"Toxic" is OED's Word of the Year

It was most often used in combination with other words.

"Toxic" is Oxford English Dictionary's word of the year

The skull and crossb... a common symbol for...

BASIC The Oxford English Dictionary is huge. It contains more than 750,000 English words and terms! It is published by Oxford University Press. **Where is that located?** *(In Oxford, England.)* Every year, the dictionary's editors get together to decide on their "word of the year." **What do you think they talk about?** *(How important a word is, how many people use it, etc.)* This year, the editors chose the word "toxic." **Who can define this word?** *(It means "poisonous.")* Products that contain toxic, or poisonous, chemicals, are often labeled with a skull-and-crossbones symbol, like the one shown here. **Have you seen this symbol before?** The word "toxic" is an unusual choice for the word of the year. Instead of being popular on its own, "toxic" was most often associated with several other words. For example, the term "toxic algae" was a popular term in 2018. **Do you know why?** *(Because of toxic algae blooms in Florida.)* NEXT

GENERAL The Oxford English Dictionary, or OED, is the largest dictionary in the English language. **What does "Oxford" mean here?** *(It refers to Oxford University in England, which is shown on the map.)* The OED contains more than 750,000 words and their definitions. It continues to grow every year, because new words and terms are constantly being invented. **How do you think a new word gets started?**

Every year, the staff of the OED chooses a new "word of the year." This is usually a word or phrase that has become very popular that year, and seems to sum up the year somehow. There were several contenders this year. One was "techlash," which is a combination of "technology" and "backlash." It describes some people's negative reaction to the power that big technologies companies have. Another possibility was "overtourism." This refers to tourist sites around the world that are being damaged because too many people are visiting them. **Can you think of examples of this? What other words from 2018 would you nominate?**

But the winner of the OED's 2018 "Word of the Year" was "toxic." **What does this word mean?** *(Poisonous.)* **What does this skull-and-crossbones have to do with this word?** *(It is a symbol that is commonly used to warn people of a toxic, or poisonous, substance.)* According to OED staff, there was a 45 percent rise in the number of times the word "toxic" was searched for on the OED websites this year. But in those searches, the word "toxic" was nearly always followed by another word. Next, we'll look at some examples. NEXT

ADVANCED In 1857, scholars at Oxford University in England started to compile a dictionary of every single word in the English language. Almost three decades later, they published the first volumes of the Oxford English Dictionary, or OED. The OED now contains more than 750,000 words and phrases. This is an ongoing project because language is an organic thing. **What does that mean?** *(It is constantly changing and growing.)* **How do you think a new word gets started?**

For fifteen years, the staff of the OED has chosen a word or phrase that has skyrocketed in popularity and seems to sum up the year. This year's "shortlist" included some words that are more popular in the U.K. than the U.S., like "cakeism." The OED defines this word as, quote, "the belief that it is possible to enjoy or take advantage of both of two desirable but mutually exclusive alternatives at once." Two words on the shortlist that you'll probably be able to define are "techlash" and "overtourism." **Can you define these words?** *("Techlash" is a negative backlash toward powerful technology companies; "overtourism" refers to damage done by excessive numbers of visitors to popular landmarks.)*

In the end, the OED staff went with the word "toxic," which means "poisonous." According to OED staff, there was a 45 percent rise in the number of times the word "toxic" was searched for on the OED websites this year. But in those searches, the word "toxic" was nearly always followed by another word. **Before we look at specific examples, can you think of terms that start with "toxic"?** NEXT
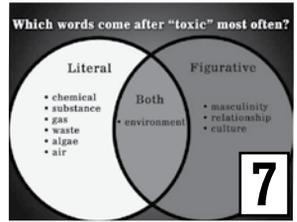
"Toxic" can have literal and figurative meanings.

BASIC This diagram contains ten words that were most commonly paired with "toxic" in 2018. **What kind of diagram is this?** *(A Venn diagram.)* The words in the left circle have literal meanings. **What does "literal" mean?** *(Taking words for their most basic sense or meaning.)* For example, a "toxic substance" is something poisonous that can harm living things. But "toxic" can be used figuratively, too. "Figurative" is the opposite of literal, when words are used in a symbolic way. **What might a "toxic relationship" be?** *(A bad relationship between people who do not get along.)* **Why does the word "environment" appear where the circles overlap?** *(Because "toxic environment" can have literal and figurative meanings.)* For example, a "toxic environment" could be a place that has been polluted by toxic chemicals. But it could also be a place that makes people unhappy, stressed, or uncomfortable. **Was "toxic" a good choice for word of the year?** END

GENERAL **What is the name for the type of diagram you see here?** *(A Venn diagram.)* This diagram shows ten words often paired with "toxic" and categorizes them into literal and figurative contexts. **What do the words "literal" and "figurative" mean?** *(Literal means taking words for their most basic sense; "figurative" is the opposite, when words have metaphorical or symbolic meanings.)* According to the OED, searches for "toxic waste" in the U.S. shot up after hurricanes hit the country's east coast. **Why do you think that is?** *(The damage from the hurricanes left behind toxic waste that many people were exposed to.)* **Why do you think "algae" appears in this list?** *(Because of toxic algae blooms in Florida.)*

When "toxic" is paired with the words on the right, the meaning becomes figurative. For example, a "toxic relationship" is a bad relationship between people who do not get along. **Can you define these other figurative terms?** *("Toxic masculinity" refers to socially harmful behavior usually associated with men; "toxic culture" refers to harmful customs of a certain group.)* **Why does the word "environment" appear where the circles overlap?** *(Because "toxic environment" can have literal and figurative meanings.)* **Who can explain the literal and figurative meanings of "toxic environment"?** *(A "toxic environment" could be a place that has been polluted by toxic chemicals or a place that makes people unhappy, like a stressful workplace.)* **Do you think "toxic" was a good choice for the word of the year? If not, what would you have chosen?** END

ADVANCED Here you see the ten most common words paired with "toxic" in 2018. As you can see, the word is used in many contexts — some literal, some figurative, and some both. According to the OED, "toxic chemical" was the most frequently searched term. **Why do you think "toxic chemical" was searched so often this year?** The OED cites a couple of events that could have inspired these searches. The first was the poisoning of Sergei Skripal, a former Russian intelligence officer, and his daughter. Both were exposed to a toxic nerve agent. **Do you remember hearing about this story?** Searches for "toxic waste" in the U.S. shot up after several hurricanes hit the country's east coast. **Why is that?** *(The damage from the hurricanes left behind toxic waste that many people were exposed to.)* Earlier this fall, NewsCurrents covered a story about toxic algae in Florida. **Who remembers its nickname?** *(Red tide.)* **Can you think of news stories that may have inspired searches for these other literal terms?**

It may well be the figurative contexts that have made the word "toxic" so popular this year. **Who can define these figurative phrases? What news stories inspired their use?** While "toxic environment" can certainly have a literal meaning, the OED says it was most often applied in a figurative sense, to describe harmful workplace environments. **What types of things make a workplace "toxic"?** *(Long hours, demanding bosses, sexual harassment, and so on.)* **Do you think "toxic" was a good choice for the word of the year? If not, what would you have chosen?** END