

If you can't remember it ... you didn't learn it! (excerpt from Great Lies We Live By)

by Dr. Stephanie A. Burns

Introduction

Think about all the effort you put into learning, be it facts for your next presentation, numbers for the board meeting, or a new technique on the computer. That effort is worthless if you are not able to access that information or skill when it is needed.

I have found student after student defeated simply because they cannot remember what they learn. This experience makes it easy to come to the conclusion that you have a bad memory. But, without actual brain damage, it is almost impossible to have a bad memory. You can, however, interpret mistakes and forgotten information as evidence of a poor memory. That evidence you use to create a belief about your memory can be strong enough to plague you all your life. Without doubt, you can become very good at forgetting.

It's also important to note that each of us works with our brain a bit differently. You may need to experiment to find your own strengths.

Making pictures in your head

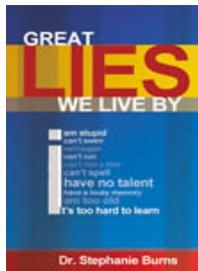
The most powerful sense for us is sight. We are easily stimulated by visual input and most of what you know is based on strong visual memory. Some people are just great at making pictures in their heads, others need to use sounds, or music, or language to reinforce their memories, while others need to use body motion to build strong memories. I'll give you some examples of all of these.

Forgetting information has nothing to do with your memory. It has to do with failing to make information memorable in the first place and that provides you with a good strategy for forgetting.

Let's look at a few examples:

1) You've read the chapter you were assigned at your night class and immediately upon finishing, you turn to the practice questions at the end of the chapter. The information just doesn't seem to be in your head and you have to turn back to the text.

2) A trainer leading a seminar tells you there are three essential reasons why justice works. At the end of her lecture you pick up a pen to write them down, but you can only remember the first one.



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the shelf in the office or for ease
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3) *You've been asked to remember to get a paper signed by your spouse. You don't remember it until the lady at the dry cleaners asks if this paper belongs to you.*

THERE ARE TWO PARTS TO REMEMBERING!!!

These examples show the problem when the first of these two parts is missing - you haven't done something to make information memorable.

Dropping your lunch

You process such a small amount of the information that comes in through your senses that I don't even know how to write a number that small. One primary function of your brain is to delete information. It is also designed to be attracted to, or stimulated by information that is different from the norm. If you want facts, data, faces, events, or places to be remembered, you need to actively make them memorable by making them different. If you don't make them memorable, you will simply remember whatever attracts your brain's attention most.

For example, you may forget your lessons at the end of a school day, but you will remember the student who dropped his/her lunch in their lap. I don't want to know how you forget the lessons - I want to know how you remembered the useless event of the dropped lunch.

If the information in the classes you attend is always presented in the same way, your brain goes into idle. It will sit like that until something attracts its attention. The teacher does a weird thing, or someone in class twists the information around so that it's funny, or you doodle it in your notebook. Memory doesn't just happen, you have to do something.

Brain Alert!

No doubt, when the plate of lunch was dropped it shocked you-your brain was alerted. You may have laughed if a piece of mashed potato ended up in someone's face. All of these things highlight the event and make it easy to remember.

If a presenter took the date 1907, wrote it on the board and said you have to remember this number, most of you would forget it by the next day. But if she spray painted it on the front of her desk, and she had never done this before, you'd remember it 20 years later.

A piece of pie

It's not the information - it's what you do to the information that counts.

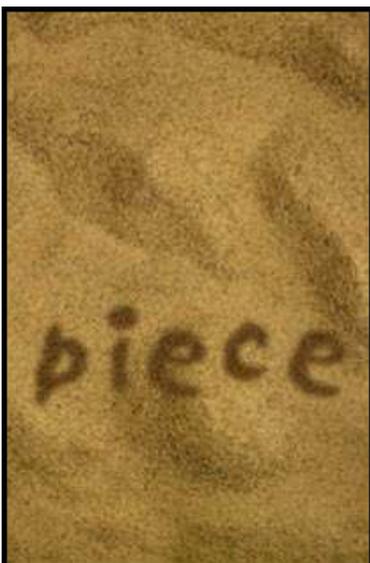
Suppose I wanted you to remember how to spell the word: 'piece'. Many of you could simply build a very strong picture of the word. You could imagine the word written like this:

P I E C E

Here, you are exaggerating the part of the word you typically find confusing.

