

Accident or Crash-Does the Terminology Really Matter?



*Harrington
Drivers
Training
Services*

Hopefully, the majority of drivers will endeavour to avoid being involved in an 'accident' (crash) during their driving career. For some time, there have been calls by road safety advocates and others to replace the word 'accident' with the word 'crash'. Their rationale is that the word 'accident' gives the impression that it wasn't anybody's fault. That question continues to be debated, but an increasing number of road safety campaigners in Europe and the United States are uniting around one position: not calling traffic incidents "accidents." Because using the word "accident" gives the comforting connotation that the collision could not have been foreseen and that no one is to blame for a victim's death or injury. While everybody wants to prevent car collisions, not all safety groups agree with the word change strategy. Critics say the word "accident" is more familiar to people. Generations of people have learned to drive when the word 'accident' was commonly used to describe fatal and serious car collisions. This paper examines in detail the position of 'accident' and 'crash' in relation to traffic incidents. Finally, a conclusion is given

Accident or Crash – Does The Terminology Really Matter?

Tom Harrington LL B F Inst. MTD (August 2020)

*“A car accident/crash is the unintended collision of a motor vehicle with another, a stationary object, or person, resulting in injuries, death and /or loss of property. It can also be defined as a multifactor random event that happens when a driver fails to cope with his/her environment”.*¹

Introduction

Can words help keep you safe behind the wheel? Many road safety groups say the language we use has an effect on our behaviour when driving on the roads – and some of that language needs to change. There’s a growing call to replace the word “accident” with the word “crash.” What’s behind this idea, and can a change in word choice really reduce vehicle-related fatalities? When a plane crash occurs, we don't call it a "plane accident." So why then do we use the term "accident" to describe a car crash? The answer, it seems, is more premeditated than you might guess... There’s an argument that periodically surfaces about the semantics (i.e. the meaning) of accidents versus crashes (or collisions). Some people argue that when a vehicle crashes it is never an accident because it was preventable. However, this is simplistic and, well, wrong. The word ‘accident’ describes intent. If we look at one definition of accident it is an unfortunate incident that happens unexpectedly and unintentionally, typically resulting in damage or injury. Therefore, if you throw a knife at a group of people and it hits and stabs one of them, it’s not an accident because it was deliberate; however, if you trip in the kitchen while carrying a knife and you stab yourself or someone else, it is an accident. Sure, you should have perhaps been more careful, and you could have decided to carry the knife in a sheath, but the fact remains that you had no intention of stabbing yourself or the other person, and in the second instance; you were simply moving the knife from one place to another. The same applies with an accident. If you break a red traffic light, this is like throwing the knife at a group of people – you might hit one, you might not hit one, but the chances are that you will because you have dramatically increased your risk by deliberately increasing the likelihood you will cause someone significant harm. However, if you are driving normally during winter and you fail to notice a micro climate that induces a skid and causes you to crash into a tree or wall, then that is an accident? But should you have been more observant and careful?

¹ Legal Dictionary. legaldictionary.net.(last accessed 22 August 2020).

Of course, but the level of care you take is completely representative of your previous experiences with similar situations. It still does not eliminate the intent, which was to stay on the road. This paper, discusses the definitions of “accident” and “crash” and why this verbiage has become so controversial when describing traffic collisions.

What’s in a Name?

