

Merriam-Webster's 2023 Word of the Year: Authentic

Authentic, the term for something we're thinking about, writing about, aspiring to, and judging more than ever, is Merriam-Webster's Word of the Year for 2023.



Source: © 123rf [123rf](#) Authentic is Merriam-Webster's Word of the Year for 2023

A high-volume lookup most years, authentic saw a substantial increase in 2023, driven by stories and conversations about AI, celebrity culture, identity, and social media.

Authentic has a number of meanings including “not false or imitation,” a synonym of real and actual; and also “true to one’s own personality, spirit, or character.”

Authentic: Hard to define

Although clearly a desirable quality, authentic is hard to define and subject to debate — two reasons it sends many people to the dictionary.

Authentic is often connected to identity, whether national or personal: words frequently modified by authentic include cuisine and dish, but also self and voice.

Celebrities like singers Lainey Wilson, Sam Smith, and especially Taylor Swift all made headlines in 2023 with statements

about seeking their “authentic voice” and “authentic self.”

Headlines like [Three Ways To Tap Into Taylor Swift’s Authenticity And Build An Eras-Like Workplace](#) associate this quality with pop-culture superpower.

With the rise of AI —and its impact on deepfake videos, actors’ contracts, academic honesty, and a vast number of other topics—the line between “real” and “fake” has become increasingly blurred.

What brands aspire to be

Authentic is what brands, social media influencers, and celebrities aspire to be.

[Elon Musk made headlines](#) when he said that people should be more “authentic” on social media.

Apps and platforms like BeReal make recording “authentic” experiences their main purpose. No matter how much artifice and calculation goes into the production of these videos, as [Rebecca Jennings of Vox puts it](#), “wherever people are supposedly being ‘authentic’ on the internet, the money will follow.”

Ironically, with “authentic content creators” [now recognised as the gold standard for building trust](#), “authenticity” has become a performance.

Other words that stood out

Other words also stood out in the dictionary’s 2023 data, including:

- Rizz: An example of internet-driven slang, shot to the top of lookups when it was added to the dictionary in September. As a noun, rizz means “romantic appeal or charm” (as in “a bro who has rizz”); as a verb (typically used with up, as in “rizz up that cutie”) it means “to charm or seduce.” It’s frequently considered a play on charisma, but YouTuber Kai Cenat (shown above), widely credited with coining the word, says nah, that’s not what it’s from. No other lexical inspiration has been identified though.
- Deepfake: The quest for authenticity partly results from technologies like the deepfake: “an image or recording that has been convincingly altered and manipulated to misrepresent someone as doing or saying something that was not actually done or said”. In late April and early May, we saw a surge of interest in deepfake when lawyers for Elon Musk argued that he shouldn’t have to give legal testimony about public statements he made, since, as a famous person, some of his statements might be deepfakes. (This argument was rejected by the judge.) Another spike for deepfake followed in May, when a fan-made ad for Tesla featured a likeness of Ryan Reynolds, and again in June, when online ads for Ron DeSantis used apparently fake images of Donald Trump.
- Coronation: The ceremony to crown a new British monarch—Charles III—caused this term to spike in May. Coronation refers to the literal act of placing a crown on a monarch’s head, a synonym of crowning. It is also more figuratively used to refer to the assumption of a prominent position or office, as in “the coronation of the league’s MVP.”
- Dystopian: A number of events this year drove interest in dystopian. A video produced by the Republican National Committee in early April, and built entirely with AI-generated imagery, portrayed what was widely described as the “dystopian future” the RNC asserts will result from the reelection of Joe Biden. And the 54th Earth Day celebration on April 22nd, which followed weeks of record-high temperatures, came with warnings from activists that action must be taken to avoid a “dystopian future.” That future was evoked in June when smoke from Canadian wildfires blanketed the eastern US creating a “dystopian landscape.” And the year was full of dystopian warnings that AI could eventually replace or subjugate humankind. Dystopian gets applied not only to frightening real-world issues, but also to entertaining fictional ones. Video games, books and movies depict a dark potential future that typifies the imagined

world or society that dystopian so often calls to mind.

