Road Collision Reporting Guidelines

Providing **best practice** reporting guidance for **road collisions.**

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Foreword

Chief Constable Jo Shiner, National Police Chiefs Lead for Roads Policing

"I am incredibly supportive of these Road Collision Reporting Guidelines because we know how important using the right language at the right time is for victims, families, friends and communities and of course for accurate reporting.

"A key pillar in the NPCC Roads Policing Strategy is about 'Changing Minds'. Language matters if we are to change minds and inform the public of the truly devastating consequences death and injury has on our roads every day. It is also important to ensure anyone with information that can help a police investigation can come forward with confidence. Therefore how we describe a collision, and all of the elements involved in it, is vital to securing that public support.

"The word 'accident' is particularly problematic. 'Accident' suggests that something was unavoidable and beyond control, yet we know most, if not all, road collisions are avoidable or preventable. I am pleased to see that the research shows we have made good progress in avoiding the word accident in favour of collision or crash.

"But the research presented in the report also clearly shows that we can do more in policing to improve our use of language. I will ensure this report is shared with our communications teams to make sure they are all sighted on the importance of this best practice for reporting on road collisions."

Background to the research

Language shapes how we perceive the world around us, its problems and solutions. **Guidelines already exist for reporting on suicide and domestic abuse**[1] - and road deaths are no less devastating.

Descriptions of road collisions, particularly those involving pedestrians or cyclists, tends to be unbalanced: describing a victim first, and the person behind the wheel of a vehicle later, and sometimes not at all[2].

To understand where we are today, this report offers **new research, analysing police language in hundreds of road collision press releases,** and suggests a way forward. Examples of best practice demonstrate that minor word choice changes can balance out a story and improve accuracy, without risking legal challenge. The intention is to help blue light services' media offices report accurately on collisions, improve public understanding of the scale of harm on the roads, and facilitate public understanding of solutions.

We analysed 227 police articles from 45 forces. While **75% referred to drivers as people**, i.e. '*A 20-year-old man has been arrested on suspicion of dangerous driving…*', almost as **frequently this came after several references to their vehicle**. In **a third of cases a driver was not mentioned** at all, and **30% of stories described the vehicle as active**. Some more extreme examples were '*the **vehicle attempted to go the wrong way** along a slip road'; while more recent examples even described an '**offending vehicle'**.*

A typical example describes "**a collision between a grey Mercedes and a 11-year-old girl**", or "a serious collision involving a cyclist and a 4x4". Research shows that **disappearing the driver** in this way, albeit unconsciously**, focuses audience attention, and blame, towards vulnerable road users**, usually those injured in such collisions, **by as much as 30%[3].** Part of this is editorial choice but some is simply convention, i.e. common usage of language.

Meanwhile some of the predominant causes of harm, such as **speeding, are commonly omitted or trivialized in the media**[4]. There is little sense from reading the news, of the daily scale of death and injury, and common contributory factors like the Fatal 4 or Fatal 5 (excess speed, impaired driving, careless driving, mobile phone use, lack of seatbelt).

While the Guidelines were originally aimed at the media, **emergency services play a core role** in shaping common usage and media discourse, particularly in the immediate aftermath of crashes. For example, busy journalists will often copy and paste blue light media releases, with little resource for additional reporting.

By adding context to collision reports, such as: 'this is the third fatal collision in [town/city/county] this year', **professionals can reduce blame on injured parties such as pedestrians**, say, and draw focus on trends, and towards factors that can reduce death and injury, like safer road design or driving speeds, **by as much as 100%**[3].

Change isn't always dramatic, and **small tweaks to language can improve accuracy and balance** and, ideally, add context that help media and the public understand the issues.

Relevant Guidelines

Of the ten Guidelines, which are available in full from www.rc-rg.com, three are particularly relevant to emergency services.

Guideline 2: Avoid the word 'accident' which presupposes no fault. Use of the word is rare in emergency services, but our analysis shows it still occurs.

Guideline 3: If you're talking about the actions of a driver, mention a driver, not just their vehicle. While collision reports predominantly describe vehicles, rather than drivers involved, almost all name a cyclist or pedestrian, i.e. a person, when present.

Guideline 10: Provide context, such as collision trends in the area over time, or the contribution of a type of collision in road casualties.

Graeme Brown, Editor, Birmingham Mail and BirminghamLive.

