

Improve Your Memory in Seven Easy Steps

Question: Which of these statements is correct?

- You can improve your memory by exercising it - that is, by memorizing poetry, important dates and so on.
- You can't do anything about your memory: like height, it's inherited.

Answer: Neither, according to the latest psychological research.

In fact, volunteers who memorized masses of material get poorer at it as their minds became cluttered. Memory isn't a muscle; exercise doesn't make it stronger. Yet you can improve your memory. Here are seven proven ways:

External memory

This refers to all physical devices that help you remember, lists, memos, diaries and alarm clocks. Many of us are either too lazy or too proud to make the best use of such help; we forget to perform a chore because we felt we didn't need to jot it down.

One handy form of external memory is the deliberately misplaced object. When my wife needs to remember some chore first thing in the morning, she stands a pitcher or jar of jam at the foot of the stairs where she can't miss it on her way down to breakfast. "What's that doing there?" she'll say. "Oh, yes!"

Chunking

This means grouping several items of information into one piece that's as easy to remember as a single item. We recall an acronym like UNICEF as a single name, not as six letters. And, to cue us in to the Great Lakes, many of us use HOMES; Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie and Superior.

Psychologist Laird Cermak, author of *Improving Your Memory*, urges you to make up your own chunks. His example: For a picnic, you need milk, soda, beer, salami, bologna, liverwurst, napkins, paper cups and paper plates; if you don't have a pencil handy, that's a lot to remember. Yet you can make it easy. There are three drinks, three meats and three paper goods; use the first letter of each category - d. m. p - to make a word: damp (bad for picnics). Remember that, and you'll recall the categories, and then the items in each.

Mediation

This means attaching the items of a list to some easily remembered "mediating" device, such as the jingle most adults use to recall the lengths of the months. "30 days hath September. . . ."

Make up your own mediators. To remember all the things to take care of when going away for a weekend. I listed them: water plants, throw out spoilables in refrigerator, turn on telephone answering machine, lower thermostat, lock windows, put out garbage, lock doors. From the first letter of each item, I made up the sentence, "Peter Rabbit takes Tums with gourmet dinners." Ridiculous, but easy to remember.

Association

Visual images are one effective form of association. To remember names, think of a visual link between a person's name and some facial feature. For instance, You've just met a Mr. Clausen, who has bushy eyebrows. Think of a "Keyword" (a sound alike) for his name — claws then visualize a lobster claw tearing at his eyebrows. When you try to recall his name, you see his eyebrows, then remember the claw tearing at them and — aha! — Clausen!

Any association can work. I remember the name of Mrs. Purdy, the woman who assigns garden plots at a nearby preserve, by thinking; "If I don't get a garden plot, I'll be in a purty bad fix."

Reliving the moment

Studies have shown that sensory impressions are associated in memory to what we're learning and later help remind us of what we learned. So if you're trying to recall a name or fact, picture the place in which you learned it, the people around you at the time, even the feeling of the seat you sat in, and your chance of remembering it will be greatly increased.

And if you're trying to remember where you lost something, mentally retrace your steps. "Ah!" you may suddenly say, seeing the scene in your mind's eye. "I put the parcel on the empty chair next to me in the restaurant when the waiter handed me the menu."

Mnemonic pegboards

Performers who remember scores of names called out by people in their audiences do not have unusual memories; they've previously memorized a set of words or images in which they mentally attach the names. Anyone can do it. First, memorize these 10 "pegwords" (since they rhyme with the numbers one to 10, it's easy): one — bun; two — shoe, three — tree; four — door; five — hive; six — sticks; seven — heaven; eight — gate; nine — line; ten — hen.

Now make up a list of 10 other words and number them. Link each one to the pegword with the same number by means of an image. Suppose your first word is bowl; picture a bun lying inside a bowl. If

your second word is desk, picture a shoe parked on a desk. A minute should be enough for all 10. You'll be amazed at how effortlessly — and for how long — you can recall the whole list.

Weaving it into the web

All the above methods are useful for recalling simple lists and names. But with more complicated information, you can't merely memorize; you have to connect it to the many related items you already know. That, according to psychologists, is the best way to retrieve it later.

And now you're equipped with seven ways to increase your memory power — if you can remember what they are.