

How to Remember Things

Introduction

There is a myth that some people have fantastic memories and some cannot remember anything. In fact, our memories are probably much more similar in capacity and operation than **we** think. We tend to remember things that interest us or are made memorable in some way. So some men can remember football scores going back years but not their wedding anniversary which occurs each year, because they are more engaged with their sport than their marriage. We are more likely too to remember things that are amusing or silly or vivid. For all of us, remembering things is usually a matter of technique - but most of us only use a few of the many techniques available. This short essay offers a variety of ideas, varying in usage and complexity. Give them a try and use what works for you.

How to remember names

Try this five-stage sequential technique:

- 1. Listen:** when you are first introduced to someone, really listen to their name rather than thinking about what to say. If the name is not offered, ask for it politely.
- 2. Respond:** immediately use the name in a suitable response, such as "It's really good to meet you, Jack" or "I'm so glad that you could visit, Jane".
- 3. Visualise:** try to link a visual cue of that person with their name in image which is vivid and memorable. Maybe the name Jack reminds you of a lumberjack and you picture him in a Canadian forest; Jane rhymes with pane, so you might picture seeing her through a pane of glass.

4. Repeat: as you leave the gathering, say farewell to people using their names and recalling the cues. "It was good to meet you, Roger" (maybe you picture a Jolly Roger pirate flag) or "Let's do lunch, Helen" (you imagine her face launching ships).

5. Rehearse: as you sit at a dinner party or at a business meeting, mentally go around reminding yourself of each person's name and visual cue; if you are going to a meeting or other event, where you expect to come across some people you know, on the way there, think about who you might expect to see and bring to your mind the name and cue.

How to remember *Numbers*

For short numbers, like a PIN number, try to play with the component numbers mentally and create some kind of memorable link between them or 'picture' of them. Just as an illustration of what I mean, take the easy case of 1113 which could be remembered as 'one plus one plus one is equal to three' or of 4007 which could be thought of as 'collecting money for four James Bond'. Get the general idea? For longer numbers, the best method is called 'chunking'. You break up the number into smaller and more memorable chunks. For example, remembering the number 472627607 is easier if one remembers it as 472 627 607 or as 47 26 27 607. Play with the original number and see which chunks best help you to remember it.

How to remember meeting *Details*

You should have a 'Future meetings' file - it can be a hanging file, a cardboard wallet or a plastic folder or a reminder in your phone (whatever suits you). Then, as you fix each meeting or other event that you will be attending, put all the information - agenda, papers, time, location, travel arrangements - in the correct chronological position in the file. If between fixing the meeting and the event itself, you see an article that is relevant or have an idea that you might want to raise, cut out the article or make a note of the idea and add this to the other information on the meeting. Everything for the same meeting or event should be held together with a suitable clip.

How to remember *Times*

If you think you might forget when you need to leave home for a meeting or when you should leave one meeting to go to another, the only sure way to remember the time is to set an alarm. But these days we have many possible devices to provide an alarm: an alarm clock, a mobile, a PDA, a lap top, and so on. You should always have a device with you that incorporates an alarm.

How to remember *Birthdays & Anniversaries*

One way is to note each date in the new pocket diary or on the new kitchen wall calendar. A better way - when you only have to make a note once - is to put each date in a computer system, preferably a personal digital assistant (so that it is always with you), and to set the system so that it reminds you of each date a set period (say a week) beforehand.

How to use *physical systems*

Putting things down on paper has two benefits: the very act of writing them down makes you more likely to remember them and, since they are on paper, you can easily go back and consult them.

So, when you attend a lecture or a meeting, constantly take notes in a decent-sized notebook that you have with you all the time you are studying or working. Use card index systems to file things that lend themselves to alphabetisation, such as the addresses of friends or the titles of books, films or music.

How to use *electronic systems*

These days many people use electronic devices to record and retrieve information - usually a computer which might be a desktop, a laptop or a handheld. Mobile devices - such as a personal digital assistant (PDA) or a mobile phone - are especially useful

because they can be with you always. The two can be synchronised such as having a PDA which can be backed up onto a PC. Always remember to back up everything at periodic intervals.

Various techniques to remember things

How to use lists

You can't beat the good old list for remembering things - things to do, things to buy, people to contact. As well as ensuring that you remember things, there is great satisfaction in ticking items on the list as each item is completed. But, if you make a list, make sure you have it when and where you need it; not like my wife who usually leaves her shopping list on the kitchen table when she goes to the supermarket.

