourself if the **it's/its** you're about to write means **it is** or **it has**. If it does, then you can use the **it's** form WITH an apostrophe. If it doesn't make sense, then you need the form WITHOUT an apostrophe.

Here's an example:

*Sweden is famous for **its** social welfare.* Can you say, "Sweden is famous for **it is** social welfare" or "Sweden is famous for **it has** social welfare"? Nope, it doesn't work, so you know you need **its** with NO apostrophe.

If you are still confused, then try replacing the **its/it's** with another pronoun: **his**, **her**, or **their**. If one of those make sense grammar-wise, then you need **its** with NO apostrophe. Here's an example:

*Volvo is famous for **its** boxy-but-safe design.* You can try "Volvo is famous for their boxy-but-safe design." Yes, it makes sense! So you know that you use **its** with no apostrophe.

- 2) The second thing you should do is use the find feature of your word processing software to search for all instances of **its** (no apostrophe) and **it's** (with apostrophe). For each instance you find, perform the *it is / it has* or the *his-her-their* pronoun test. If you take the time to do this, you will never risk turning in piece of writing containing this dorky grammar mistake.

Good luck! It's been a lot of fun making this first grammar podcast for you. I

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hope you'll find it useful for avoiding the dorky its/it's mistake.

Before I sign off, just a little update on the two favors I asked of you in the last episode. Thanks to all who have recommended your favorite English books -- I really appreciate your input! If you still haven't made a recommendation, it's not too late. I'll be collecting suggestions for another week or so, and then summarize them on the website.

I had also asked you how you would feel about mild swearing in these podcasts. So far only one person has told me that it wouldn't be a good idea. To make it easier for you to have your say, I've put a poll up in the sidebar of the website at *Better At English dot com*. If you have any positive or negative feelings about mild profanity or swear words in these podcasts, please take the time to let me know.

Finally, I have some really cool news. Recently I started guest podcasting with Ben over at *Very Vocabulary dot com*. It's a 20-minute weekly vocabulary podcast that teaches a handful of advanced vocabulary words each week. It's aimed mainly at native speakers, but would be good for upper-intermediate to advanced learners of English as well. I hope you'll head over to *VeryVocabulary dot com* and check it out! Our first joint episode should be up in the next few days.

Thanks to all of you who have been writing in with feedback and kind words about the show. I really appreciate it! Special thanks to the nice person from Korea who left a review on the iTunes site. Reviews really help a lot to get new people interested in the show, so if you like what I do here, please take the time to leave a review on iTunes. If only one of every one hundred iTunes listeners left a review, there would be TONS of them, and it would totally make my day.

That's it for this time. We'll see you next time here at Better at English dot com. Bye for now!

Links:

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www.veryvocabulary.com