

What headline? 'Gaslighting' Merriam-Webster's word of 2022



By LEANNE ITALIE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — “Gaslighting” — mind manipulating, grossly misleading, downright deceitful — is Merriam-Webster's word of the year.

Lookups for the word on merriam-webster.com increased 1,740% in 2022 over the year before. But something else happened. There wasn't a single event that drove significant spikes in the curiosity, as it usually goes with the chosen word of the year.

The gaslighting was pervasive.

“It's a word that has risen so quickly in the English language, and especially in the last four years, that it actually came as a surprise to me and to many of us,” said Peter Sokolowski, Merriam-Webster's editor at large, in an exclusive interview with The Associated Press ahead of Monday's unveiling.

“It was a word looked up frequently every single day of the year,” he said.

There were deepfakes and the dark web. There were deep states and fake news. And there was a whole lot of trolling.

Merriam-Webster's top definition for gaslighting is the psychological manipulation of a person, usually over an extended period of time, that “causes the victim to question the validity of their own thoughts, perception of reality, or memories and typically leads to confusion, loss of confidence and self-esteem, uncertainty of one's emotional or mental stability, and a dependency on the perpetrator.”

Gaslighting is a heinous tool frequently used by abusers in relationships — and by politicians and other newsmakers. It can happen between romantic partners, within a broader family unit and among friends. It can be a corporate tactic, or a way to mislead the public. There's also “medical gaslighting,” when a health care professional dismisses a patient's symptoms or illness as “all in your head.”

Despite its relatively recent prominence — including “Gaslighter,” The Chicks' 2020 album featuring the rousingly angry titular single — the word was brought to life more than 80 years ago with “Gas Light,” a 1938 play by Patrick Hamilton.

It birthed two film adaptations in the 1940s. One, George Cukor's “Gaslight” in 1944, starred Ingrid

Bergman as Paula Alquist and Charles Boyer as Gregory Anton. The two marry after a whirlwind romance and Gregory turns out to be a champion gaslighter. Among other instances, he insists her complains over the constant dimming of their London townhouse's gaslights is a figment of her troubled mind. It wasn't.

The death of Angela Lansbury in October drove some interest in lookups of the word, Sokolowski said. She played Nancy Oliver, a young maid hired by Gregory and told not to bother his "high-strung" wife.

The term gaslighting was later used by mental health practitioners to clinically describe a form of prolonged coercive control in abusive relationships.

"There is this implication of an intentional deception," Sokolowski said. "And once one is aware of that deception, it's not just a straightforward lie, as in, you know, I didn't eat the cookies in the cookie jar. It's something that has a little bit more devious quality to it. It has possibly an idea of strategy or a long-term plan."

Merriam-Webster, which logs 100 million pageviews a month on its site, chooses its word of the year based solely on data. Sokolowski and his team weed out evergreen words most commonly looked up to gauge which word received a significant bump over the year before.

They don't slice and dice why people look up words, which can be anything from quick spelling and definition checks to some sort of attempt at inspiration or motivation. Some of the droves who looked up "gaslighting" this year might have wanted to know, simply, if it's one or two words, or whether it's hyphenated.

"Gaslighting," Sokolowski said, spent all of 2022 in the top 50 words looked up on merriam-webster.com to earn top dog word of the year status. Last year's pick was "vaccine." Rounding out this year's Top 10 are:

- "Oligarch," driven by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
- "Omicron," the persistent COVID-19 variant and the 15th letter of the Greek alphabet.
- "Codify," as in turning abortion rights into federal law.
- "Queen consort," what King Charles' wife, Camilla is newly known as.
- "Raid," as in the search of former President Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago home.
- "Sentient," with lookups brought on by Google canning the engineer who claimed an unreleased AI system had become sentient.
- "Cancel culture," enough said.
- "LGBTQIA," for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, and asexual, aromantic or agender.
- "Loamy," which many Wordle users tried back in August, though the right word that day was "clown."

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