

LEARNING & REMEMBERING

Despite the belief of many people that “you can’t teach old dogs new tricks,” the ability to learn and remember is a skill that can be improved. Students who have a basic understanding of memory processes understand why learning strategies are effective and can use them to their advantage. Think of a computer...

Memory is a three stage process involving encoding, storage, and retrieval. Encoding is a process of acquiring new information. Your five senses—hearing, sight, touch, taste, and smell—provide important information about your world. When you listen to a lecture, for instance, you are constantly receiving numerous input. You might hear a dog barking, smell someone’s perfume, feel that the room is too cold or that you’ve been sitting too long. During the lecture, information is selected by you, the student, as either important or unimportant. The key here is to select and attend to important information by shutting out the distractions.

Information that is not attended to (written down or rehearsed) will rapidly fade away. However, by attending to the information (taking notes) the learner is able to transfer the information to short-term memory. Short-term memory, it is believed, holds information for a very short time, perhaps as long as a minute or less than 20 seconds. But unless the incoming information is actively rehearsed or practiced, it will quickly be forgotten. So practice or rehearsal is critical to remembering. It is the activity which transfers information to long-term memory and allows you to retain information for a long period of time.

Long-term memory is your permanent store of information. It’s where all the information you’ve ever learned is stored. Just as it’s important to get the information there, it also must be easily retrieved in order for it to be of any use to you. Retrieval involves pulling that information out of storage. Learning to connect new information to what you already know about a subject will help develop retrieval cues. Also, using visualization techniques, reciting key ideas or main points of a lecture, and relating the information to your personal life will help strengthen the association between what you’ve learned and how you remember it.

Now, let’s continue with the computer image. You know that using a computer means inputting or entering the information into a file. Saving that information for future use is extremely important. When using a computer to save a file, you must give the file a name and save it. The computer will store it for another time. To use that information again, you must know what the name of the file is, where you filed it, and tell the computer to retrieve it. If you don’t follow these steps, the computer isn’t much use to you.

Likewise, during college you will learn new information. Textbooks and lectures will be your primary sources of “incoming” information. Techniques for transferring information from short-term memory to long-term memory include:

- Learning how to select important information
- Anticipating what you are about to learn
- Immediately reviewing, rehearsing, elaborating or going beyond what the instructor or textbook covers
- Thinking about how this information might be applied
- Organizing information into patterns or categories

These techniques are also useful for developing retrieval cues. Because these activities help you store information in memory, they also help you remember it more effectively. Thus, you are able to tell the “computer” where to find the information and as a result can retrieve it more easily.