

12 Great Memory Strategies for Better Grades

By: Linda Bress Silbert, Ph.D. And Alvin J. Silbert, Ed.D.

"I'm bad at tests." "I knew it yesterday!" "I sit down to take a test and my mind goes blank."

These are all things students say when they forget assignments or don't do well on tests. All of us, students and non-students alike, forget important things. This happens when we don't transfer information into long-term memory. It is important to know how to do this in order to do well in school and beyond.

Have you ever noticed that some things are easy for you to remember while others are difficult? For example, you may be able to remember how to put an engine together, or why it rains, but you may have trouble remembering definitions of vocabulary or historic facts. You'll be relieved to know that there's nothing wrong with you; this happens to everyone.

The good news is that there are strategies that can help you remember what you need to remember. The twelve strategies (some of which are called mnemonic devices) introduced below will help you learn how to memorize important information. We know they are effective because they have been helping students at STRONG Learning Centers® for years, not only on homework and tests, but continuing to be valuable in their daily lives.

STRATEGY 1. CHUNKING

It is easier to memorize information when you break it up into small chunks. You may not realize it, but you use chunking often, like when you memorize your friend's telephone number, a locker combination, or your social security number. It's easier to remember long numbers when you "chunk" them into groups of threes, fours and fives. That's because most people can only comfortably remember about three, four or five bits of information at a time, with a comfortable max of about seven items.

Here are suggestions on how you can use "chunking" to remember information:

- Chunk vocabulary words by grouping them by parts of speech or other attributes.
- Chunk time periods or events by what connects them
- Chunk foreign language by grouping words into categories like household items or occupations.
- If there is no pattern to the information you need to study, just group the items into three, four or five at a time, and that will help a lot.

STRATEGY 2. UNDERSTANDING

Before you begin trying to memorize something, try to understand it. A good way to do this is by making a connection between what you are learning and what you have experienced. The better you can relate the new information to what you already know, the easier it is to learn. For example, before attempting to memorize events of European history, find the places on a globe (or world map) and see where they are relative to one another and also relative to where you live.

STRATEGY 3. RHYMING

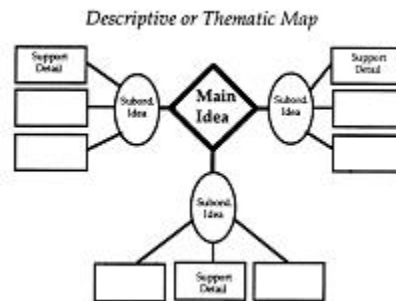
We all used rhyming in the ABC song to learn the alphabet. And the rhyme "I before E, except after C, or when it sounds like A as in neighbor or weigh." This is also a great strategy even when learning the times tables. For example, 7 and 7 went down the line to capture number 49; 8 and 4 made some stew and gave it to 32. (Rhymes don't have to make sense!)

STRATEGY 4. GRAPHIC ORGANIZERS

These tools help you see things you are trying to learn. They help organize information. There are many different types of graphic organizers. You can even design them yourself.

- the Venn Diagram for comparing and contrasting
- a Web for the main topic and details
- the Cause and Effect Design with the event in the middle box, the causes listed in the left boxes and the effects listed in the right boxes. (The effects and the causes are connected to the event by lines.)
- the Cycle Organizer consists of shapes drawn in a cyclic pattern with words in each shape to represent things or events that go in cycles. For example, the water cycle.

To see/print examples of these graphic organizers, find No. 452 Improve Your Memory Skills, Silbert, at our StrongLearning website.



STRATEGY 5. VISUALIZATION

To visualize means to see an image in your head without actually looking at it. Visualization can help you learn almost anything. Here is an example. Let's say the topic is the water cycle. Create a mental image of a cloud. Picture it growing. Now see, and "feel" its heavy cold rain. See the rain hitting the ground, then flowing toward streams and rivers toward the ocean. Now "see" the hot sun hitting and evaporating the water and forming clouds.... Get the picture? If you can visualize parts of the water cycle, the boring diagram becomes meaningful and remember-able. In general, if you have trouble visualizing material, try drawing maps, charts, graphs, or pictures.

STRATEGY 6. ASSOCIATION

Another learning strategy is to associate, or "connect," each word or event with a person, place, thing, feeling, or situation. For example, you may connect what you are trying to learn with someone you know, or with a movie character or scene. When you have to learn vocabulary words, just write the new words, write the definitions next to them, and then write a person, thing, event, movie, or any strong association to help you remember the meaning of each word. For example, "My altruistic Aunt Alice gives great gifts." (Altruistic means generous.)

