

Improving Your Memory

THE PROBLEM OF MEMORIZING

Some people have the mistaken idea that their memory is like a mental muscle. They think that the more they exercise it by memorizing things, the better able they will be to memorize new things. Thus, they spend a lot of time memorizing useless material in hopes that it will make them better to recall necessary things.

Unfortunately, the analogy between muscles and memory is false. Muscles are indeed strengthened by spending time lifting weights. But the ability to memorize is not best developed simply by spending time lifting facts from pages. The time devoted to developing your memory can be spent in several ways. Part of that should be devoted to analyzing your memory tasks, part of learning the principles of memorizing, and finally, after preparation, part to practice. First, let's analyze the memory tasks you have. What are they?

TECHNIQUES FOR MEMORIZING

First Technique: Study by Wholes

The technique is applied when you have a large, integrated, meaningful body of facts or ideas to memorize. Go over the material completely. Then, without looking at the material, try to recite the whole thing. Don't break it up into tiny little parts. In other words, don't break up sentences or words if it is really paragraphs of material; don't fractionalize a formula or a compound into its elements.

When might this technique be used? It would be valuable in learning poetry, dialogues in a foreign language, or a speech to be presented.

Second Technique: Rhythm & Grouping

In using this technique to memorize a series of elements, you would break up the string of items to be memorized into small subgroups. You might, as you think about them, form them into subgroups by putting stress or accent on every third or fourth element.

Suppose, for example, you had to remember the twelve cranial nerves. Think of them not as twelve elements, but as three groups with the last element in each group somehow emphasized thus:

Olfactory, optic, oculomotor, trochlear

Trigeminal, abducens, facial, auditory

Glossopharyngeal, vagus, accessory, hypoglossal

The rhythm and grouping technique can, of course, be used in other situations where you have a long chain of material. Emphasis and accent help for they convert one long list into several shorter ones.

Third Technique: Secondary Association

The technique of secondary association involves connecting the material you want to learn with something you already know very well. In recalling the material, you first say the thing you know, and this helps you reproduce the new thing. The more meaningful and easier it is to recall the old item, the more familiar it is to you, and the easier it will be to recall the new thing which you have associated with it. The technique can be used for both chain and random series memory tasks.

An example of this technique is the mnemonic or memory device that some people use to recall, in order, the colors of the visual spectrum. They simply remember ROY G. BIV. Each letter of that name is the first letter of the colors in the Spectrum: r-red, o-orange, y-yellow, g-green, b-blue, i-indigo, and v-violet. Thus it is only necessary to remember the name in order to reproduce the colors sequence.

The same technique has been occasionally used to recollect those twelve cranial nerves that were remembered by the rhythm and grouping technique. Here is a silly sentence, though more or less meaningful. The first letter of each word is the same as that of each name of the cranial nerves: On old Olympus's towering tops a fat, armed German visited Aunt Harriet. The sentence, unusual enough to stick in your memory, will help you by secondary association to recall the twelve nerves.

Fourth Technique: Attend to Meaning

This technique is important if there are other ideas or concepts behind the things that you are trying to memorize. You should look for theories or other known facts or interpretations that relate to explain the thing you are trying to memorize.

Let's pretend you are studying psychology and you have to remember William Sheldon's interesting theory which relates physique, or body shape, to personality. Sheldon classified all people into three body types: Tall thin called ectomorphs; short fat called endomorphs; and medium height, highly muscled, called mesomorphs. He also classified personality into three types: the viscerotonic person loves food and comfort and tends to be an endomorph; the somatotonic personality – quiet, hard, and callous – is usually a mesomorph; and the cerebrotonic personality – secretive, nervous, and shy – often shows up with the ectomorphic body. How do you remember what personality goes with what body type?

If you recall from biology that in a developing fetus the ectodermal layer is the layer that produces nerves and the brain, then it's easy to associate ectomorphs – the nervous, withdrawn, cerebrotonic person. The mesoderm is the layer that produces muscle, and the mesomorph is the muscular, silent, somatotonic type. The endoderm is the layer that produces the stomach and intestine, and the endomorph is the jolly, fat, happy-go-lucky person who likes to eat. Thus you put together other areas of knowledge and other information to make it easier to memorize one particular set of facts.

Fifth Technique: Self-Test

This technique is very useful for all kinds of material. Flash cards, the old gimmick used to teach arithmetic combinations in elementary school, has much application here. On one side of the flash card you put some work, formula, or date that you want to remember. On the opposite side, you put the significance of the word or formula, its translation or its solution or its meaning.

You self-test yourself by looking at one side of the card, predicting what is on the other side, and then flip the card over to test yourself. You could then go over the decks of cards as many times as you need to thoroughly recall the facts.

If the material is random and can be learned in any order, be sure you shuffle the cards for each self-test trial. You want to self-test your knowledge of the front and back, not which answer comes after which.

A bit of advice here: over learn the material in the cards. That is, go over the deck of cards once or twice after you have memorized it thoroughly. The extra learning won't take much time, but it will certainly help you retain the material. The sooner after learning you do the over learning of self-recitation, the more you will remember.

Sixth Technique: Be Alert

You must be alert to memorize. Passively reading and rereading is not an effective technique for memorizing. You must want to learn. And, if you are going to retain, you must want to memorize the material.

Seventh Technique: Be Confident of Your Ability to Remember

This is not so much a technique as a warning. The more confident you are of your ability, the more effective you will be. You will become confident by applying these techniques in many situations. And seeing that they work, you will gain confidence of your ability in the future.