How powerful is one word? Traffic safety activists are among those who believe words influence people in tremendous ways. Because of this belief, several US advocacy groups are fighting to have the word "crash" replace the word "accident" when referring to vehicle collisions. Many people believe that saying "accident" makes it wrongly appear as though crashes are inevitable rather than preventable. In truth, the majority of fatalities and injuries could be prevented if it were not for drunk driving, distracted driving, poor road conditions, speeding or negligence by one of the drivers.² For some time now, the controversial question subject to debate is whether a car accident/crash should be called an accident or a crash. Therefore, is it a car accident, crash, traffic collision, motor vehicle accident wreck, prang or fender –bender etc.? Whether you’re watching the news, listening to the local radio, or getting an alert from your smart phone, one of those terms describing a traffic incident is commonly used. But when is a traffic collision considered an “accident,” and when is it determined to be a “crash”? That question continues to be debated, but an increasing number of safety advocates in Europe and the United States are uniting around one position: not calling traffic incidents “accidents.” Using the word “accident” gives the comforting connotation that the collision could not have been foreseen and that no one is to blame for a victim’s death or injury — a reason that is empowering many to change the way people talk and think about crashes. Traffic collisions can be classified by general types. Types of collisions include head-on, road departure, rear-end, side collisions, and rollovers etc. Many different terms are commonly used to describe vehicle collisions. The World Health Organization (WHO) uses the term road traffic injury,³ while the U.S. Census Bureau uses the term motor vehicle accidents (MVA),⁴ and Transport Canada uses the term "motor vehicle traffic collision" (MVTC).⁵

² *Why you should say ‘crash’ not car ‘accidents’*. Gilreath & Associates (Lawyers). sidgilreath.com

³ WHO road traffic injury – *WHO/World report on road traffic injury prevention*.

⁴ *The statistical abstract: Motor vehicle accidents and fatalities*. Archived from original on 25 December 2007.

⁵ *Statistics & data – Road and motor vehicle safety*. Road Transportation – Transport Canada.

Other common terms include auto accident, car accident, car crash, car smash, car wreck, motor vehicle collision (MVC), personal injury collision (PIC), road accident, road traffic accident (RTA), road traffic collision (RTC), and road traffic incident (RTI) as well as more unofficial slang terms including smash-up, pile-up, and fender bender and prang etc. Some organizations have begun to avoid the term "accident", instead preferring terms such as "collision", "crash" or "incident".^{6 7} This is because the term "accident" implies that there is no-one to blame, whereas most traffic collisions are the result of driving under the influence, excessive speed, distractions such as mobile phones or other risky behavior.^{8 9 10} Historically, in the United States, the use of terms other than "accidents" had been criticized for holding back safety improvements, based on the idea that a culture of blame may discourage the involved parties from fully disclosing the facts, and thus frustrate attempts to address the real root causes.¹¹

More Jarring & Less Clinical

The language we use helps shape our perceptions. If our word choice downplays an issue, we might not take that issue as seriously as we should. This is what many advocates say is happening with the common use of the word “accident” when describing any type of collision involving one or more vehicles. The Head of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, (NHTSA) (US) Mark Rosekind, summed up the issue at a driver safety conference held by the Harvard School of Public Health: “*When you use the word ‘accident,’ he said, ‘It’s like saying ‘God made it happen.’*” The basic idea is that the word “accident” implies nobody is at fault. The phrase “accidents happen” is a common way to say that the unfortunate event well, just... happened. The attitude that accidents will just occur no matter how we drive might actually lead to an increase in vehicle-related injuries and fatalities. Why? Proponents argue the word “accident” significantly downplays personal responsibility when driving. Roughly 90% of all vehicle accidents are the result of human error.

⁶ Collision, crash, incident. Traffic Scotland – Current Incidents.

⁷ “M1 Motorway”. en.pedia.org

⁸ “It’s no accident: advocates want to speak of car ‘crashes’ instead”. The New York Times, 22 mMy 2016. Retrieved 30 May 2015.

⁹ When a car ‘crash isn’t an ‘accident’ – and why the difference matters. The Washington Post. 24 August 2015. Retrieved 30 May 2018.

¹⁰ Saving lives and protecting people from injuries and violence. (PDF) Retrieved 8 March 2020.

¹¹ Charles, Geoffrey (11 March 1969). "Cars and Drivers Accident prevention instead of blame". *The Times*, Quoting from JJ Leeming in *Accidents and their prevention*: "Blame for accidents seems to me to be at best irrelevant and at worst actively harmful."... "Much of the Leeming case is that by attributing blame and instituting proceedings against the motorist, the law virtually guarantees that none of the participants will be wholly truthful, so that the factors that really led to the accident are never discovered."