How to use pictures and patterns

Remember the old saying: "A picture is worth a thousand words". There's a lot of truth in this. If you can turn the information to be remembered into some kind of picture or pattern or diagram, you are much more likely to remember it. A well-established example of this is 'mind mapping'

How to use key letters

One of the simplest techniques to aid memory is to look for key letters that will help you to recall things. For instance, when I struggle to remember whether 'pazhalsta' or 'spaseeba' is 'please' or 'thank you' - the first two words I learned in Russian - I remember that '**p**azhalsta' = '**p**lease'. So 'spaseeba' must be 'thank you'. Or, when trying to remember 'left' and 'right' in Czech, I recall '**l**evý' = '**l**eft' and '**p**ravý' = '**r**ight'.

How to use acronyms

If you have a set of things to remember - especially if the order is not relevant or important - try making up an acronym from the initial letters of the items in the list. One

example comes from learning how to shoot a rifle: 'breath, relax, aim, sight, squeeze' becomes BRASS. For another example where order is not important, consider the items 'nuts, apples, bananas, carrots, oranges' which could be re-arranged to 'bananas, apples, carrots, oranges, nuts' and remembered with the acronym BACON.

How to use mnemonics

Mnemonics are where the initial letters of a memorable sentence stand for the initial letters of pieces of information in a particular order. For instance, British schoolchildren learn the order of the colours in the rainbow with the mnemonic (REMEMBER VIBGYOR, YOU STILL REMEMBER THE NAME OF ALL 7 COLOURS): or "Richard of York gained battles in vain" (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet). Lots of other classroom information can be encoded in mnemonics, the order of the planets from the sun with "My Very Excellent Method: Just Say You Know Planets" (Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, Pluto) or the order of operations in mathematics with "Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally" (parentheses, exponents, multiplication, division, addition, subtraction).

Working with this technique, one can personally construct all sorts of mnemonics to remember all sorts of things. Indeed the more personal - and the funnier - the more memorable.

British author Judy Parkinson has collated a wonderful collection of such mnemonics (and other memory aids) in her book "i before e (except after c)".

How to use rhymes

Rhymes are often used very effectively to teach children how to remember basic information, but frequently these rhymes are remembered in adulthood and still prove useful.

For instance, a short one is "The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain". Another one - used to assist English spelling - is "'i' before 'e' except after 'c'".

A long one is: "Thirty days have September, April, June, and November; All the rest have thirty-one, Excepting February alone, Which has but twenty-eight days clear, And twenty-nine on each leap year." [Note: In many non-English-speaking countries, this information is remembered by using the knuckles and spaces between them]

Working with this technique, one can personally construct little rhymes to remember or reinforce information, such as "When in doubt, leave it out" or "Don't be a clown, write it down".

How to use the link system

The link or linking or chaining system is used for remembering a list of random things in the exact order in which you wish to recall them. The essence of the system is to create a mental picture of the two adjacent items in the list that links them memorably. This is most likely if the picture or image is vivid and unusual and incorporates genuine interaction.

In an example given by Darren Brown in his book "Tricks Of The Mind", the first three items are: telephone, sausage, monkey. His first picture is of someone trying to dial an old-fashioned phone by using a flaccid sausage; his second picture is of sausage being cooked over a barbecue by a monkey in the jungle; his third picture is of a trained monkey doing up the buttons on your shirt. You get the idea ...

One way of using the linking system is when giving a speech when you don't want to be seen using notes. You turn each of the main points in the speech into a vivid image and then create pictures of adjacent images interacting.

For instance, maybe you're making a speech at a wedding reception. The first three elements of your speech is a joke about the groom when you were in a pub together, next a story about how he met the bride at a party, and then some remarks about the bride's

father. The first picture might be the groom drinking a pint of bitter. The next picture might be the groom needing the toilet and his bitterness that the mens' toilet is out of use, so he is forced to go to the womens' toilet only to find that, behind the door, a fantastic party is in full swing with his bride being sick from too much alcohol. The third picture might be the bride as a baby being sick over the shoulder of her father as he cradles her. Remember the images are supposed to be vivid and interact.

