



Dear <media>

Recent cycling deaths have prompted cyclists to look closely at language and word choice, particularly the use of the word "accident" to describe a motorist-cyclist crash. Statistically speaking, a crash is either a collision (with another party) or a fall (solo). There is no accident category.

Cyclists have two specific concerns. The media generally:

- 1) Resort to the word "accident" to describe a collision; and
- 2) Often refer to collisions between trucks, cars and bicycles, rather than motorists and cyclists, replacing the operator with the vehicle involved in the incident.

Regarding these two points:

1) The term "accident" connotes excusable error by an operator, unfortunate circumstances, equal division of responsibility, or just bad luck. An accident suggests nothing can or should be done. This is inaccurate for a number of reasons. A motorist may not intend to harm anyone or may assert that they never noticed a cyclist or pedestrian in a particular collision. However, the operator still intentionally made a turn with inaccurate or incomplete knowledge, misestimated the distance between themselves and cyclists or pedestrians, failed to affirmatively know a turn could be initiated and completed safely or perhaps been unaware of the traffic laws that give a cyclist the right of way. These factors are compatible with the use of a term like "collision," "incident" or "crash," but not "accident."

In a collision, a truck/motor vehicle operator and cyclist bring dramatically different levels of energy into the collision, by virtue of their relative weight and capacity for speed. There is an inherent inequality, which is itself a factor in the collision. Media and law enforcement should not try to neutralize or eliminate that inequality in their reporting. Accuracy and precision can contribute to a better public understanding of that inequality and serves an important education function.

Precision and accuracy matter. Consequently, we urge you to revise the manner in which you report collisions between the operators of cars, trucks and bicycles.

2) Operators, not the tools they operate, are the relevant actors. Vehicles do not operate on their own, but are propelled by individuals and their choices. By referring to incidents involving cars and trucks and bicycles, rather than motorists and cyclists, the media (and law enforcement) de-humanize the collision and provide distance between readers and the incident. While perhaps comforting, this is not an accurate exercise in media or law enforcement responsibility.



If circumstances are ever to change, operators of motor vehicles need to acknowledge that they are manipulating an object weighing thousands of pounds in the public space. They do so, not by right, but under state license. It took decades of protest by groups like Mothers Against Drunk Driving to slowly change societal views about a specific and dangerous type of conduct. Perhaps it may take years to change the views of motorists and the public regarding cyclists and their equal right to the road. No bicycle was killed in Brecksville; a young cyclist, husband and father was.

Words matter. Our word choices frame debate, allocate initial responsibility and create impressions for readers to begin understanding situations and events. The concept of safe roads, "[The Good Roads Movement](#)" was initiated by cyclists and pre-dates motor vehicle travel. We have moved away from the appreciation of the shared, public space; that road usage is for motorists, cyclists and pedestrians. Our choice of words can educate the public, set accurate expectations and restore some of the balance. Word choice can contribute to improved road safety and help save lives. If you would like further comment on this issue, or have questions in general, please contact Rob Thompson at Bike Cleveland (216-245-3101) or [rob@bikecleveland.org](mailto:rob@bikecleveland.org)

Best Regards,  
Bike Cleveland

*(Author: Kevin Cronin – Bike Cleveland Board Member and Attorney at Law – [kevincronin.us](http://kevincronin.us))*