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How to permanently improve your memory

Courses on how to improve your memory very rarely have any long-lasting effect on your memory. It is not enough to learn 'tricks' — to permanently improve your memory you need to understand enough about how memory works to know why and how and when different learning and retrieval strategies are useful.

Most memory-improvement programs do not result in long-lasting change

For 2500 years, 'experts' have claimed to be able to improve a person's memory. For most of that time the methods have been the same. But despite the proven effectiveness of these strategies, despite the established validity of the principles, **people rarely improve their memory**. Even intensive, month-long courses rarely bring about permanent memory improvement.

Why do people who try to improve their memory fail to do so? Not because they are intelligent or lazy. Because the memory improvement programs are flawed. They are based on effective strategies, they are based on valid principles, but they are flawed. Because they have put in the "too-hard" basket, the information that you need to know to improve your memory. This book aims to fill this gap.

Memory is plural!

One of the reasons behind the failure of most memory improvement programs to achieve long-lasting improvement is that "memory" is really a category like "sport". Would you say, "I want to improve my sport"? Of course not. But you might say, "I want to improve my tennis (or golf or swimming …)".

Memory is not one thing. The feats of memory that so impress us are not evidence of a "photographic" memory or any other innate talent. Being able to memorise a string of 80 digits after seeing them once is a trick anyone can learn — if they wish to devote months of training and practising to the skill.

But the trick does not generalise to other types of memory. The person who sweats for months to master longer and longer strings of digits will be no better at remembering shopping lists. Chess experts take years to develop their phenomenal memory for the arrangement of chess pieces, but that doesn't make them any better at remembering a speech or what they did last Tuesday.

Surveys have found that there are over 100 memory tasks in everyday life that can cause people problems. Each of these tasks requires a different strategy.

Don't panic! One hundred sounds a lot but think for a moment how many different techniques you have for simply getting through the day. Putting on your shoes is a different technique than putting on a shirt; burning the toast is an entirely different skill than cleaning your teeth. You probably use 100 different skills before you've gone out the door!

Moreover, you're not starting from scratch. You already know many memory skills, and you're probably quite happy with your level of competence at some of them. What it comes down to is identifying your needs. Don't say "I want to improve my memory", say "I want to improve these specific memory skills".

Identify the memory tasks you want to be more skilled at.

Before you go any further, ask yourself *why* you want to improve your memory. Why do you think you have a 'poor' memory?

Here are the memory tasks that most commonly cause problems:

- trying to put a name to a face
- trying to put a face to a name
- trying to remember who someone is (e.g. "local librarian")
- remembering important dates (birthdays, appointments etc)
- remembering to do something at a particular time
- remembering information you have studied
- remembering the names of things (e.g., computer jargon, business strategies, books, plants, recipes etc)
- trying to remember how to do something (e.g., computer procedures, craft techniques, domestic tasks)
- meeting someone and wanting to remember details such as names of children and partner, any problems they may have been having last time you talked, etc
- knowing there's something you need to remember but you can't think what it is
- remembering whether you've done something
- remembering where you've put something

- remembering when/where something happened (e.g., where you bought something; where you read something)

Be specific. Think of particular occasions when you have been embarrassed by your memory failure, or annoyed with yourself over your forgetfulness. Write them down (there's a worksheet on p11). Use these specific instances as a springboard for working out your needs. If you were mortified the time you forgot your best friend's birthday, write that down. Then consider whether this points to a general memory task you want to be better at (remembering significant dates), or whether you merely want to ensure a better memory for one or two dates of particular importance.

If specific instances of memory failure point to general memory tasks that you wish to be better at, write down the general task. If only the specific instance is of interest to you, write down the specific task.

Here is a sample:

Memory tasks I want to be better at

remembering personal details that my friends tell me

remembering interesting things I read

remembering the names of people at my tennis club

remembering my partner's and my nieces' birthdays

remembering things I have to do today

remembering information I have studied

If you want to achieve genuine memory improvement, this is a vital, utterly necessary step. So do take the time to think about what you want to achieve before going any further.

