

Concentrate > Comprehend > Remember

Improving Your Memory

You must “get” something before you can “forget” it! Often when we say “I forgot” what we mean is “I didn’t pay attention and understand it.”

Concentrate

By concentration I mean sustained attention, focused in one direction with no distractions. When you complain that you “can’t concentrate,” you usually mean you can’t keep your attention on your studies. You’re probably concentrating, but on things such as what to eat, how to pay the rent, and where to go tonight. To overcome distractions that interfere with study, identify the distraction and apply a technique to alleviate or overcome it.

Cope with internal distractions

Internal Distractions include daydreams and thoughts like “I have to remember to call the plumber” and “this is boring.” Many people find themselves “reading” a paragraph and discovering they are really thinking about how hungry they are or the question they need to ask their professor next week. Some ways of coping with these internal distractions include:

- Keep a note pad on your study table and jot down a brief reminder of the idea or problem. Then, let it go from your mind.
- Turn the distraction, especially hunger or sleep, into a reward—once you master this idea, reward yourself with a snack or nap.
- To counteract boredom or lack of interest, try to identify the cause: lack of background knowledge, lack of purpose for the assignment, difficult reading material, or personal problems. If it is a textbook problem, try using the Plan»Do»Review approach or getting help from a tutor. If the problem is personal, consider talking with a counselor.
- If you can’t concentrate, take a break and deal with the distraction.

Eliminate external distractions

External Distractions are related to the physical environment of your study area. They are easier to deal with once you’ve identified them.

- The best way to combat most external distractions, whether it’s the television, the telephone, family members demanding attention, or the smell of dinner cooking, is to get away from them.
- Form the habit of studying in the same place at the same time everyday. Make this place, whether at home or school, just for study. Pay your bills and read your magazines somewhere else—don’t mix personal work, school work, and leisure activities.
- Select a study area with good lighting, adequate ventilation, and quiet surroundings.

When it is time to study, apply yourself totally with your full attention. If you feel you are not getting as much as you should from your study and you cannot alleviate the distraction, take a short break and try again. The bottom line: you must learn to concentrate.

Comprehend

How well you learn something, not how fast you learn it, is a critical factor in remembering.

Comprehending means your ability to translate information into meaningful ideas you understand. Five basic principles of good comprehension include:

1. Something that doesn't make sense to you is hard to learn. The more meaningful you make it, the easier it is to learn.
2. The more you know about a subject, the easier it is to understand new information about it.
3. The more interested you are in a subject, the easier it is to comprehend.
4. Your ability to distinguish main points from details and tell the difference between significant details and unimportant details is a most important skill.
5. Learning—understanding ideas—means you must fit each new piece of information into the subject's "big picture," not just memorize bits of details.

Use the memory techniques on the reverse side to help you remember more of what you learn.

Remembering is a skill. Improving your memory, like improving any other skill, is hard work. These tips and techniques will not necessarily make remembering easier; they just make it more efficient.

Remember

» Being able to remember something usually depends on how thoroughly you learned it in the first place. "I have a poor memory" is often a convenient excuse to use when you haven't had time to "learn" something.

» You remember only what you intend to remember. Do you forget your best friend's name or phone number? Do you forget how to drive?

» Realize you can't and don't need to remember everything. Trying to remember every detail you read and hear is probably impossible. Therefore, your ability to identify important ideas and details in the study/learning process is critical to effective recall of information.

How you put information into your memory affects how easily you can access it.

In many ways your memory is like an office filing system.

- Your sensory memory (momentary and very limited) is like a pink "while you were out" message that you deal with and forget.
- Your short-term memory (30-45 seconds with limited capacity) is like the "in-basket" where you sort out important and non-important information.
- Your long-term memory (relatively permanent and unlimited in capacity) is like large file cabinets for storing important information.

Everything in long-term storage must first be identified through sensory and/or short-term memory as important, and then organized by some system and filed in the cabinet so it can be found easily. The same principles apply to your memory.

You must identify meaningful/important information, organize it, and then study it (file it) so you can retrieve it from your memory.

Once you have identified important information, there are several techniques that can help you organize and recall it. There is not, however, one best method for remembering everything.

Associate. Relate new information to something you already know. An isolated idea/fact is hard to remember; if you associate it with information that already makes sense to you, it will be more meaningful and easier to organize and remember.

Visualize. Organize information into a vivid, clear, mental picture. For example, to remember the necessary elements of a novel, form a picture with all the important characters dressed in the style of the period, doing something representative of the character.

Mnemonic Aids. For information that defies association or visualization, adapt a memory technique. Some mnemonic devices include:

Acronyms Form a word from the first letter of each word in a series. For example, "HOMES" for recalling the Great Lakes: Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, Superior.

Experiment with many memory techniques to see which ones work best for you.

Acrostics Make a nonsense phrase so that the first letter of each word is the information. For example, “Every Good Boy Does Fine” for the E, G, B, D, F lines of the treble music staff.

Word-Part Clues For example, remember whether the denotative or connotative meaning of a word is the dictionary meaning by denotative and dictionary both beginning with “d.”

Poems & Rhymes Make up short, catchy sayings that include the essential information. For example, “in 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue.”

Regular review and use of information will significantly improve retention and recall. So, rather than a single marathon study session, plan frequent short study sessions. Always include a review of previously learned information (yes, even if you’ve already had that test) as well as learning new information.