Only about 10% of accidents are caused by vehicle error, weather, or another non-human-related event. The word accident can mean a human-caused collision. But it can also mean an incident due to a tyre blowout, unexpected flash flood, or another instance where the driver is truly not at fault. Supporters of the word change say *“crash” invokes clearer imagery of a car slamming into an object or another car. The word is meant to be more jarring and less clinical than the word “accident.”*

The Right Verbiage Can Really Help

Insurance companies love to talk about “accidents,” because that word implies that your injury was nobody’s fault. Insurance company lawyers like to use the word “accident” because they hope the jury will start to believe that the “accident” was not anybody’s fault. But the truth is that most vehicle “accidents” are someone’s fault – someone did something wrong and they should be held accountable by paying for damages through their insurance. This is why we are required to have car insurance, so that when we cause a crash there is money available for damages, including medical bills, lost wages, and property losses. In casual conversation, we call them “accidents” too, because that’s how people talk. But when we’re talking to a jury, or an insurance adjuster, we prefer to call them “car crashes” or “collisions,” because it turns out that, usually, they *were* somebody’s fault. When we are talking among friends, this language does not matter much. But when we are in front of a jury, the choice of words can matter a lot. If you have been in a collision, you might start noticing that you get different reactions from people if you call it a “crash” than if you call it an “accident.” And this can make a difference to your eventual settlement. Using the word “crash” or “collision,” is a lot more accurate. First of all, these words imply fault. Second, they give a better understanding of the actual events. A car “accident” could be many things, like a teenager running over a curb, or even someone spilling coffee inside a car. Technically, these are “accidents.” But a crash or collision implies that one vehicle came into contact with another and that one person is liable for the damages. Determining liability in a car crash can be difficult, but using the right verbiage can really help everyone involved understand the implications of fault in a car crash. So while using the word accident does not matter when we are talking to friends, it is important to avoid this word when talking to adjusters so that they understand you know the difference and the accountability involved in a car wreck. And then, if you ever go to trial, you’ll recognize that the words we use to describe car crashes really matter to the jury’s understanding as well. ¹²

¹² *What’s the difference between a crash and an accident?* Portland Personal Injury Attorney. Du Bois Law Group LLC. pdxinjurylaw.com

Need For Change in Terminology

We Save Lives¹³ are not the only group that's interested in changing the word accident to crash though. In fact, in an article entitled Motor Vehicle Crash versus Accident: A Change in Terminology Is Necessary, published in the Journal of Traumatic Stress they also determined the need for a change in terminology. The authors of this published journal article concluded that:

“We assert that motor vehicle crash should replace motor vehicle accident in the clinical and research lexicon of traumatologists. Crash encompasses a wider range of potential causes for vehicular crashes than does the term accident. A majority of fatal crashes are caused by intoxicated, speeding, distracted, or careless drivers and, therefore, are not accidents. Most importantly, characterizing crashes as accidents, when a driver was intoxicated or negligent, may impede the recovery of crash victims by preventing them from assigning blame and working through the emotions related to their trauma”.

Not that the author indicates that a car crash includes crashes *caused* by someone. They were caused by the driver doing things the driver shouldn't be, which was labeled as “intoxicated, speeding, distracted, or careless drivers” in the article. Also, note that the authors conclude that this can actually impede the process of being able to assign blame. It also impedes the process of accident victims or loved ones being able to cope after the accident and move forward with their lives. This is why it is so important for this redefinition. It will help both legally and emotionally.¹⁴

Drop the “A” Word

According to Vox,¹⁵ using the word 'accident' to describe car crashes might seem natural. But early coverage of crashes in the 1910s and 1920s depicted vehicles as dangerous killing machines — and their violent collisions were seldom called accidents. The phrase "car accident" took off for years, but in the 1960's the first director of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), William Haddon, made anyone who used the word "accident" in one of their meetings to put a dime in the jar.