STRATEGY 7. TALKING

Here's a strategy that's easy and fun to use, especially if you like to talk! Just talk about the information you have to learn. Tell Grandpa, Mom, a friend, or your dog what you have to learn! Do you want to learn history? Then talk history — discuss, debate, argue. Think of a person who may have lived during a major historical event and pretend to be that person. Now talk about the important events: who was involved, when it happened, where it took place, what happened, and why? If you're learning a language, then speak it at the dinner table. It doesn't matter if others know what you are saying; you do, so you'll learn.

STRATEGY 8. WRITING SENTENCES

Do you remember learning the silly sentence "Every good boy does fine" from music class? We used this to remember the notes. You may also have used the sentence "My Very Excellent Mom Just Served Us Nine Pizzas" to remember the planets. (Oops, change the sentence because Pluto is no longer considered a planet). This strategy can even help us learn those extra troublesome spelling words. Just make up a sentence using words that begin with the letters. So, to learn "aardvark," you may make up a nonsense sentence like: Aardvarks Always Run Down Very Angry Rowdy Kids.

STRATEGY 9. ACRONYMS

An acronym is a word made up from the first letters of a list of words. Here's how it works. You take the list of words or facts that you want to remember and put them in an order so that the first letters of each word, or the first syllables, spell a real word or a made-up word.

How do you memorize the names of the five Great Lakes? Easy, just remember "HOMES." H=Huron, O=Ontario, M=Michigan, E=Erie, and S=Superior. While this strategy won't help you understand the information, it at least helps you to memorize it. It's easy and fun, and you'll probably remember the information forever. You may be interested in knowing that our company name is an acronym. STRONG stands for: Self-esteem, Trust, Responsibility, Options, Needs, Goals.

STRATEGY 10. REHEARSING

When you want to remember information, you have to practice it, or else it fades. So, just as actors need to rehearse in order to remember their lines, students need to rehearse to remember what they are learning. Here are some helpful hints on "rehearsing" whatever information you need to learn for homework or tests:

- Rehearse for short practice periods (perhaps 30 to 60 minutes) and then take a short ten-minute break to call a friend, have a snack, or shoot some hoops.
- Use a multisensory approach every time you rehearse: say it, write it, read it, draw it, sing it — do whatever it takes.
- Just before going to sleep, review everything you will need to know for the next day or for the upcoming test. It's amazing how much more you'll remember if you rehearse the night before.
- Review in the morning while brushing your teeth, eating breakfast or sitting on the bus.

STRATEGY 11. STORYTELLING

Storytelling is a great way to help you remember information in any subject. Write a story by focusing on the key points of what you're learning and arranging them in a logical sequence. It can even be a song or rhyme that tells the story. And there's a bonus: each event in the story triggers your memory of the next event, so you'll remember even more.

STRATEGY 12. PLAYING GAMES

Playing games is a great way to memorize information. You see, as you play the game you are learning the material and practicing it over and over again. Games can help you remember facts, formulas, definitions, events or any other information you're trying to learn. Here is an example.

Play Memory, alone or with others, using decks of cards you make from ordinary index cards you cut in half. Create pairs by writing the same number on each of two cards, 1 and 1, 2 and 2, etc. Write the numbers tiny so they will not interfere with play. On each pair, write a question on one card and the answer on the other card. For example, " $2 \times 7 =$ " is on one card and "14" is on its pair, or "Where did the Pilgrims land?" is on one card and "Plymouth, Massachusetts" is on its pair. Then shuffle all the cards and play Memory with yourself or with a friend. If you're alone, see how fast you can match up all the pairs. You'll be able to check yourself by making sure the small numbers are the same. Have Fun!

For the Tough Ones: for the pairs that are really hard to remember, make a string "clothes line" between two places on a wall. Hang the pairs next to each other with spring type clothes pins. So, for example, if circle formulas get you down, every time you walk into your room you'll see " $C =$ " and " $2 * \pi * r$ " and " $A =$ " and " $\pi * r$ squared" next to each other. Pretty soon you'll remember the info.

Another example is the many commercially available games to make learning to read easier and fun. A good example is, by using any of the twenty STRONG Learning Phonics Games, children in grades 1-6 can learn important phonics rules while playing popular card games: Go Fish, War, Memory, or Old Maid.

We hope you find that some of these techniques and strategies make it easier for you and your children to remember important things. We also hope that these strategies will help make school days and home nights a whole lot better.

(Originally published at the Strong Learning website: www.stronglearning.com and was reprinted at http://www.streetdirectory.com/travel_guide/13043/education/12_great_memory_strategies_for_better_grades.html) with permission of the authors, Linda Bress Silbert, Ph.D. and Alvin J. Silbert, Ed.D. This article has been shortened and slightly edited by Marni Jones for use with Dickinson College students.)

ALSO CHECK OUT THIS SITE FOR USEFUL TIPS TO HELP WITH MEMORY:

<http://www.studygs.net/memory/>