

A simple guide to learning

Remembering information is not a matter of intelligence, although without intelligence it would be hard to accomplish anything beyond swimming around a fish tank like a goldfish. By the way, the truth about goldfish is they do have memories of more than twenty seconds, but that is another story.

Learning and recalling information is simply another process undertaken by our minds. But because we have not undertaken this since school, it is likely that you will have forgotten (or perhaps were never shown) how to learn. My guess is that you were repeatedly told by people you know and trust who said how daft you were, perhaps your ideas were stupid and that *they* (your so called seniors) knew much better than you – right?

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No surprise then, with such a thorough grounding, the first thing our learning teaches us is (a) we are not good enough and (b) learning is anxiety making.

Well, now you are an adult. You are in charge of your own life, you know better, your ideas are often brilliant, and yes, you sometimes feel stupid but then that is only when something really matters to you and you really want to get it right. Of course you know all of this. And despite these nice words of support and encouragement you are still slightly hesitant about returning to learning. So, to help you get ahead of the fear and anxiety we have provided some practical tips that you will find useful in helping you get the most out of your training.

Your starting point is to consider one simple fact. Psychologists believe that we are *ALL* unable to recall 80% of everything we have tried to learn simply because it has not been transferred to our long term memory; we are therefore unable to gain access to that very thing we are trying to recall.

To my kind, this suggests two questions; how much can you remember (well you have something like 11 billion neurons in your head, more than the biggest computers ever built and all waiting to learn, so you will have some room) AND the second question, how can you go about transferring information to your long term memory (i.e. the key to remembering)?

For now, we will assume that you have more than enough room in your brain and our four active stages will focus only on the second question; how to *actively* go about transferring information to your long term memory.

Step one:

Make sense of what you have been told. Ensure that you have fully understood what has been said by clarifying, reflecting, asking questions to understand the issues, their impact, alternative options etc... If you don't want to ask questions now, jot a note of your question, this will help you remember to ask the question and also alerts your mind what to think! So, what if you forget to ask the question? Not to worry, the key here is that you engage with the information.

You will find our lessons to be relaxed, informal, highly supportive and encouraging. We and most of your colleagues will understand how important it is that you fully understand the subject and if unsure, are un-hindered in seeking clarification.

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Step two:

Take time to write down exactly what has been reflected in stage one.

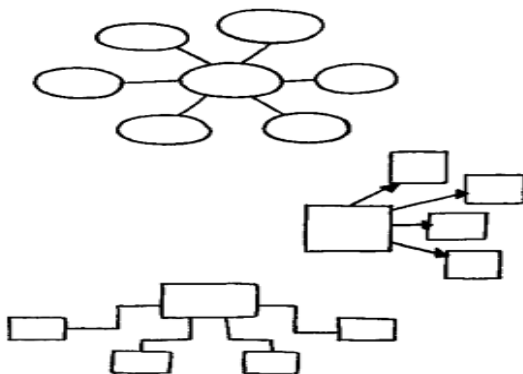
Reflected in this case simply means your understanding of what has been said. No need to write everything out long hand use bullet points or mind maps, crazy mnemonics, visualisation, highlighting (as we have below), underlining (as we have throughout this text), in fact, use anything that “grabs your attention” at that moment.

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“To make sense of what has been said or written can be complex, depending upon the speaker/author’s style, use of grammar and, of course, and your own interest in the subject (so say nothing of what you are actually thinking at the time). For instance, when writing about gravity, an author may make a dry and technical subject interesting by including **stories** about how Isaak Newton lived as a child or by using **drawings of the apple dropping on to his head**. You too should try too to avoid overlooking the interesting part (interesting to you, not your colleagues or the lecturer). If a subject is not of interest, find ways to make it of interest, for example, I hate maths, but by using maths to create charts I can **be creative** with maths at work and get to understand how numbers function and relate to each other. Of course I now **practice** them all of the time. I also have a lot of feedback from experts, who can advise me when I am wrong (!) or when there are other ways of doing things, so I am **engaging** with my maths. However, I still have no idea what a cosine is, why because I have not found a way to use it, in other words, it is not important to me. When it becomes important to me, I have no doubt I will make the effort to engage with the cosine (but for now, it is unimportant).

On many of our professional courses we will show you how to use some of these techniques, and visualisation that will be one of the most powerful tools you can unlock. The web is also packed with idea such as mind maps. No matter which you try out and which styles suits you, as you engage with the subject the information starts to transfer to your short-term memory; but you will still forget 80% of it if you do not go to step three.

Examples of ways to organise notes:



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I can
update
from the
side like
this

Step three:

After a few days have passed, read your notes out aloud and update them with new ideas that you have since thought or remembered as being important. . We help you here by designing your assignments in so that you move effortlessly from your notes, your handouts are kept to the minimum and we make the assignments relevant to you thereby connecting your mind and your emotions. The material is now well on its way to your long term memory, but you may still only remember 60% if you do not go to step four.

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Step four:

Set a date to review your notes and other information. Discuss what you have learnt with your peers and in conversation with friends. For example, one group of students would make up simple games. When they met socially they would ask questions of each other or discuss what they have learned and fit this into the theory, perhaps even developing their own ideas and concepts. In other words they are using their information to shape into knowledge – information used in this way enters what is known as working memory (working memory is the type of memory you use when recalling phone numbers etc).

Congratulations, you are now using your long-term memory to recall facts and you will be able to apply these simple techniques to other knowledge you have acquired and as you start to use this knowledge, it becomes a skill.

Remembering is a crucial element in all that we do. In the more complex tasks that we undertake we even need prompts and clues to remind ourselves what we need to remember. Take for example airline pilots. They are highly skilled (both in the classroom and in practical aspects) and then they fly aircrafts every day (often the same aircraft). Before each flight they are required to carry out a series of checks, the same checks each and every time and yet these checks are listed on a check list. I was learning to fly one and was most surprised that in order to land even a small aircraft I had to learn a series of check lists not by heart but by following a list (I still remember the list to this day and have not used it in years)!

When you add stress and other pressures to a situation, the ability for your mind to recall all the information is firmly tested (some psychologists have shown that you can not undertake even the most simple of task such as driving, and answer simple questions such; as thirty eight minus fourteen). So, under pressure, there is a need for additional prompts and clues. Returning to our example of pilots, if on one more engines fail mid-flight, the pilots do not rely on their training and skills alone (memory), they are required to studiously follow instructions on a check list, in other words, – even those highly intelligent pilots who are highly trained, fail to remember and must not rely on their memory: so why should you expect that of yourself?

In 2005, 11 patients recovering from surgical operations in hospitals complained of unusual side effects. On investigation, they were found to have operating instruments still inside their bodies – the surgeon had *forgotten* to remove them!

Make and use notes that help you accomplish what you want to achieve.

Enjoy your learning.

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Other places to get ideas leaning and organising information:

<http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/students/learning/lr1grorg.htm>

<http://www.businessballs.com/kolblearningstyles.htm>

<http://www.peterhoney.com/content/LearningStylesQuestionnaire.html>

<http://www.essex.ac.uk/plagiarism/>