¹³ We Saves Lives are an organization led by MAAD founder Candace Lightner whose aim is to tackle drunk, drugged and distracted driving. www.wesavelives.org

¹⁴ *What is the difference between a crash and an accident?* patrickdaniellaw.com

¹⁵ Joseph Stromberg 20 July 2017. *We don't say “plane accident”. We shouldn't say “car accident either”.* Vox Journalism. vox.com

Haddon must have been a firm believer of power in words. In 1994, the same administration asked that people stop using the word "accident," and in 2013, police departments of New York City and San Francisco quit using the term altogether in their collision reports.¹⁶ Safety advocates, grass-roots groups, and even US state and federal officials have all shown support for the word change. In 2016, Nevada passed a state law changing "accident" to "crash" in dozens of official government documents such as police and insurance reports. Additionally, at least 28 other State Departments of Transportation no longer use the term "accident" in relation to vehicle-based incidents. At the forefront of the movement is Jeff Larason, Director of Highway Safety for Massachusetts and a former traffic reporter. He's also the author of *"Drop the 'A' Word"*, a blog dedicated to promoting the change from "crash" to "accident." He explains his reasoning on the front page of his site:

"Not all crashes are 'accidents.' Crimes are not 'accidents.' It's not an 'accident' when a person makes a decision to drive drunk, distracted, or in a negligent manner. Stop giving criminals a pass by calling it an 'accident.'"

Larason's main goal is to increase awareness among major media outlets. He wants them to stop using the term 'accident' in news reports. Some media outlets have made changes. The Associated Press now uses the word crash when negligence is claimed or proven in a crash. Other major outlets like the New York Times haven't taken an official position on the terms. To most people, the terms "car crash" and "car accident" are largely interchangeable. But a growing number of traffic safety advocates have been pointing out that there's actually a big difference — and they want journalists, public officials, and everyday people to say crash, not accident. The two groups behind the recent campaign — Transportation Alternatives and Families for Safe Streets — argue that the term "accident" makes it seem like crashes are inevitable, rather than preventable. In a subtle way, it normalizes the crash and discourages us from looking more deeply into their causes — whether alcohol, reckless driving, or bad street design. In a sense, reflexively saying "accident" is implicitly throwing up our hands in despair, rather than trying to fix the underlying problem. As Alissa Walker puts it in an excellent Gizmodo post on the campaign, "accident is the transportation equivalent of ☹️."

¹⁶ *Why you should say 'crash' not car 'accidents'*. Gilreath & Associates (Lawyers). sidgilreath.com

All this might seem pedantic, but there's a real point here. We live in an era where most Europeans and others drive around in heavy machines at high speed, and these vehicles kill with surprising regularity. They cause 30,000 or so deaths per year in the US, as many people as are killed by guns. If we want to cut down on that number, it's worth examining the language we use to describe these events.¹⁷

What is an Accident?

While several definitions of “accident” appear in dictionaries, let’s focus on these two similar definitions found in Merriam-Webster:

- An unforeseen and unplanned event or circumstance
- An unfortunate event resulting especially from carelessness or ignorance

However, there are those who steadfastly argue that accidents are unavoidable; it wasn’t their fault and will happen anyway and even consider them to be a “*force majeure*”.¹⁸

Why is Using “Accident” Controversial?

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) US, nearly all car crashes result from driver behaviour, such as drinking, distracted driving, and other risky activity. Given this fact, calling the majority of roadway incidents “accidents” has become controversial because it implies one of two things: no one is taking responsibility for the traffic incident, and the incident was not caused by a driver’s mistake or negligence but was simply an unfortunate and unforeseen event. The at-fault driver did not mean to harm anyone or cause the incident, so it was just an accident. Because the word “accident” suggests that no one is at fault, many safety advocates are troubled by calling crashes that are caused by something like distracted driving as an “accident.” For example, drivers know better than to use their mobile phone while they are behind the wheel, but many people still make the careless decision to do it — which leads to nearly 3,500 deaths and nearly 400,000 injuries every year. And those numbers are rising.

