

Using Appropriate Language in Road Safety Communication

The language we use when discussing road safety plays a critical role in shaping public perception, policy, and action.

Using precise, sensitive, and accurate terms can influence how society views road safety issues and, ultimately, how governments and communities work to reduce road fatalities and injuries.

This guide outlines the best language to use when writing or talking about road safety to highlight the preventable nature of crashes and the seriousness of road trauma.

Use “Crash” Instead of “Accident”

Why: The term “accident” suggests that crashes are random, unpredictable events that happen by chance and cannot be prevented. This language implies that deaths and injuries on the road are simply an unfortunate cost of using vehicles, which undermines efforts to reduce them.

Crashes, however, are typically caused by identifiable and preventable factors such as speeding, intoxication, distracted driving, or poor road conditions. By using the word “crash,” we shift the focus to the fact that these incidents result from a chain of causes, many of which can be addressed through better policies, driver behaviour, and vehicle safety improvements.

Example:

Instead of: “The accident resulted in two deaths.”
Use: “The crash resulted in two deaths.”

Use “Road Trauma” Instead of “Road Toll”

Why: The word “toll” traditionally refers to a fee or charge paid for using a specific infrastructure, like a toll road or bridge. In road safety contexts, it has come to be used as a count of fatalities. However, this term has several problematic implications:

Minimising Impact: The term “toll” downplays the preventability of road deaths and injuries, making them seem like inevitable outcomes of road use.

Desensitisation: Referring to lives lost as a “toll” depersonalises the tragedies and reduces them to mere statistics, dulling the public’s emotional response.

Avoids Accountability: “Toll” can suggest that these incidents are part of an uncontrollable process rather than preventable occurrences that could be mitigated by better road safety measures.

Overlooks Non-Fatal Injuries: The focus on fatalities ignores the significant impact of serious injuries and disabilities resulting from road crashes.

Using “road trauma” acknowledges both fatalities and serious injuries, as well as the emotional and social impact on victims, families, and communities, emphasising that these incidents are preventable.

Example:

Instead of: “The road toll increased last year.”
Use: “Last year, road trauma increased”, or “Road trauma worsened last year, with more deaths and serious injuries recorded.”

Use “Killed” Instead of “Lives Lost”

Why: When a person dies in a crash, they have been killed. Using the term “killed” conveys the harsh reality of the situation—that a life was ended due to specific and often preventable causes, such as speeding, failure to wear a seatbelt, or unsafe road design.

The phrase “lives lost” can soften the language, implying a passive or accidental event, which detracts from the seriousness and avoidability of the incident.

By using “killed,” we maintain focus on the fact that road deaths are not random occurrences but are often the direct result of human actions or system failures.

Example:

Instead of: “Two lives were lost in the crash.”
Use: “Two people were killed in the crash.”

Why Language Matters

The language we choose when discussing road safety isn’t just a matter of semantics—it directly impacts how road safety is perceived by the public, policymakers, and the media. Terms like “accident” and “toll” diminish the sense of urgency and accountability needed to address the road safety crisis.

By using more accurate and impactful language such as “crash,” “road trauma,” and “killed,” we reinforce the preventable nature of road incidents and support the call for stronger action in reducing road deaths and serious injuries.

By consistently using the best language in road safety communication, we create a cultural shift towards recognising road deaths and injuries as preventable tragedies, which encourages society to focus on the policies, behaviours, and innovations that can save lives.

