

Making the Case for Saying *Motorcyclist* Safety: Personalizing the Tragedy of Motorcycle Rider Traffic Crashes

SMARTER uses, and advocates for the use of, the word “motorcyclist” (or the two words “motorcycle rider”) instead of the word “motorcycle” in references to motorcycling safety or training programs, rider fatality rates, or in any other appropriate context. Our advocacy for this change is rooted in our belief that the more we can personalize the tragedies associated with motorcycle traffic crashes, the more attention and effort will be made to reduce the risks associated with motorcycle riding.

While there are a variety of opportunities to make this change, the most obvious is in the statistical reference to the number of deaths in a given period of time that result from motorcycle crashes. The literal meaning of the term “motorcycle deaths” means that the bikes go to the junkyard, but saying “motorcyclist deaths” or “motorcycle-rider deaths” (or fatalities) means that family members and friends who rode motorcycles have been killed and that their loved ones are left grieving.

Motorcycles are made of metal, rubber, and plastic. Motorcyclists are made of blood, bones, and tissue. SMARTER is not concerned about motorcycles dying, but we are very concerned about motorcyclists dying. While this may seem like semantics, we believe that one way to help focus on the issue that **motorcycle riders are dying in record numbers** is to personalize it. This is just one small step, one small part of what could easily—and *at no added expense*—be included in driver-education or comprehensive motorcyclist-safety programs.

Here are some clear examples where the word “motorcycle” should be replaced with “motorcyclist” or “motorcycle rider” (the two terms may be used interchangeably):

INSTEAD OF SAYING	SAY
Motorcycle Fatalities	Motorcycle Rider Fatalities
Motorcycle Fatality Rate	Motorcyclist Fatality Rate
Motorcycle Training Program	Motorcycle Rider Training Program
Motorcycle Instructor/Coach	Motorcycle Rider Instructor/Coach
Motorcycle Safety Program	Motorcyclist Safety Program

Once you make the above-suggested substitutions and reframe your thinking, the absurdity of the literal meanings of the terms in the left-hand column becomes patently obvious, and it's a wonder these terms were derived in the first place and have widespread use; however, there are other situations where the distinction is not so clear—for example, when referring to crashes. Should we say “motorcycle crash” (was it the vehicle that crashed)? Or should we say “motorcyclist crash” (was it the person who was operating the vehicle that crashed)? Either or both could be appropriate and correct.

How about with regard to conspicuity? Is it “motorcycle conspicuity” or “motorcyclist conspicuity”? In this case, both terms could also be correct, depending upon the circumstance; and when we talk or write about conspicuity, we can distinguish between the two. For instance, adding lights to the machine would enhance the conspicuity of the motorcycle, while a rider's changing to a bright-colored jacket with reflective tape would add to the motorcyclist's, or motorcycle rider's, conspicuity.

Driver-education instructors are uniquely positioned to initiate a grassroots movement in this regard so that youthful motorists become accustomed to tailoring not only their own language appropriately when talking with others but also their internal dialogue when assessing oncoming traffic. It is one thing to think *It looks like I have enough time to pull out in front of that motorcycle* and quite another to reflect *I need to be very sure I have enough time to pull out, or I could kill or injure that motorcyclist*.

SMARTER's advocacy for this change is in the interest of taking positive, thoughtful action. We are asking those with influence—legislators, educators, coaches, and trainers—journalists who write about crashes involving motorcyclists, and safety advocates who write news releases and public-service announcements to consider carefully their use of the words “motorcycle” and “motorcyclist” or “motorcycle rider” so that they then make a conscious, deliberate effort to use one of the latter two choices whenever appropriate. Motorcyclists will be appreciative. Motorcycles will not care.