¹⁷ Joseph Stromberg 20 July 2015. *We don't say "plane accident". We shouldn't say "car accident either"*. Vox Journalism. vox.com

¹⁸ *Force majeure* is a French term that literally means "greater force." It is related to the concept of an act of God, an event for which no party can be held accountable, such as a hurricane or a tornado. *Force majeure* also encompasses human actions, however, such as armed conflict. *constitute force majeure*, they must be unforeseeable, external to the parties of the contract, and unavoidable.

Accidents Takes the Blame Off ...

Saying these are just “accidents” takes the blame off of the people who cause crashes by choosing to drive distracted. A similar attitude may be why efforts to increase traffic safety and decrease injuries and fatalities on the road are ineffective. And while most people don’t intend to cause a crash or hurt others on the road, their careless decision making may still be the only reason a crash happens. A drunk driver may not get in a car meaning to hit a pedestrian, but if they had gotten a ride home with a sober friend, they could have avoided injuring another person entirely. Similarly, aggressive driving, following too closely, making lane changes without checking, and speeding are all decisions that people make to behave in an unsafe manner. People should not be allowed to avoid responsibility for these harmful decisions by calling the resulting crash an “accident.”

The Case for “Accident”

Still, some safety advocates prefer using the term “accident,” including the North Carolina Department of Insurance, which uses the word more than 50 times in their auto insurance consumer guide. A few of the arguments for continuing to describe collision as a traffic “accident” include:

- Most traffic violations— from running over a curb to fatal collisions—are unintentional therefore; most traffic incidents can be technically defined as an accident.
- All collisions routinely undergo a thorough investigation to determine the cause and what or who is at fault.
- Legislative bodies and law enforcement agencies take action to solve problems that lead to traffic incidents—such as passing drunk driving laws and suspending licenses of irresponsible drivers. As a result, they do place fault on guilty drivers and bring awareness to the consequences of negligent driving.¹⁹

¹⁹ Myers Law Firm Plc. *Car accident or crash: what you call it matters*. myerslegal.com (last accessed 21/8/2020).

The Transition to “Crash”

Despite these arguments, approximately 30 US State Departments of Transportation have now veered away from using the term “accident.” In addition, the Associated Press announced a new policy last year that instructs their reporters to avoid using the term “accident” when negligence is claimed or proven in a car crash. The term “crash” is preferred to replace “accident” because it restores responsibility to the at-fault driver and promotes widespread understanding of the implications of fault in vehicle collisions.

Is it a Car Crash or a Car Accident?



What is the difference in meaning between a car crash and car accident? The Colorado State Patrol (CSP) has stopped using the word “accident” in regard to a vehicle wreck. Instead, they use the words “crash” or “collision.” Why? An accident is unexpected and unintentional, and therefore is not preventable. On the other hand, a “crash” is something drivers can avoid. We all use the term ‘car accident’ but, we probably don’t think twice about what that term “accident” really means. “Accident” is defined as: *“an unfortunate incident that happens unexpectedly and unintentionally, typically resulting in damage or injury.”* It occurs *“...without apparent or deliberate cause.”* Whenever anyone is in a ‘car accident’, it’s common to think it’s an unfortunate incident – no one wants to be in a car accident. But what does using the word ‘accident’ actually say about the event?

What Qualifies as a Car Accident?

Accidents occur if a driver loses control of their vehicle and hits something or someone.

The driver had no intention of doing so, and the result of the accident was a crash, but it's still referred to as an accident. An example of a car accident would be:

- if a rockslide breaks loose and debris falls onto the road or the vehicle
- if a sinkhole suddenly appears in the middle of the road where a car is driving

What Qualifies as a Car Crash?

A car crash, on the other hand, can be avoided. They occur because of someone's negligence or intentional behaviors. A car crash happens because at least one driver made a poor decision without regarding the risks. That is not an accident. The terms crash and collision are interchangeable – when two vehicles or objects collide, there's a crash. Both of these terms imply fault and give a better understanding of the events – one person is liable for damages.

An example of a car crash would be:

- If a driver is texting while driving
- If a driver is speeding
- If a driver fails to yield at a stop sign
- If a driver changes lanes without checking to see if it's safe to do so
- If a driver is operating a vehicle while fatigued
- If a driver is under the influence of alcohol or drugs
- If a driver is failing to drive safely on icy roads

All of these actions can be prevented. Colorado State Patrol (CSP) is asking Coloradans to start using the terms “crash” or “collision” instead of “accident”.