Or you might make an internal picture like this:

PIE CE



Here, you are using a word you are already familiar with, 'pie', as the memory trigger.

This makes the image unique and much easier to recall later. If you look at that word printed that way and then close your eyes and make a mental picture, in a moment you would have the image installed solidly enough for there to be no confusion in spelling the word. You would simply recall that picture and spell. If you focused on the internal image, you would even be able to comfortably spell it backwards. You're reading it off your internal blackboard.

Your sense systems

Some people, however, need to use their auditory (sound) or kinesthetic (physical) senses. Some of you will have better recall if you sound out the word, emphasizing with a different tone of voice the two letters 'I' and 'E'. Others who are good with their auditory memory find that linking the information to a song helps, replacing the song's lyrics with the facts they need to remember. Rap music is now being used by lots of teens to remember their school work. When you spell the word, you hear these two letters accented, or marked, uniquely.

Some of you will need to get your bodies involved. You may find it helps to spell the word out in the air using your arm, again making the I and E bigger than the rest of the letters. This whole-body experience is excellent for reinforcing memories you are installing. Many students go down to the beach and write words in the sand, or use stones to spell them out. For these people, getting the memory into the system by acting it out is the key.

So, in all the following examples of making information memorable, it is important to know that you have all of these systems. Some are stronger than others in all of us. Once you have found the way that produces a success for you every time, you'll have your own keys for successful memory.

Trigger happy

Here is the second important part to remembering: Once the information has been made memorable it has to be linked to a trigger so it can be recalled at the appropriate time.

There is no sense in making information memorable if you can't recall it when you need it. How many of you have had the experience of struggling to find an answer you knew was in your head while taking an exam and then had the frustration of remembering it when you left the classroom?

When the second part of a good memory strategy fails, here's what happens:

1) Mary goes through her morning routine and heads off to work. She arrives at her office, and as she hears the click of the lock on the file cabinet she seizes up and says, "Aghhh, I forgot the files!" She then says, "I worked on them all night and then I forgot them."

2) John swallows his last sip of coffee, grabs his bag and heads out the door. Just as he's about to grab the handle of his car door, he realizes he's locked his keys in the house. He spends the next hour getting a locksmith to let him

back in, and during that time he continually tells himself how stupid he is that he couldn't even remember his keys. It's the third time he's locked his keys in the house this month.

3) Shaun shows up at night school and immediately on seeing Sarah he remembers that he has forgotten the book he'd promised her. He's had to apologise every day this week.

Is it true that these people have forgotten?

NO. The information, (like remembering the book), has been stored. However, it was remembered at a not very useful time. What use is it to remember your keys after you've locked the house? It is not that these people have bad memories-they have just demonstrated a great memory. The memory, however, is linked to the wrong trigger.

There are three components that make for strong memories and memory links.

The first component of strong memories involves your five senses. Sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell. Things that are memorable often have a strong relationship to the five senses. As I said earlier, we process and therefore remember very little that comes in through our senses. But our memories have a strong link to sensory information.

If you were walking down a street in New York with 50 million people coming at you, would you expect to remember all of them? Of course not. But a lot of people will tell me they have a bad memory because they can't. Without some action to make people memorable, they will slip through the net of your brain. Who would you remember at the end of the day?

You would remember anyone who stood out as being different or unique. Their uniqueness is what stimulated your brain to notice them in the first place and then their uniqueness contributed to them becoming memorable. For example, someone wearing a banana suit, or an old lady wearing a diaper. Someone with a strange hairstyle, someone carrying a boa constrictor, someone who flashed you or even someone who mugged you. In all these cases, the person would be different enough to catch your brain's attention. If you go one step further and imagine yourself telling your spouse tonight and him or her laughing hysterically, you will have a strong enough trigger to see that the event is recalled when you see your spouse.

Use your imagination

If you want information to be remembered, MAKE IT UNIQUE. Single bits of data are easy. Many times each day, I'm given some bit of information to remember and running around finding a scrap of paper wastes too much time. If I get a call saying tomorrow I'm on Qantas flight 27 at 8am, I need to make that memorable. So I make the information as strange and weird as I can.

In my imagination I might see an Qantas jet. This one's different because it's parked with its nose in the terminal. Written on the side in neon letters is the number 27. And blasting out of a speaker in the nose is a squeaking voice saying "We leave at 8am."

