Eight Ways to Remember Anything

Research-based strategies to boost your memory and keep it strong

I once came up with a metaphor I thought perfectly captured the sheer mass of material my classmates and I were expected to memorize in our first two years of medical school: it was like being asked to enter a grocery store and memorize the names of every product in the store; their number and location; and every ingredient in every product, in the order in which they appear on the label—and then to do the same thing in every grocery store in the city.

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When I look back now, I can't imagine how any of us were able to do it. And yet we did. The mind's capacity to store and recall information is truly wondrous. And we've learned a lot about memory and learning since I attended medical school. Though much of what follows are techniques I used to survive my first two years of medical school, much of the science that proves they work is new.

8 Strategies for Remembering

1. Become interested in what you're learning. We're all better remembering what [interests](http://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2006-05/cp-tbm042706.php%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) us. Few people, for example, have a difficult time remembering the names of people they find attractive. If you're not intrinsically interested in what you're learning or trying to remember, you must find a way to become so. I have to admit I wasn't so good at this in medical school—the [Krebs cycle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citric_acid_cycle%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) (I provide the link only to prove how immensely boring it is) just didn't excite me or relate to anything I found even remotely exciting.
2. Find a way to leverage your [visual](http://cvcl.mit.edu/MM/pdfs/BradyKonkleAlvarezOliva2008.pdf%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) memory. You'll be astounded by how much more this will enable you to remember. For example, imagine you're at a party and are introduced to five people in quick succession. How can you quickly memorize their names? Pick out a single defining visual characteristic of each person and connect it to a visual representation of their name, preferably through an action of some kind. For example, you can remember Mike who has large ears by creating a mental picture of a microphone (a "mike") clearing those big ears of wax (gross, I know—but all the more effective because of it). It requires mental effort to do this, but if you practice you'll be surprised how quickly you can come up with creative ways to generate these images. Here's another example: How often do you forget where you left your keys, your sunglasses, or your wallet? The next time you put something down somewhere, pause a moment to notice where you've placed it, and then in your mind blow it up. If you visualize the explosion in enough detail, you won't forget where you put it. Remember: Memory is predominantly visual.
3. Create a mental memory tree. If you're trying to memorize a large number of facts, find a way to relate them in your mind visually with a memory tree. Construct big branches first, then leaves. Branches and leaves should carry labels that are personally meaningful to you in some way, and the organization of the facts ("leaves") should be logical. It's been well recognized since the 1950's we remember "bits" of information better if we [chunk](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chunking_%28psychology%29%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) them. For example, it's easier to remember 467890 as "467" and "890" than as six individual digits.
4. Associate what you're trying to learn with what you already know. It seems the more mental connections we have to a piece of information, the more successful we'll be in remembering it. This is why using [mnemonics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mnemonic%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) actually improves recall.
5. Write out the items to be memorized over and over and over. Among other things, this is how I learned the names of bacteria, what infections they cause, and what antibiotics treat them. [Writing out facts](http://psychsocgerontology.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/reprint/51B/4/P226.pdf%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) in lists improves recall if you make yourself learn the lists actively instead of passively. In other words, don't just copy the list of facts you're trying to learn but actively recall each item you wish to learn and then write it down again and again and again. In doing this, you are, in effect, teaching yourself what you're trying to learn—and as all teachers know, the best way to ensure you know something is to have to teach it. This method has the added benefit of immediately showing you exactly which facts *haven't* made it into your long-term memory so you can focus more [attention](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/attention%22%20%5Co%20%22Psychology%20Today%20looks%20at%20attention) on learning them rather than wasting time reinforcing facts you already know.
6. When reading for retention, summarize each paragraph in the margin. This requires you to think about what you're reading, recycle it, and teach it to yourself again. Even take the concepts you're learning and reason forward with them; apply them to imagined novel situations, which creates more [neural](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/neuroscience%22%20%5Co%20%22Psychology%20Today%20looks%20at%20neural) connections to reinforce the memory.
7. Do most of your studying in the afternoon. Though you may identify yourself as a "morning person" or "evening person" at least one [study](http://www.scielo.br/pdf/bjmbr/v41n6/7019.pdf%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)suggests your ability to memorize isn't influenced as much by what time of day you perceive yourself to be most alert but by the time of day you actually study—afternoon appearing to be the best.
8. Get adequate [sleep](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/sleep%22%20%5Co%20%22Psychology%20Today%20looks%20at%20sleep) to consolidate and retain [memories](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/memory%22%20%5Co%20%22Psychology%20Today%20looks%20at%20memories). Not just at [night](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2005/06/050629070337.htm%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) after you've studied but the day [before](http://www.nature.com/neuro/journal/v10/n3/abs/nn1851.html%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) you study as well. Far better to do this than to stay up cramming all night for an exam.