

Introduction to Memory Techniques

The tools in this section help you to improve your memory. They help you both to remember facts accurately and to remember the structure of information.

The tools are split into two sections. Firstly you'll learn the memory techniques themselves. Secondly we'll look at how you can use them in practice to remember peoples names, languages, exam information, and so on.

As with other mind tools, the more practice you give yourself with these techniques, the more effectively you will use them. This section contains many of the memory techniques used by stage memory performers. With enough practice and effort, you may be able to have a memory as good. Even if you do not have the time needed to develop this quality of memory, many of the techniques here are useful in everyday life.

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Mnemonics

"Mnemonic" is another word for memory tool. Mnemonics are techniques for remembering information that is otherwise quite difficult to recall: a very simple example is the "30 days hath September" rhyme for remembering the number of days in each calendar month.

The idea behind using mnemonics is to encode difficult-to-remember information in a way that is much easier to remember.

Our brains evolved to code and interpret complex stimuli such as images, colours, structures, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, positions, emotions and language. We use these to make sophisticated models of the world we live in. Our memories store all of these very effectively.

Unfortunately, a lot of the information we have to remember in modern life is presented differently – as words printed on a page. While writing is a rich and sophisticated medium for conveying complex arguments, our brains do not easily encode written information, making it difficult to remember.

This section of Mind Tools shows you how to use all the memory resources available to you to remember information in a highly efficient way.

Using Your Whole Mind to Remember

The key idea is that by coding information using vivid mental images, you can reliably code both information and the structure of information. And because the images are vivid, they are easy to recall when you need them.

The techniques explained later on in this section show you how to code information vividly, using stories, strong mental images, familiar journeys, and so on.

You can do the following things to make your mnemonics more memorable:

- Use positive, pleasant images. Your brain often blocks out unpleasant ones.
- Use vivid, colourful, sense-laden images – these are easier to remember than drab ones.
- Use all your senses to code information or dress up an image. Remember that your mnemonic can contain sounds, smells, tastes, touch, movements and feelings as well as pictures.
- Give your image three dimensions, movement and space to make it more vivid. You can use movement either to maintain the flow of association, or to help you to remember actions.
- Exaggerate the size of important parts of the image.
- Use humour! Funny or peculiar things are easier to remember than normal ones.
- Similarly, rude rhymes are very difficult to forget!
- Symbols (red traffic lights, pointing fingers, road signs, etc.) can code quite complex messages quickly and effectively.

Designing Mnemonics: Imagination, Association and Location

The three fundamental principles underlying the use of mnemonics are **imagination, association and location**. Working together, you can use these principles to generate powerful mnemonic systems.

Imagination: is what you use to create and strengthen the associations needed to create effective mnemonics. Your imagination is what you use to create mnemonics that are potent for you. The more strongly you imagine and visualize a situation, the more effectively it will stick in your mind for later recall. The imagery you use in your mnemonics can be as violent, vivid, or sensual as you like, as long as it helps you to remember.

Association: this is the method by which you link a thing to be remembered to a way of remembering it. You can create associations by:

- Placing things on top of each other.
 - Crashing things together.
 - Merging images together.
 - Wrapping them around each other.
 - Rotating them around each other or having them dancing together.
 - Linking them using the same colour, smell, shape, or feeling.
- As an example, you might link the number 1 with a goldfish by visualizing a 1-shaped spear being used to spear it.

Location: gives you two things: a coherent context into which you can place information so that it hangs together, and a way of separating one mnemonic from another. By setting one mnemonic in a particular town, I can separate it from a similar mnemonic set in a city. For example, by setting one in Wimbledon and another similar mnemonic with images of Manhattan, we can separate them with no danger of confusion. You can build the flavours and atmosphere of these places into your mnemonics to strengthen the feeling of location.

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