"I don't have a vested interest in this - I'm not a cyclist and I'm more regularly on our road as a driver than a pedestrian. However, as a parent in Birmingham, I do fear for my children walking to school.

"BirminghamLive and the Birmingham Mail have been campaigning for the last year over road violence because it is evident to me that our roads are nowhere near safe enough for pedestrians and cyclists .

"It has become evident to me, from seeing the quality of driving on the West Midlands' streets to seeing the huge numbers of reports we are writing about families devastated by people killed on our roads, that more needs to be done.

"I have also been alarmed at quite how easily large swathes of the general public accept the scale of deaths on our road.

"At BirminghamLive at the Birmingham Mail, we feel there needs to be a shift to recognise the problem of road safety which is why we campaign for better and better protection for pedestrians and cyclists."

No Accidents

For the past decade, road deaths and serious injuries have remained stubbornly high. Despite improvements in vehicle technology, every day five people are killed and 82 suffer life-changing injuries. While most of these collisions are preventable, society as a whole tends to accept this toll. Driving bans are rare, even for the worst offenders[5].

RoadPeace's **#CrashNotAccident** campaign highlights the importance of avoiding the word accident, as it incorrectly presupposes nothing could be done to prevent a crash. The charity says the term 'exemplifies society's tolerance of road danger'. More information on their campaign, and resources, can be found at https://www.roadpeace.org/working-for-change/crash-not-accident/

If you're talking about a driver, say a driver

For clarity it is possible, early on in an article, to add the word **'driver', 'rider'**, or describe a vehicle **'being driven'**. I.e. 'the **driver of** a grey Mercedes hit a man in his 50s', (language commonly used if a cyclist hits a pedestrian, or someone drives a vehicle into an object) or 'a Mercedes **was driven** into a man'. A serious collision involved a 4x4 **driver** and a cyclist (as two human actors, rather than one person and one vehicle). A collision occurred between two vehicles **being driven** on the southbound carriageway…; a Seat Leon **driver** failed to stop; a serious collision saw a **driver crash** off the road.

It is also possible to mention an arrest or caution in connection with a driver first, before describing the vehicles, i.e. 'a man was arrested **after driving/crashing** a car/a car **was driven** into pedestrians'.

Adding context

Research shows adding context to a story can help reduce victim blaming and promote better understanding of wider patterns and trends, like road design.

Collision data by local authority or police force area is available from [GOV.UK](GOV.UK).

The suggested filters, below, will give you the number of people killed and injured within selected years by force, type of road user and their age, road type (urban/rural) and speed limit.

You could perform this analysis once for the most recent year and share it on any collision news/updates, as well as on operations/initiatives reports, or select specific data for different collision types

- **Choose casualties**

   suggest: killed, seriously injured, slightly injured

- **Choose year(s) (the most recent year will work for many stories)**

   suggest: GB, Countries, Regions/ parliamentary constituencies/ police force(s)/ or local authority(ies)

- **Choose up to four additional elements**

   suggest: Road user, Casualty age, Urban/Rural (OR Road class if area predominantly rural/urban), Speed limit

- **Confirm and create report**

Other elements:

- Reports could also include a general warning about weather conditions, where relevant, the importance of vehicle maintenance, driving to the conditions, etc., while being mindful not to pre-empt any investigation
- News outlets also commonly link to similar stories; highlighting that the incident isn't isolated can help audiences understand potential patterns

In practice

The below examples have been taken from police press releases.

Instead of	Say	Reason
Avoid accidents		
The **accident** took place between North Road and Castle Place	The **collision /crash/incident** took place between North Road and Castle Place	Helps the audience understand collisions are potentially preventable
If you're talking about a driver, say a driver		
Police are appealing for witnesses **after a blue Seat Ibiza collided with a tree** today. The driver – a teenage boy – was taken to hospital.	Police are appealing for witnesses **after a Seat Ibiza being driven by a teenage boy, collided with a tree**. The ~~driver – a teenage boy –~~ **boy driver** was taken to hospital.	Tells the audience straight away the vehicle was being driven when the crash occurred. The rest of the article was amended to avoid repetition
A 26-year-old man was arrested this morning following an incident of dangerous driving. *(continued overleaf...)* Police reportedly requested that the	A 26-year-old man was arrested this morning following an incident of dangerous driving. *(continued overleaf...)* Police reportedly requested that the	As the driver was mentioned in the first paragraph of the original story, just a one-word change is fine here.

