



Report Series

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Change the language, change perceptions: how we talk about road collisions

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“Accident (avoid in reference to motor vehicles; prefer collision or crash)”

– Canadian Press Caps and Spelling, 2021

The Canadian Press (CP) style guides provide authoritative advice on writing and editing from Canada's national news agency.

The guides – comprising The Canadian Press Stylebook, Caps and Spelling and Guide de rédaction – are the authoritative manuals consulted by CP journalists every day as they write the stories used by hundreds of newspapers, broadcasters and websites. Newsrooms across Canada, as well as communications teams, adhere to Canadian Press style, ensuring their writing is accurate and consistent by following the Canadian news standards.

A change in Canadian Press style means an enforceable change in language used in news coverage across the country.

For instance, how we talk about collisions and injury on our roadways shapes our attitudes: That’s clearly shown in a 2019 study published in *Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, [“Does news coverage of traffic crashes affect perceived blame and preferred solutions? Evidence from an experiment.”](#)

As Carlton Reid wrote in a [Forbes magazine summary of the study](#): “Researchers presented nearly a thousand readers with three news reports of an incident involving a motorist hitting a pedestrian, and were asked who might be to blame and what action, if any, the authorities ought to take.

“When the text was presented from a driver’s perspective—victim-blaming is common in mainstream media reporting of motorists hitting pedestrians—readers stated that the pedestrian was at fault. However, when more context was provided about the road in question and the number of similar incidents citywide, readers were less likely to victim-blame and more likely to call for street changes.”

Says the study summary: “The specific terms used to refer to a crash can influence how readers interpret what happened. For instance, the British Medical Journal banned use of the term ‘accident’ because it conveys an undue sense of faultlessness and inevitability ([Davis and Pless, 2001](#)). In 2016, the Associated Press Style Guide changed to encourage journalists to use ‘crash, collision, or other terms’ instead of ‘accident’ ([Transportation Alternatives, 2016](#)). Eliminating this term would be more in line with the nature of traffic crashes, which are ‘predictable and preventable’ ([Davis and Pless, 2001](#)). Nevertheless, the use of ‘accident’ remains widespread, with one study finding the term in 47% of news articles about VRU [vulnerable road user] crashes ([Ralph et al., 2019](#)).”

To clarify, the Associated Press (AP) style change in 2016 – the style document followed by most U.S. journalists – did not go very far when it came to discouraging the use of “accident”: it cautioned against calling a crash an “accident” in cases “when negligence is claimed or proven.” That meant “accident” was the default term unless there was proven fault.

In Canada, however, there was no national style guidance about the use of the term “accident” when it came to road crashes. Parachute set out to change that.

Professionals in the fields of injury prevention, public health and medicine have championed replacing “accident” with more appropriate and useful terms for decades. In 1993, Leonard Evans’ editorial, “Medical accidents: no such thing”, called on the medical community to use crash rather than accident when referring to traffic injuries. While the language was changing in some disciplines, such as the study of traffic and air transport safety, the field of medicine was lagging despite earlier calls for change, such as from Theodore Doege in 1978. Like Doege, Evans reasoned that since the term “accident” conveys fate and a lack of rational explanation, it was in direct conflict with and an impediment to efforts to understand how injuries occur and how to reduce harm. Most notably, Barry Pless and Ronald Davis published their editorial, “BMJ bans ‘accidents’”, in 2001. As announced in the editorial, BMJ was the first major medical journal to ban the use of “accident” in its publications, except for cases deemed appropriate and unavoidable, and invited readers to hold them to their commitment. While progress has been made, there are particular realms where the term “accident” still holds firm: in the insurance industry, in public discourse, and in the media.

