20 MEMORY TECHNIQUES

Organize It

1. **Learn from the general to the specific.**
   Blindfold yourself, put a magnifying glass up to your eye, move your face to within inches of the painting; now yank the blindfold off and begin studying the painting; one square inch at a time. After you finish looking at the painting this way, you won’t know what it is. Before you read your next assignment, skim it for the general idea.

2. **Make it meaningful.**
   A skydiver will not become bored learning how to pack his parachute. Know what you want from your education; then look for connections between what you want and what you are studying.

3. **Create associations.**
   The data already stored in your memory is arranged according to a scheme that makes sense to you. When you introduce new data, you can recall it more effectively if you store it near similar or related data.

Use Your Body

4. **Learn it once, actively.**
   “People remember 90 percent of what they do, 75 percent of what they see, and 20 percent of what they hear.” Action is a great memory enhancer. When you sit at a desk, sit up. Sit on the edge of your chair, as if you were about to spring out of it and sprint across the room. Some people insist their brains work better when they stand.

5. **Relax.**
   When relaxed, we absorb new information quicker and recall it with greater accuracy. Students who can’t recall information during a final exam, when they are nervous, often can recite the same facts later, when relaxed. Relaxation is a state of alertness, free of tension, during which our minds can play with new information, roll it around, create associations with it, and apply many of the other memory techniques.

6. **Create pictures.**
   Draw diagrams and make cartoons to connect facts and illustrate relationships. Relationships among abstract concepts can be “seen” and recalled easily when visualized. Visual information is associated with a different part of the brain than verbal information, anchoring information in two parts of your brain.

7. **Recite and repeat.**
   When you repeat something out loud, the concept is anchored two different senses. First, the physical sensation of the throat, tongue and lips when voicing the concept. Second, the sound. The combination is synergistic.
   The “out loud” part is important. Reciting silently, in your head, can be useful—in the library, for example—but it is not as effective as making noise. Your mind can trick itself into thinking it knows something when it doesn’t. Your ears are harder to fool. Recitation works best when you recite concepts in your own words.

8. **Write it down.**
   Writing a note to yourself helps you remember an idea, even if you never look at the note again. Writing prompts us to be more logical, coherent, and complete. Written reviews reveal gaps in knowledge that oral reviews can miss, just as oral reviews reveal gaps that mental reviews miss.

Use Your Brain

9. **Reduce interference.**
   Find a quiet place that is free from distraction. If there’s a party at your house, go to the library. If you have a strong attraction to food, don’t torture yourself by studying next to your refrigerator. Two hours of studying in front of the television might be worth 10 minutes of studying where it is quiet.

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10. Overlearn.
Fight mental fuzziness; learn more than you intended. Do you study until you think you know the material well enough to pass a test? Pick a subject apart, examine it, add to it, and go over it until it becomes second nature.

11. Escape the short-term memory trap.
A short review within minutes or hours of a study session can move material from short-term memory into long-term memory. That quick mini-review can save you hours of study time when exams roll around.

12. Use daylight.
Study your most difficult subjects during daylight hours.

Marathon study sessions are not effective. You can get far more done in three two-hour sessions than in one six-hour session. You can get more done if you take regular breaks, and you can even use them as mini-rewards. After a productive study session, give yourself permission to make a short phone call, or listen to a song.

People who think history is boring tend to have difficulty remembering history. People who believe math is difficult tent to have difficulty recalling mathematical formulas. This is not fighting your attitudes or struggling to give them up. Acknowledge them. Notice them. Awareness can deflate an attitude that is blocking your memory.

15. Choose what not to store in memory.
Adopt an “information diet.”

These memory techniques work even better in combination. Choose two or three techniques to use on a particular assignment.

Recall it.

17. Remember something else.
When you are stuck and can’t remember something you know you know, remember something else related to it. During an economics exam, if you can’t remember anything about the aggregate demand curve, recall what you know about the aggregate supply curve. If you cannot recall specific facts, remember the example the instructor used during her lecture.

18. Notice when you do remember.
To develop your memory, notice when you recall information easily and ask yourself what memory techniques you used.

19. Use it before you lose it.
Even information stored in long-term memory becomes difficult to recall if we don’t use it regularly. The pathways to the information in our brains become faint with disuse. To remember something, access it a lot. Read it, write it, speak it, listen to it, apply it—find some way to make contact with the material regularly. Each time you do so, you widen the neural pathway to the material and make it easier to recall the next time.

20. And remember, you never forget.
Adopt an attitude that says, “I never forget anything. I may have difficulty recalling something from my memory, but I never really forget it. All I have to do is find where I stored it.” We can also use affirmations that support us as we develop our memories. Possibilities include “I recall information easily and accurately” and “My memory serves me well.” Or even “I never forget!”