

TEACHING SHORTENING (CONTRACTION) IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Abstract: *By definition, a contraction is a shortened form of a group of words. Contractions are used in both written and oral communication. When a contraction is written in English, the omitted letters are replaced by an apostrophe.*

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This comparatively new way of word-building has achieved a high degree of productivity nowadays, especially in American English. Shortenings (or contracted/curtailed words) are produced in two different ways. The first is to make a new word from a syllable (rarer, two) of the original word. The latter may lose its beginning (as in phone made from telephone, fence from defence), its ending (as in hols from holidays, vac from vacation, props from properties, ad from advertisement) or both the beginning and ending (as in flu from influenza, fridge from refrigerator).

The second way of shortening is to make a new word from the initial letters of a word group: U.N.O. ['ju:neu] from the United Nations Organisation, B.B.C. from the British Broadcasting Corporation, M.P. from Member of Parliament. This type is called initial shortenings. They are found not only among formal words, such as the ones above, but also among colloquialisms and slang. So, g. f. is a shortened word made from the compound girl-friend. The word, though, seems to be somewhat ambiguous as the following conversation between two undergraduates clearly shows:

- Who's the letter from?
- My g. f.
- Didn't know you had girl-friends. A nice girl?
- Idiot! It's from my grandfather!

It is commonly believed that the preference for shortenings can be explained by their brevity and is due to the ever-increasing tempo of modern life. Yet, in the conversation given above the use of an ambiguous contraction does not in the least contribute to the brevity of the communication: on the contrary, it takes the speakers some time to clarify the misunderstanding. Confusion and ambiguousness are quite

natural consequences of the modern overabundance of shortened words, and initial shortenings are often especially enigmatic and misleading.

Both types of shortenings are characteristic of informal speech in general and of uncultivated speech particularly. The history of the American okay seems to be rather typical. Originally this initial shortening was spelt O.K. and was supposed to stand for all

correct. The purely oral manner in which sounds were recorded for letters resulted in O.K. whereas it should have been AC. or aysee. Indeed, the ways of words are full of surprises.

Here are some more examples of informal shortenings. Movie (from moving-picture), gent (from gentleman), specs (from spectacles), circs (from circumstances, e. g. under the circs), I. O. Y. (a written acknowledgement of debt, made from I owe you), lib (from liberty, as in May I take the lib of saying something to you?), cert (from certainty, as in This enterprise is a cert if you have a bit of capital), metrop (from metropoly, e. g. Paris is a gay metrop), exhibish (from exhibition), posish (from position).

Undergraduates' informal speech abounds in words of the type:

exam, lab, prof, vac, hol, co-ed (a girl student at a coeducational school or college).

Eaching contractions might seem complicated, but these helpful tips can make this concept easy to teach!

1. Use a rubber band to demonstrate to your student the concept of expanding and contracting. When you stretch the rubber band, it expands; when you let it go, it contracts. That's what we're doing when we contract words – we're just making them smaller.

2. Demonstrate the concept of contractions by writing *he is* on a piece of paper, or use [letter tiles](#) if you have them. Cross out the **i** and replace it with an apostrophe. Read the new word to your student to show how the pronunciation changes from *he is* to *he's*.

3. Explain that an **apostrophe** is a type of punctuation mark. One of its jobs is to help us form contractions. However, many students put the apostrophe in the wrong spot, as in *ar'nt*. Understanding that the apostrophe must *always* take the place of the omitted letters will help prevent such errors.

4. Write or build the words *she will*. Cross out the **w-i** and replace those letters with an apostrophe. Explain to your student that *she'll* is a shortcut, a shorter way of saying *she will*.

5. Underscore the importance of the apostrophe by removing it from the contraction *she'll*. Point out that without the apostrophe, the word is *shell* and not *she'll*. Never forget the apostrophe!

6. Finally, in *All About Reading* we include an engaging activity sheet where students create contractions out of printed strips of paper. The strip starts out with a pair of words, such as *I am*.

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