In 2017, at the Vision Zero Summit held in Toronto and organized by Parachute, a media panel featuring transportation reporters from the Toronto Star and Globe and Mail, moderated by radio host John Moore, focused on how language choices shape our perceptions. Ben Spurr of the Toronto Star told the audience that the Star's newsroom had recently implemented a policy to avoid using the word "accident" to describe car crashes. The panel discussed how media coverage needed to stop treating crashes as inconveniences slowing down commuters and focus instead, where possible, on those injured or killed, and look at patterns: why, for instance, did Scarborough have a disproportionate number of pedestrian road deaths in Toronto? By asking such questions, the answers revealed structural issues – wide roads, higher speed limits, few pedestrian crossings – that contributed to pedestrian deaths.

In 2018, Parachute launched a national awareness campaign, supported on social media and through donated billboard space.



The campaign used an all-too-common image – flowers tied to a utility pole commemorating the death of someone due to a road crash at the spot – and challenged the viewer. This death was not an accident.

“This was not an accident” drove people to information about Vision Zero. Changing public perception that crashes are not accidents – that they were preventable through changes in how roads were built and how drivers used them - is key to building support for Vision Zero initiatives.

Our partners at Preventable in B.C. collaborated with Parachute and launched a complementary campaign:



Parachute undertook a Vision Zero Case Study published in September 2020: [Changing perceptions of Vision Zero in Canada: a media audit](#). This point-in-time audit compared media coverage of Vision Zero – and therefore discussions about road safety in Canada – across two periods of time: January 2017 through the end of June 2018, and the beginning of July 2018 through the end of December 2019.

From the audit summary: “Language used to describe road safety incidents wavered across the first period, with alternating use of “collisions” and “accidents” in the first review period across publications and a greater reliance on the more accurate “collision” language in the second review period because using the word “accident” implies that there was no way to predict or prevent the occurrence”.

So, while some newsrooms beyond the Toronto Star had also moved away from using “accident”, there still was no standard to enforce.

In early 2021, Parachute’s VP of Communications and Marketing Kelley Teahen, who worked as a journalist prior to moving to communications and marketing, secured a meeting with the current editor of the Canadian Press Stylebook, James McCarten. It was a short meeting: she made the case as to why “accident” is the wrong word to use to describe traffic crashes and collisions and he said, you’re right. I’ll put that on our list of updates to make in our next edit.

In 2021, we received the following note from McCarten:

“The entry on accident will be in the forthcoming edition of Caps and Spelling, which is the more widely used and cited volume for which words to use, and when. That print edition will be out next fall [2022].

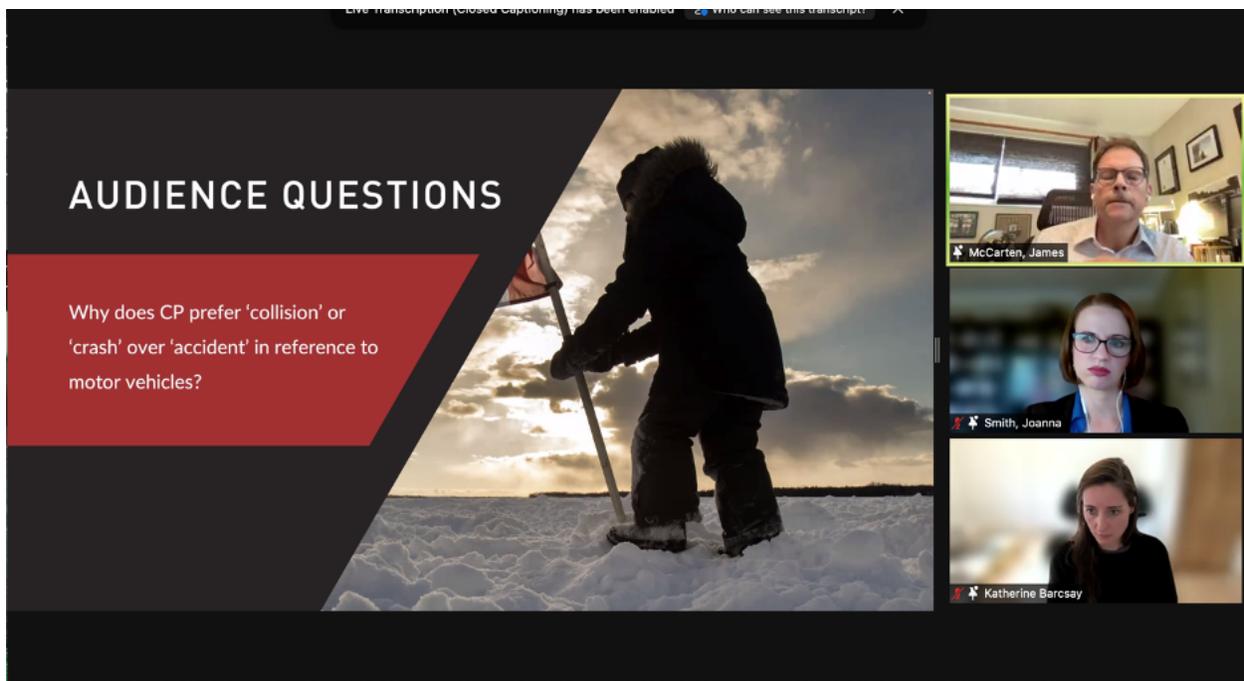
“It’s already reflected and available in the online version, as per below.