“If we can change our perspective about why car crashes occur, instead of pretending the act was unavoidable, we can become more aware of our actions and possibly prevent future crashes”. ²⁰

Who is Opposed?

While everybody wants to prevent car collisions, not all safety groups agree with the word change strategy.

²⁰ Myers Law Firm Plc. *Car accident or crash: what you call it matters*. myerslegal.com (last accessed 21/8/2020).

Critics say the word “accident” is more familiar to people. Generations of people have learned to drive when the word accident was commonly used to describe fatal and serious car collisions. For instance, the US Virginia Department of Transportation determined their drivers generally felt more comfortable and familiar with the term “accident” – so they’ve decided to keep using the word in their official documentation. One of the most common criticisms is that the word “crash” is simply too confusing. On a scale where one side is a minor fender bender accident and the other is a serious accident, where does a “crash” fall?

Conclusion

So, can it be a crash and accident at the same time? Apparently yes. If you are the person who causes the incident through texting, speeding, fatigued or alcohol related driving etc. you had a crash. The other person had an accident. As mentioned in the introduction, there’s an argument that periodically surfaces about the semantics (i.e. the meaning) of accidents versus crashes (or collisions). Some people argue that when a vehicle crashes it is never an accident because it was preventable. However, this is simplistic and, well, wrong. The word ‘accident’ describes intent. Using the word “accident” gives the comforting connotation that the collision could not have been foreseen and that no one is to blame for a victim’s death or injury — a reason that is empowering many to change the way people talk and think about crashes. The basic idea is that the word “accident” implies nobody is at fault. The phrase “accidents happen” is a common way to say that the unfortunate event well, just... happened. The attitude that accidents will just occur no matter how we drive might actually lead to an increase in automobile-related injuries and fatalities. Saying incidents are just “accidents” takes the blame off of the people who cause crashes by choosing to drive distracted. A similar attitude may be why efforts to increase traffic safety and decrease injuries and fatalities on the road are ineffective. And while most people don’t intend to cause a crash or hurt others on the road, their careless decision making may still be the only reason a crash happens. A drunk driver may not get in a car meaning to hit a pedestrian, but if they had gotten a ride home with a sober friend, they could have avoided injuring another person entirely. Similarly, aggressive driving, following too closely, making lane changes without checking, and speeding are all decisions that people make to behave in an unsafe manner. We shouldn’t allow people to avoid responsibility for these harmful decisions by calling the resulting crash an “accident.” However, there are those who steadfastly argue that accidents are unavoidable; it wasn’t their fault and will happen anyway and even consider them to be a “*force majeure*”. Roughly 90% of all vehicle accidents are the result of human error.

Only about 10% of accidents are caused by vehicle error, weather, or another non-human-related event. The word accident can mean a human-caused collision. At least 28 US State Departments of Transportation no longer use the term “accident” in relation to vehicle-based incidents. At the forefront of a movement to change the term accident to crash is Jeff Larason, Director of Highway Safety for Massachusetts and a former traffic reporter. He’s also the author of *“Drop the ‘A’ Word”*, a blog dedicated to promoting the change from “accident” to “crash.” He explains his reasoning on the front page of his site: *“Not all crashes are ‘accidents.’ Crimes are not ‘accidents.’ It’s not an ‘accident’ when a person makes a decision to drive drunk, distracted, or in a negligent manner. Stop giving criminals a pass by calling it an ‘accident.’”* Finally, many skeptics argue that ‘accidents’ will happen no matter what or happen as a result of *“force majeure”*. These are the *“Doubting Thomas’s”* who believe that accident/crashes are inevitable and cannot be prevented. However, Mark Rosekind, Head of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, (NHTSA) (above) succinctly summed up the meaning of the word ‘accident’ when he stated: *“When you use the word ‘accident, it’s like saying ‘God made it happen.’”*