Memory skills can cost too much

Another problem with many memory training programs is that too little attention is paid to the costs of particular learning strategies.

For example, one of the classic memory strategies is the "method of loci". This strategy requires you to memorise some physical object that has distinct locations (for example, your house, a familiar route, a classroom). You then use this structure as a base for any information you want to remember. So for a shopping list, you might picture bread on the doormat, potatoes hanging from the coat-hook, apples in the sink, and so on. This strategy was supposedly invented in 477 BC, and people have been

learning it ever since — but how many people have ever used it more than once or twice? It involves more effort than most of us want to put in.

Strategies such as the method of loci and the peg-word system do work, but *very* few people want to put in the effort to making them work. That's not laziness, that's an appreciation of costs versus benefits. The cost of using these strategies is rarely worth the benefits. The cost of having an old envelope stuck to the fridge with a magnet, and writing down shopping needs as they come up, is much less than the mental effort needed for me to produce vivid mental images for each item I need.

For a strategy to have value it must be not only effective but also useful. That means the benefit of it *to you* must be worth the cost *to you*. Some people find it very easy to create memorable images, and for them the cost of such a strategy is low. Some people may rate a particular memory task as so important to them that they are prepared to invest a great deal of time and effort into improving skills that would help them.

Before you learn a skill, assess whether it is worth the time and effort to you.

Look at your list of the memory tasks you are poor at. Now ask yourself: how important are these tasks to you? You may be very poor at remembering people's names, but perhaps you don't really care. You may already be reasonably competent at remembering information you have studied, but perhaps it is really important to you to be better.

Beside the tasks on your list, put a rating as to how much effort you're prepared to put into improving your skills for that task. The ratings could be simple comments indicating the amount of effort you're prepared to put in ("lots", "not much", "some", etc), or could be numbers indicating your priority order. You may find doing both helpful.

Memory Task Priority List

Memory task	Effort rating			Priority
	Lots	Some	Little	Rating
remembering information you have studied				
remembering someone's name/face				
remembering important dates				
remembering to do something				

Now that you have your targets worked out, let's see what you need to do to achieve them.

What you need to know to improve your memory skills

Knowing what can be done

Although I have emphasised that you cannot improve 'memory' but must target specific memory skills, that doesn't mean that memory skills should be acquired in a vacuum. You can learn to cook without any understanding of basic chemistry, but you'll be far better at adapting recipes and creating new ones if you understand the role of the various ingredients (for example, whether the eggs are included to thicken, to bind, or to leaven).

Research has found that people are most likely to successfully apply appropriate learning and remembering strategies when they have also been taught general information about how the mind works.

The more you understand about how memory works, the more likely you are to benefit from instruction in particular memory skills.

When you have a good general understanding of how memory works, different learning strategies make much more sense. You will remember them more easily, because they are part of your general understanding. You will be able to adapt them to different situations, because you understand why they work and which aspects are important. You will be able to recognise which skills are useful in different situations. Not least important, because you understand why the strategies work, you will have much greater confidence in them.

Understanding how memory works:

- helps you remember different memory skills
- helps you recognize which skill to use
- helps you adapt your skills to new situations
- gives you confidence in the skills
- increases the likelihood that you will use the skills.

You must believe in what you are doing, and in your ability to do it.

Confidence in a particular technique doesn't come about merely because you have been told it's really useful, nor even by trying it out yourself. To be really convinced of a strategy's usefulness, you need to not only experience for yourself its use in everyday situations, you need to understand *why* it works. You also need to believe in your own ability to use the strategy successfully and appropriately — to do that you need to *master* the skill, not simply 'learn' it.

Think of driving a car. In the beginning there were so many different things to think about, but eventually they became routine, automatic. You know you have mastered a skill when you no longer have to think about it.

As it is with driving a car, playing the piano, pruning the roses, a memory skill is mastered when it becomes automatic. And once it becomes automatic, aah, you're safe! An automatic, over-learned skill is part of your 'permastore'. Like the permafrost that never melts, memories in permastore are never lost.