A

accident (avoid in reference to motor vehicles; prefer collision or crash)”

Advocates such as Parachute can now challenge journalists who use “accident” in their news coverage, citing the CP ruling.

McCarten highlighted the change in an online training webinar about CP style held Oct. 14, 2021, saying he agreed with advocates’ arguments and evidence that “all motor vehicle collisions are avoidable and preventable. To use the term ‘accident’ implies it’s just a part of life and we have to live with it – which we don’t.”



The image is a screenshot of a webinar slide. The slide has a dark background with a red diagonal shape on the left. The text on the slide reads: "AUDIENCE QUESTIONS" in white, followed by "Why does CP prefer 'collision' or 'crash' over 'accident' in reference to motor vehicles?" in white. The background image shows a person in winter gear standing in snow, holding a shovel. On the right side of the slide, there are three video thumbnails of participants: James McCarten, Joanna Smith, and Katherine Barcsay.

This continues to be an ongoing journey to encourage accurate reporting about what happens on our roads and the language used. The 2019 study published in

Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives outlines six language choices that affect how people perceive road collisions.

Status quo	Better practice	Effect of status quo
Accident: “Pedestrian killed in <u>accident</u> on Main Street.”	Crash: “Pedestrian killed in <u>crash</u> on Main Street.”	Obscures preventable nature of crashes
Non-agentive: “A pedestrian was hit and killed.” (no agent)	Agentive: “A pedestrian was hit and killed <u>by a car</u> .”	Obscures role of a human actor
Focus on pedestrian: “A <u>pedestrian</u> was hit and killed by a car.”	Focus on vehicle: “A <u>car</u> hit and killed a pedestrian.”	Increases blame for the focus of the sentence
Object-based language: “A <u>car</u> jumped the curb.”	Person-based language: “A <u>driver</u> drove over the curb.”	Obscures role of a human actor
Counterfactual statements: “The pedestrian <u>darted into the street</u> .”	Not included	Increases perceived blame for the victim
Episodic framing: Treats the crash as an isolated incident.	Thematic framing: “This is the tenth fatal collision this year.”	Prevents readers from connecting the dots between incidents and thus shifts attention to individual-level rather than systematic solutions

For “non-agentive” and “focus on pedestrian,” we could and should go further and say the better practice is: A driver hit and killed a pedestrian.

With the tool of the CP ruling on “accident” as a start, we can initiate conversations with journalists, but also with those in law enforcement whose language and attitudes also shape public perception. Referring to road deaths as “accidents” conveys that there’s not much we can do. But at the heart of Vision Zero is the evidence-based proof that these are not “accidents”: that they are predictable and preventable through changes in road design, regulation, enforcement, language and behaviour. Building public support for these changes is key to achieving our vision of zero deaths on our roads.