vehicles stopped, which they allegedly failed to do….	**drivers** stopped, which they allegedly failed to do…	

If you're talking about a driver, don't focus on vulnerable road users

Police are appealing for witnesses after **a pedestrian was seriously injured** in a collision on Sunday. The driver of the car involved in the collision… was arrested in connection with the incident and has been bailed pending further inquiries.	**A car driver has been arrested** after a pedestrian was seriously injured in a collision in Ipswich on Sunday - and police are appealing for witnesses. The driver has since been bailed pending further inquiries.	Alters focus of piece to the driver, rather than the injured pedestrian. Research shows focusing on a pedestrian increases audience blame on the pedestrian.
A man has been killed after a car ploughed into pedestrians in South London	A man has been killed after a driver crashed a car into pedestrians in South London	Mentions a driver. This framing is already used when a cyclist 'hits' or 'ploughs into' a pedestrian[6]

Add context (see also template and detail below)

No context to story	This is the third fatal collision on [police force/local authority] roads in the past year. OR In [year], [number] people were killed on [police force/local authority] roads, and [number] seriously injured	Adds specific collision data relating to the current or previous year(s) to help the audience better understand collisions occur as part of trends that can be tackled.
No context to story	[Percentage] of collisions take place on rural roads, despite their carrying [percentage] of traffic	Adds road collision statistics. This can be done for driver age, time of year (when clocks go back), or weather Research shows common events seem less important if presented in isolation. Collision trends help audiences see a need for broader, systematic changes and reduce victim blaming

Figure 1: *suggested wording alterations for common news story structures*

Suggested press release templates

Suggested template 1 (for police):

We received a call at [time, date] reporting a collision involving [drivers of vehicle make] or [vehicle make being driven] and

a [driver of vehicle/vehicle make being driven/pedestrian/object] in [insert specific location]. Officers attended the scene. [injury details, age, gender]. [Details of road closures]

This is the [number] collision on [force/service] roads this year **and/or** last year [number] of people were killed or seriously injured on [force/service] roads.

Suggested template 2 (for fire/ambulance):

At [insert time] on [insert date], [insert force or service] attended a road traffic collision at [insert specific location].

Our team extricated the driver of the [model of car/vehicle] using [rescue tools, provided first aid, and secured the scene for the police investigation].

We urge all drivers to [insert safety advice relevant to the incident, e.g., "exercise caution during these adverse weather conditions and adhere to speed limits"]

Dan Quin, Chief Fire Officer for Surrey Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) and National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) Lead for Road Safety and Road Rescue supports the Guidelines and has put them into practice in his team. The above template was designed by this team. SFRS staff are instructed to avoid the term 'accident', using 'collision' or 'incident' instead; and to include a relevant road safety message to help educate the public, as well as ensuring reporting is neutral and only includes facts relevant to their attendance on the scene.

Baseline analysis reveals mixed picture among police forces

The Guidelines were received positively by police, with the NPCC Lead for Roads Policing, Chief Constable Jo Shiner, recommending forces adopt them.

We undertook an analysis of 227 press releases from 45 police forces across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, as well as using Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to obtain a baseline, and to identify areas of good practice. While the focus is on police services the learnings, we hope, can apply to fire and ambulance services too.

Six of 45 forces that responded either adopted the guidelines formally, or refer to them when writing collision reports, and a further two use the Guidelines in practice. Almost across the board there is room for improvement, however.

The analysis

Media releases were grouped into five rough themes: collision news and updates; witness appeals; operations and initiatives; sentencing news; and tributes. This analysis will focus on the first two categories, as those most likely to feature 'absent driver' language, partially from an abundance of caution. We have demonstrated above, in 'if you're talking about a driver, say a driver', how reporting can be both neutral and accurate.

Accident: The word 'accident' tended to appear in quotes from officers, potentially as a slip of the tongue. This could be corrected by press offices, by default, to collision before releasing to the media.

Absent driver: Some reports didn't mention that a person was behind the wheel at all, simply that two vehicles had collided. This is often reflected in the news stories that use this primary source of information[7].

Some more extreme examples of this: 'did you see a vehicle acting suspiciously?' or 'a vehicle intentionally swerved at a police car', or 'officers had attempted to stop the vehicle due to the speed at which it was driving'. More than one recent police media release referred to an 'offending vehicle'.