More importantly, if the skill can be performed automatically, the cost of applying it falls dramatically. The time is less; the effort is much less. Reducing the cost makes using the skill a much more attractive proposition. An over-learned skill is therefore much more likely to be used.

Mastering a memory skill means making it a habit.

You are more likely to use a skill if:

- you are convinced it helps you remember
- you understand why it helps you remember
- you know when and when not to use it
- you are confident that you can use the skill.

Becoming confident in your memory skills

I believe part of the reason for people's lack of confidence in their own skills is the association we commonly make between learning and intelligence. If a person appears to learn facts easily, we assume they are intelligent. A person who has trouble learning is assumed to be less intelligent. Although of course some people find it easier than others to learn appropriate skills and see when to apply them effectively, ***being skilled at learning is a learned skill.*** You can be 'smart' and poor at learning; you can be 'average' and good at learning.

Whether or not you *use* memory-improvement strategies depends more on how much you know about your memory processes than how intelligent you are.

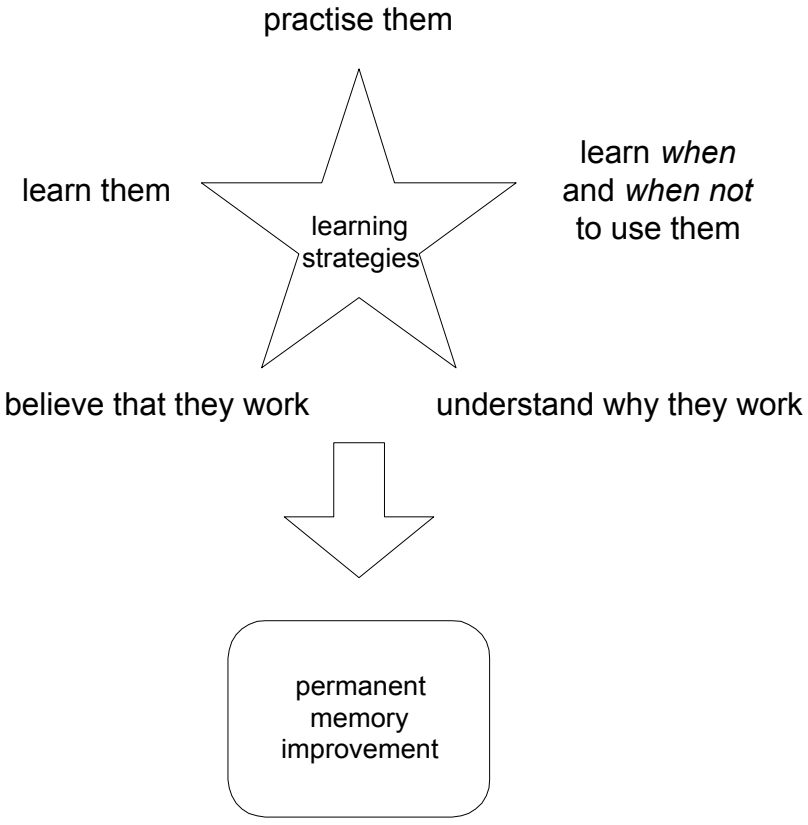
The key to good learning lies not only in your knowledge of how memory works, and your flexible and appropriate use of different strategies, but also in your ability to understand your own capabilities.

You're not likely to use efficient strategies if you don't even realise how poorly you have learned something or how unlikely you are to remember it. You are not going to apply a strategy well if you are blithely unaware that you have completely misunderstood the information.

An effective learner:

- knows how memory works
- has many memory skills and can apply them appropriately
- monitors and understands their own learning behaviour.

Putting it together



Main Ideas

To permanently improve your ability to remember, it is not enough to learn specific memory skills.

To permanently improve your memory, you also need:

- knowledge about the different sorts of learning tasks, and when different learning strategies are appropriate
- knowledge about the process of memory, how it works and why it fails
- faith in yourself and your abilities