



GRAMMAR GROWLS WITH THE GRAMMAR OWL – ITS or IT'S



The Owl has another tricky apostrophe question in the grips of his apostrophe-shaped talons.

Is it its or it's? If you sometimes have trouble answering that question, you are not alone. Knowing when to put in the apostrophe and when to leave it out causes many people to stumble.

The problem is, of course, that we're used to an apostrophe s being added to a word to make the word a possessive. And unfortunately, that's not true in this case.

With its/it's, the apostrophe s is used ONLY when it's is standing in for the longer it is or it has.

It's an inflexible rule. It's been that way for a long time. (It is an inflexible rule. It has been that way for a long time.)

If you're writing a possessive, you leave out the apostrophe. The owl lifted its foot and scratched its head with its talon. (The owl possesses the foot, the head and the talon.)

With the apostrophe – it's – the word is a stand-in for it is or it has.

Without the apostrophe – its – the word is the possessive.

So to check which form you should be using in any given situation, substitute the two words it is or it has. If it makes sense to say it is or it has, put in the apostrophe. If it doesn't make sense, leave out the apostrophe.

It's or its Beth's hat. Does it make sense to say it is Beth's hat? Yes. Therefore use it's. It's Beth's hat.

The lion stalked its or it's prey. Does it make sense to say the lion stalked it is prey? No. Therefore use its. The lion stalked its prey.

That last one looks odd to our eyes, because we are so used to the possessive having an apostrophe, but you just have to accept that its is one possessive that does not possess an apostrophe.

The Owl and I hope that this problem never raises its claws at you again and that from now on it's easy for you to decide which form to use.