

# 20 memory techniques

Experiment with these techniques to make a flexible, custom-made memory system that fits your style of learning. The 20 techniques are divided into four categories, each of which represents a general principle for improving memory.

Briefly, the categories are:

- 1) Organize it. Organized information is easier to find.
- 2) Use your body. Learning is an active process; get all your senses involved.
- 3) Use your brain. Work with your memory, not against it.
- 4) Recall it. This is easier when you use the other principles to store information.

The first three categories, which include techniques #1 through #16, are about storing information effectively. Most memory battles are won or lost here. To get the most out of this article, survey the following techniques by reading each title. Then read the techniques. Next, skim them again, looking for the ones you like best.

Mark those and use them.

## Organize it.

**1. Learn from the general to the specific.** Imagine looking at a new painting this way. Blindfold yourself. Put a magnifying glass up to your eye. Move your face to within inches of the painting. Now, yank the blindfold off and begin studying the painting, one square inch at a time. Chances are, even after you finished “looking” at the painting this way, you wouldn’t know what it is.

Unfortunately, many students approach new courses and textbooks just this way. They feel driven to jump right in and tackle the details before they get the big picture.

Here is a different approach. Before you begin your next reading assignment, skim it for the general idea. You

can use the same techniques you learned in Exercise #1: “Textbook reconnaissance” on page vi.

You can also use this technique at the beginning of a course. Ask someone who has taken it to quickly review it with you. Do a textbook reconnaissance of the reading assignments for the entire course. This technique works best at the beginning of a term, but it’s never too late to use it.

If you’re lost, step back and look at the big picture. The details might make more sense.

**2. Make it meaningful.** A sky diver will not become bored learning how to pack her parachute. Her reward for learning the skill is too important. Know what you want from your education, then look for connections between what you want and what you are studying. If you’re bogged down in quadratic equations, stand back for a minute. Think about how that math course relates to your goal of becoming an electrical engineer.

When information helps you get something you want, it’s easier to remember. That is one reason it pays to be specific about what you want.

**3. Create associations.** The data already stored in your memory is arranged according to a scheme that makes sense to you. When you introduce new data, you can recall it more effectively if you store it near similar or related data.

Say you are introduced to someone named Greg. One way to remember his name would be to visualize another person you know named Greg. When you see the new Greg, your mind is more likely to associate him with a Greg you already know.

## Use your body.

**4. Learn it once, actively.** According to an old saying, people remember 90 percent of what they do, 75 percent of what they see, and 20 percent of what they hear.