Another way I might do this is to look at my wristwatch and imagine



the hands are at 8am; lifting off out of the face is a tiny Qantas jet and when I look really close, the wings are oddly shaped - one looks like a 2, the other like a 7. I catch the jet in my fingers, say "So long, flight 27" and squash it.

One more way might be to imagine that I'm lying on the runway. I hear a tremendous roar, and as I lift my head up I see an Qantas jet bearing down on me. As it passes over me I see the number 27 in neon lights on the belly. When it's gone past I'm left looking at the sky and there's a huge clock hanging in thin air. What's the time? That's right, it's 8am.

More than five billion brains

There is no one right way to make information memorable. When I have my students do an exercise like this in a seminar, it is fascinating that no two brains have come up with the same story, image or sound. There are many billions of people on the planet, and there are that many different ways of doing this. But you must do something to make the information different. In these cases I used my senses to exaggerate the data.

Do you still remember the date the teacher painted on the front of the desk?

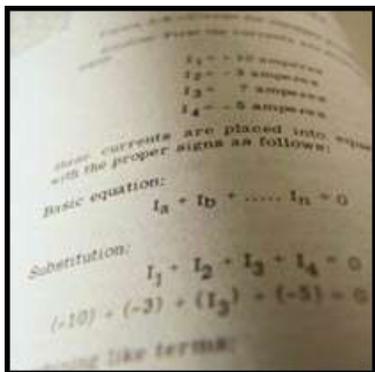
EMOTIONS and REPETITION are the other components of strong memories and memory links. Emotions create strong links to the past. Most of us can conjure up vivid memories when we think of EMBARRASSING situations, or FEARFUL situations, or even JOYFUL situations. If you can exaggerate the emotions involved with your experiences, they will stick much better. Instead of fun, make it extreme fun, instead of excited, make it very excited.

Repetition is the only memory strategy I recall using in school. Remember reading chapters over and over again in the hope that they would stick? Repetition, though, does have a role to play - if you want information to stick firmly in your long-term memory then you will need to do a bit of repetition.

The key to all of these strategies is the use of UNIQUENESS.

Regardless of whether you choose to use EMOTIONAL or SENSORY based stimulants or plain old REPETITION, the key will be to make it unique - make it different. If I want to remember a kelpie is a sheepdog then I need to make that kelpie unique and link it to a unique sheep. If I think of a regular old kelpie as a plain old dog, how will it be strong enough to remember? I will want to make the kelpie really big and have it eat a sheep. Or really little kelpies sitting on the nose of huge green sheep. Whatever, but it must capture my imagination.

Once I have established the information as memorable, I will need to do a bit of repetition over the course of the day, and, and over the course of the week. This repetition, fortunately, can be done in the privacy of your own mind whenever you have a spare minute in your head; for instance, when you're walking between classes or during a particularly boring part of class.



Joining the links

Once information is made memorable, how are you going to recall that information when you need it? You don't want the trigger for work you've done at home to be something in your office. If that happens you will perpetually remember the report too late to see that it gets from home to work.

To remember to bring your report to work, you might imagine yourself eating your usual breakfast. Maybe it's eggs. Imagine that you look down to take a bite out of your eggs and someone's standing in them - your boss, and he's yelling, "Don't forget the report."

At breakfast tomorrow, (if you rehearse this a few times), you will remember the report. That's a much better trigger than waiting till you reach your office.

It is important to recognise that this is how you remember what you do anyway. Information has been made memorable and it has been linked to a trigger. We are forcing the issue - making it memorable and making a link.

Right time, right place

Why do you forget the answers when you are taking the test in the classroom, but remember them later on? The two most common reasons are because the information was never made very memorable in the first place, and because the information wasn't linked to that classroom during that situation.

When I am studying, I imagine myself in the place where I am going to need the information I am taking in. As you make facts memorable for a test, decide where you want the link. Perhaps it will be to your desk or to the test paper; imagine the questions being written, again in some unique way and see yourself having the memory of the answer.

Many times when we study we say to ourselves "I'll never remember this," and then we wonder why we don't. Our focus is on forgetting, so we link forgetting instead of remembering to the situation.

Your internal dialogue, your self-talk, is an important part of your memory strategy, too.

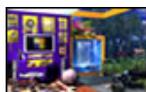
In closing ..

You have a choice about remembering important information. Learning is an active process. Don't sit back and hope it'll be there when you need it .. do something!

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