Once sentencing was passed, press releases tended to refer to drivers, i.e., 'As they were crossing the road [the driver] approached, driving a Toyota Rav-4 at speed before colliding with the woman on the crossing'.

There were, encouragingly, examples of best practice in collision reports and witness appeals. Northamptonshire, for example, described: **'the driver of a blue Nissan Micra car left the carriageway for unknown reasons … and collided with a tree.'** Surrey police wrote of **'reports of a road traffic collision between the riders of two motorcycles', and 'a collision involving two people riding a motorcycle'.**

Of 227 press releases analysed across UK police forces...

171 (75%)
referred to an actor as a person

'a 20-year-old man has been arrested on suspicion of dangerous driving'

(often after describing the actions of a vehicle first)

159 (70%)
referred to an actor as a vehicle

'a grey Ford Transit van and a black Yamaha motorbike were involved in a collision'

53 (23%):
referred to a vehicle as active, rather than a person behind the wheel

'the vehicle attempted to go the wrong way along a slip road'

8: times
the word 'accident' was used

'seatbelts are a vital safety feature that will save lives if the vehicle was involved in an accident'

Figure 3: press release analysis identifies room for improvement in police reports

Context in action

Of 227 articles analysed, 49 (22%) put road safety issues into a wider context. All of these were 'operations and initiatives', and 'sentencing news' pieces. This presents an opportunity to relate the current sentence with wider trends, but as seen above (figure 2) general road collision data can also be published with 'collision news' and 'witness appeals' pieces.

Some positive examples from this research:

South Yorkshire: 'We know that those who drive with no insurance are usually willing to take further risks... "I hope today's sentence highlights that we will intercept those who use our road for criminality, and we will bring those who pose a risk to innocent people before the courts."'

Surrey: 'Two of the 'Fatal 5' offences are speeding and dangerous driving, these are offences officers from the Vanguard Road Safety Team aim to tackle to help reduce the number of people who are killed or seriously injured on Surrey roads. If you are willing to drive dangerously, chances are we will catch you'

Avon and Somerset: 'In 2021, a third of RTCs in Avon and Somerset had a drink and/or drug factor. They involved the deaths of 12 people, all of whom had families, friends and loved ones whose lives will be forever impacted.'

Avoiding 'Accidents' - Warwickshire Police

Hazel Nicholas – Communications Officer, Warwickshire Police

Warwickshire police and partners adopted the Guidelines in 2021 and proactively implement them across communications and activities. We no longer use the word 'accident' in our media communications.

If the communications teams come across the word, we contact the relevant media outlet and share the Guidelines with them. We have had positive responses, but also those defending the word. There is still more work to do in-house, especially around mentioning the driver, not just the vehicle, and we welcome the examples in this report.

In May 2023, as part of the RoadPeace Challenge week, Warwickshire Road Safety Partnership ran the social media campaign 'Crash Not Accident' to raise awareness around the use of language more widely.

This was positively received by the public and provoked comments around stronger sentencing for offenders. However, negative comments around 'semantics' shows further awareness is needed.

When external reports are completed for Warwickshire Road Safety Partnership teams, our expectation on language and wording is shared from the beginning. We also share the guidelines with external film makers and designers. Explaining the reasons for the change of wording helps spread awareness and ensures consistent language within the Partnership.

All Partnership website pages also reflect the guidance.

New ways of working have helped the Partnership create a culture where officers feel confident to remind others of the correct wording. Discussing best practice in an open forum has created greater acceptance of the wording and guidelines.

Finally, the partnership is now looking at its current assets to ensure they are consistent with the guidelines, such as the SLOW ACCIDENT signs used at the roadside by Warwickshire Police.

In Summary...

The picture among UK police forces is mixed, but progress on phasing out the word 'accident' is promising. The aim of this document is to share and highlight good practice where it exists, and provide a baseline of current language use for improvement. It is clear blue light services have a strong influence over media output and the language we all use. By adopting best practice, emergency services can help improve understanding of the causes of harm on the roads, and the solutions. Pioneer services are already changing their language, and we hope others will follow.

Separately we have produced a quick guide for police force press offices to use in-house. This is available from www.rc-rg.com. Training on the Guidelines is also available on Co-Pilot as a Masterclass (www.co-pilot.org).

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For more information contact@rc-rg.com or www.rc-rg.com

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