How to use the linking system

A weakness of the linking system is that, if you forget one link in the chain, you're stuck. The loci system - which does not have this problem - works by attaching images to places along a familiar real-life route that you know well. It is sometimes called the Memory Room or Roman Room. For instance, the route might be your walk from the bus stop to your home and the places on the route could be a shop, a pub, a zebra crossing, a church, a particularly large tree, a post box, traffic lights. Another route might be the rooms in your home in the order you would take if you entered the house when it was dark and went through all the rooms drawing the curtains and switching on the lights. Of course, if you combined both these routes, you could have system with up to 20 loci. The second stage of the loci system is mentally to place the items to be remembered in one locum after another in the order in which you wish to remember them and construct a memorable - perhaps a funny or silly - image. For example, let's take the three items we used in the case of the linking system: telephone, sausage, monkey. You might picture a telephone in a shop where it can be used by customers, then a picture of a silly sausage getting drunk in the pub, next a monkey crossing a zebra crossing. You get the idea.

If you find the loci system useful, it can be expanded almost infinitely, depending on how much practice you are prepared to give the system. So, for instance, you could dramatically explain the number of rooms by imagining a palace and/or you could take each room in the route and imagine walking round it in a clockwise direction and noticing say five memorable (and fixed) objects, such as a large vase, a television set, a bookcase, a particular picture, a favourite photograph. This will enable you to create what is sometimes called a memory palace.

How to use the peg system

method for aiding memory uses the basic principle of associating an unknown thing with a known object. First, you make a list of 10 or 20 convenient pegs or keywords that you can easily recall in the right sequence. Then you take each item you wish to remember and link them in order with the pegs usually by creating a mental picture or image. There are at least three simple versions of the peg system.

1. In the **number-shape system**, you create a visual image which looks like each of the numbers 1 to 10. Tony Buzan uses these pictures: 1-paintbrush, 2-swan, 3-heart, 4-yacht, 5-hook, 6-elephant's trunk, 7-cliff, 8-snowman, 9-ballon and stick, 10-bat and ball. The idea is that each picture look a bit like the way the number is represented visually. If Buzan's pictures don't work for you, you can invent your own. Now suppose you want to remember telephone, sausage, monkey in order. You could imagine painting a picture using paint of the colour of your own phone; then a swan chewing on a sausage, next a monkey beating its chest over its heart.
2. In the **number-rhyme system**, you create a word which sounds like each of the numbers 1 to 10. Derren Brown uses these words: 1-bun, 2-shoe, 3-tree, 4-door, 5-hive, 6-sticks, 7-heaven, 8-gate, 9-line, 10-hen. Say you want to remember telephone, sausage, monkey in order. You might picture a bun in the shape of a telephone with the buttons in the form of currants, then a sausage filling up an empty shoe, next monkey in a tree. You have the idea.
3. In the **alphabet system**, you use the sounds of the names of the 26 letters of the alphabet as memory pegs instead of numbers. A more complicated but more useful version of the peg system - often called the **major system** - involves converting numbers into common consonants. So the number 1 would become the letter l because it looks similar; the number 2 would become the letter n because of the two downward strokes on a small n; the number three would become the letter m because there are three downward strokes; and so on. Then suppose you wanted to remember the number 213 under this system, you would represent it as 'nlm'

which is not very memorable but could be if you added some vowels such as 'NeLaM' (the name of an Indian woman I know).

Now suppose you want to use this set of pegs to remember a list of items. You start by taking the consonants that represent the different numbers and add some letters to turn them into words representing memorable objects. So number 1 which became the letter l becomes the word 'ale'; number 2 which became the letter n becomes the word 'hen'; and number three which became the letter m becomes the word 'ham'. Then you create a picture of your list of items by associating each in turn with the right number. Take our familiar list: telephone, sausage, monkey. You could picture a glass of ale sitting by a telephone on the bar of a pub; you could think of a hen eating a sausage (unlikely but the idea is to create vivid and perhaps amusing images); you could create a scene of a packet of ham being opened by a monkey.

If this memory system sounds complicated, it is - but, in the hands of a professional magician like Derren Brown, it can be used to memorise in order the 52 cards in a shuffled pack. If you want to know how, read his book "Tricks Of The Mind".

How to remember in bed

I don't know about you, but I have some of my best ideas as I'm falling to sleep (as well as remembering things I need to do the next day), but I don't want to delay falling asleep (or annoying my wife) by leaving the bed, switching on the light and making notes. So I lean over, grab a slipper and throw it to one side. Then, when I rise in the morning, I remember that I have to remember something and usually manage to work out what it was.

If I have a second idea, I throw aside the other slipper. If - and this is rare - I have a third idea, I move my wrist watch from its usual position on the bedside cabinet. If I have more than three thoughts, clearly I'm not tired enough for sleep and should get up.

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This article written by Manmohan Kolkata. I didn't claim any originality.

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