Guidelines on the use and abuse of apostrophes

Introduction
There are two main uses for apostrophes in English: truncated forms and possessives. In the former case, an apostrophe signifies a missing letter or letters. In the latter case, an apostrophe signifies a relationship of possession between two nouns. As a general rule, truncated forms (for example, “I’m”; “it’s”; “they’re” and so on) are not appropriate for academic writing and you should avoid using them in your essays.

Possessives
The main way you will be using apostrophes in your essays will be in the possessive form. Here are a few rules and examples:

1. The standard use is that when we transform a noun into its possessive form by adding an apostrophe and an ‘s’ . For example, “Locke’s book was radical and unsettling for his contemporaries.” (as in “his book”) or the “The cat’s mat was on fire” (as in “its mat”). Notice that the apostrophe comes before the ‘s’.

2. When a noun is plural and already ends in an ‘s’, we add just an apostrophe. For example, “The philosophers’ ideas were to change the very foundations of society” (as in “their ideas”) and “The cats’ mats were on fire.” (again, as in “theirs”).

3. If a noun is plural, but does not end in ‘s’, the former rule applies. For example, “The children’s toys were all broken.”

4. When it comes to singular nouns that end in ‘s’, there is some contention of what the proper convention actually is. So, “Rawls’s A Theory of Justice was an attempt to offer a coherent moral theory...”, “Hobbes’s Leviathan...” and “Jesus’s cross” are all as correct as “Socrates’ trial” and “Hodges’ new formulation of...”. A good rule of thumb is phonetic. Say the word out loud, pronouncing and then not pronouncing the ‘s’ and see what sounds better. Normally, if the word ends in a hard "z" sound, we usually don't add an "s" and simply add the apostrophe: “Socrates’ trial was a farcical sham.” However, it is most important to get cases 1 through 3 correct and worry only mildly about these cases.

Some common mistakes

It’s and its
“It’s” is an abbreviation of “it is” as in the sentences: “It’s very windy today.” and “It’s time to go to the lecture.”

“One” is the possessive form as in the sentence as in “The water was very still and its surface reflected the clouds above perfectly.” and “The Enlightenment era adopted scientific rationalism as the dominant method. Its aims were the liberation and the empowerment of all humans.”
Who’s and whose

“Who’s” similarly is the truncated form of “who is” as in “Who’s the Prime Minister of Britain?”

“Whose” is the possessive form of “who” as in “Whose book is that on the desk?” (viz. to whom does it belong).

One’s and ones

There is always the exception and “one’s” is the possessive form (like his and hers) as in “It is always good to pay one’s butler fairly.” as well as the truncated form of “one is “ as in “one’s very happy today” whereas ones is the plural of one as in “I want the red ones over there.” I doubt you will be using this pronoun that much anyway.

Reference


http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/possessives.htm