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How to Improve your Memory

How memory works/ Why we forget

Forgetting is normal and necessary. Your brain is bombarded with millions of bits of information every day. All of this information could not possibly be stored, nor is it important enough to remember for any length of time. The mind decides what information is unimportant and immediately disregards it. What your mind remembers is what you need to function. There are strategies to use that will increase your ability to remember important information.

Types of Memory

Sensory Memory – We are constantly processing information gathered through our senses. Through **selective attention**, your mind determines what of the huge amount of incoming information is important and ignores the rest. When you concentrate on your professor's lecture or the discussion that is going on you use selective attention to deem this information important. Although sensory information is only kept in your mind a few seconds, by concentrating on a certain piece of information, you can transfer it to your short-term memory.

Short-Term Memory – Information in your short-term memory lasts only about a minute. When you meet someone and they tell you their name, chances are, an hour later, you won't remember their name. By reciting and rehearsing information like names, lists or phone numbers, you can increase your retention of the information. Short-term memory is limited, however. The average number of items you can keep in short-term memory is seven. To remember larger amounts of information you must group it into common themes, memorize "chunks" of information at once, or use other strategies to improve retention.

Long-Term Memory – Once information is moved to long-term memory, it is integrated with existing information. If this integration is not successfully done, the information may get "lost" and will be harder to recall. Long-term memory is like a giant warehouse full of file cabinets. You take information you know and you place it in existing "files." If there is no existing file and you do not create one by integrating like information, the information may be more difficult to recall.

The 3 R's of Memory

Reception – **Be attentive** and observant. This will help you receive important information more easily. **Engage** all of your **senses**. Look at the professor, listen to the lecture and discussion, and take notes. **Ask questions** if you aren't clear about something. If you don't understand, you won't be able to remember. **Survey before reading** the material. If you know what the selection is about before reading, you will be more attentive to the information.

Retention – Make a **conscious effort** to remember what is being said. If you set goals for your performance and motivate yourself this will give you the incentive to remember. Become an **active reader** by highlighting and marking your text. **Review** your notes **frequently** to increase your retention. **Recite** your notes aloud when possible. By using both your visual and auditory senses, you will increase your retention rate. Do all your homework when it is assigned. Using information in and out of the classroom will help you remember it better. See the list of Memory Aids for tips on improving your memory.

Recollection – **Organize** your material before the test. Group tests, summaries, and notes according to chapters and similar topics. Make a list of important topics and what you should know about them. The week before the test set up a block of time (2-3 hours) to thoroughly review the information. Remember to take breaks when studying! During the test **visualize** your diagrams and flashcards to help remember the information. Use **practice tests** to study. Anticipate possible test questions and make up your own test or look at old tests if they are available from the professor.

Memory Aids

Mnemonics – rhymes, sayings or phrases that repeat or codify the information you're trying to remember.

HOMES – an acronym that stands for the first letter of each of the five Great Lakes
Fall Back, Spring Ahead – this phrase helps you remember Daylight Savings Time
Thirty days hath September... - this jingle helps you remember how many days there are in each of the twelve months.

Associate – Relate the information you're trying to remember to something you already know. To help remember the three stages of memory (reception, retention, and recollection) you can associate the mind with a computer. By recalling the computer's three processes (input, storage, and output) you will be able to remember the stages of memory.

Visualize – Drawing out pictures and diagrams makes the information easier to recall by visualizing the drawing while taking the test. When memorizing the names of bones in the body, draw a human skeleton and label the bones. During the test, visualize the skeleton and you will be able to remember the names.

Flashcards – Write key words or terms that you need to know on one side of an index card. Write the explanation or definition on the other side of the card. Carry these cards with you and review them as often as possible.