

# Skills for Learning

## Guide to Improving Your Memory

### What You Have to Remember at University

In your work at university, you will be expected to understand and apply knowledge, not just learn information by rote. However, you will be required to recall key ideas and concepts quickly and accurately. This study guide will suggest some strategies and techniques that you might find useful both in remembering facts, but also allowing you to recall ideas, arguments, and theories in your subject area.

### Memory and Exams

Exams can understandably make you nervous. You may be concerned about being able to recall all the information you need for an exam. A common mistake in this situation is to just read and reread your lecture and other notes, in the hope you may be able to remember all you need. This is unlikely to be successful as the exam will ask you not just to remember, but to understand and apply your knowledge. You need to actively think about the ideas not just learn them by rote. To do this you need to practice active revision, not passive. Active revision is about understanding and using the information, testing your knowledge and using it to construct something. Passive revision is memorising or learning by rote without real understanding of the subject matter.

Without active revision and review we forget a lot of information very quickly after we first encounter it. Active revision requires using material that you understand and that is memorable. The first stage in active revision is to ensure that your revision notes are memorable and that you understand them. To make your notes more memorable try to:

- Ensure you understand everything in your notes as it very difficult to remember something that you do not understand.
- Use your own words.
- Understand how these ideas relate to other material you are studying.
- Use colour and images to make particular ideas or concepts stand out.
- Use structure and organisation such as mind maps to help you remember.

The next stage in the process of remembering is reviewing and testing. Once you have notes you are happy with you need to review them on a regular basis. An effective pattern might be

to review your notes immediately after you make them, then perhaps the following day, then the next week and then once a month after that. This process of familiarisation, review, and reinforcement helps ensure that you are remembering most of the information you are trying to learn.

## Learning Styles

Everybody has particular ways that they like to learn. Understanding which style suits you best can help you decide how to approach your learning and remembering. You might be better at learning by writing notes (visual), discussing with colleagues (auditory), or by doing (kinaesthetic).

## Top Memory Tips:

Whilst the work you are asked to do at university is not intended to be merely a memory test, there are occasions both in an academic environment and in the wider world where a good memory is helpful.

1. Make sure what you are trying to learn is well structured, broken down into manageable sections and that you understand it. Plan regular reviews of your notes - not just last minute attempts to cram.
2. Testing yourself and particularly explaining ideas to others can help fix ideas in your memory.
3. Use mind maps to remember more structured complex information. The shape of the mind map will provide a visual cue to remembering the structure of the information.
4. Use pictures, images and colour as part of your notes to help trigger in your memory an associated image.
5. Separating information into manageable pieces can help you remember, particularly useful for remembering numbers (e.g. 09112 432 3443 rather than 091124323443).
6. Use colour coded flash cards to learn discrete pieces of information, such as mathematical or chemical formulae. Put one fact on each card and display one card in a prominent location e.g. by the toaster until you have learnt that fact and then add that card to the pile of learnt cards and put a new one on display. Go back to the learnt pile to review your learning.
7. Create and use mnemonics such as Richard Of York Gave Battle In Vain to remember the order of the colours in a rainbow (Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo, Violet).
8. Use storytelling, familiar places or objects to provide a structure which you can associate with ideas you are trying to remember.
9. It is okay to make and use lists. No one is expected to be able to remember everything.

## Help and Advice

For help and advice on any aspect of memory skills, please see the [Skills for Learning](#) website.

## Further Reading

Books offering advice on memory and learning are available in the Study Skills collections in the Learning Centres and as part of our e-book collection including:

Cottrell, S. (2024) *The study skills handbook* (chapter 18 - memory). London: Bloomsbury:  
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