- EGOT: One of the rarest distinctions an entertainer can achieve is winning four particular awards: the Emmy, the Grammy, the Oscar, and the Tony. This accomplishment is referred to by a word made up of the first letters of each award, the EGOT. EGOT was first used in 1984 and was added to our dictionary in 2019. Lookups for EGOT spiked in February when Viola Davis won a Grammy for her reading of the audiobook version of her memoir, adding to the Emmy, Oscar, and Tony awards she had already received. EGOT is pronounced as a word as /EE-gaht/ rather than by spelling out its letters. We heard Viola Davis pronounce it when she used EGOT as a verb in her acceptance speech at the Grammys, exclaiming “I just EGOT!” We don’t currently enter EGOT as a verb in the dictionary, but perhaps this usage will catch on.

- X: Elon Musk’s rebranding of Twitter as X sent many people to the dictionary to learn more about this unusually flexible letter. It doesn’t just represent a letter and its sound, but also has various meanings and functions: for example, it stands for “an unknown quantity,” it’s a symbol for the act of multiplication, and it is used as a substitute for “by” in measurements, as in “The room was 10’x15.’” Lookups for X spiked 885% on July 23, the date of the rebranding announcement, although the value of the platform has declined significantly since then.
- Implode: When a submersible attempting to visit the wreck of the Titanic disappeared in June, the search made international headlines. Titan, the world eventually learned, had imploded. While explode is a common word, implode is encountered less frequently; people turned to the dictionary to understand it. Something that implodes bursts inward or undergoes violent compression—in this case, from the immense water pressure two miles below the ocean’s surface. The noun implosion also saw a dramatic increase in lookups. Submersible itself was also a top lookup. A submersible is a small underwater craft used for deep-sea research.
- Doppelgänger: Doppelgänger saw multiple lookup spikes from independent events. Media coverage of two crimes—one in Germany and one in New York, each involving the murder or attempted murder of someone’s lookalike—focused on the word. So did a story about two minor league baseball players who, despite sharing professions, names, and similar physical features (height, colouring, glasses), were shown via a DNA test to be unrelated. And September saw the release of Naomi Klein’s book, *Doppelgänger: A Trip Into the Mirror World*. Doppelgänger can refer to a living person that closely resembles another living person—that is, a double; or it can refer to the opposite side of one’s personality.
- Covenant: Several very different stories contributed to an increase in lookups for covenant, defined as “a formal, solemn, and binding agreement” or “a written agreement or promise.” A tragic shooting at the Covenant School in Nashville on March 27th coincided with the first spike in lookups for covenant. The word remained higher during the

April release of Guy Ritchie's *The Covenant*, a film depicting the rescue of an Afghan interpreter who had saved the life of a US soldier in combat. In May, a much-anticipated new novel by Abraham Verghese, *The Covenant of Water*, became an instant bestseller featured in Oprah's Book Club.

- Indict: Indict was often in the news this year. Former President Donald Trump was indicted in four separate cases now moving through the legal system, and indict spiked by 9440% on March 30, when a New York City grand jury charged the former president in the hush-money case. Indict is defined as “to charge with a crime by the finding or presentment of a jury (such as a grand jury) in due form of law.” Like most words in our legal vocabulary, indict comes from French (others include judge, jury, arraign, appeal, and acquit).
- Elemental: In June, the title of the new Pixar film *Elemental* made lookups spike. Appropriately enough, this title employs the original and oldest meaning of element: “any of the four substances air, water, fire, and earth formerly believed to compose the physical universe.” With characters that embody fire, water, earth, and air as anthropomorphised qualities, the film’s plot becomes an allegory about identity and prejudice.
- Kibbutz: When Hamas launched attacks on Israel from the Gaza Strip on October 7th, civilians living in kibbutzim were among the targets.
A term unfamiliar to many outside Israel, kibbutz refers to a communal farm or settlement in Israel. Other terms relating to Hamas’s attack and Israel’s military response that saw an increase in lookups were blood libel and intifada.
- Deadname: Deadname saw a large increase in lookups in March with “Parental Rights” bills being considered in several states. Such bills require schools to use what many transgender supporters call a “deadname”—the name someone was given at birth and no longer uses upon transitioning. While deadname does not appear in legislation, the word was used in media coverage of the issue.

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