

Seeing something allows for a momentary and featureless experience. To coin one of my father's favorite expressions – "It's like opening your mouth and letting the sun shine in it." Observing something, on the other hand, means paying attention to detail, and setting the person, object or instance apart from other things in your mind and memory. The skill of observing involves noticing special properties or features of what you are seeing so that you have a better chance of remembering it later.

If you'd like to improve your skill of observation, you can try a simple skill building activity using a magazine photo of a person. To begin, study the photo and then close the magazine. Next, jot down the features of the person in the photo. What color were the eyes? What shape was the nose? What about hairstyling and clothing? Was there anything else in the background? After you've made your list and "checked it twice," go back to the magazine and study the photo again, looking for any details you may have missed. Then repeat this same process until you've managed to list every aspect down to the smallest detail.

Why do it? Because with practice, improved observation will become second nature. The way you look at things will change as you begin to focus more and more on the details. And the attention you pay to the details will make each person, place or thing rare enough to stand out in your mind and be remembered.

Memory and Learning Strategies

Obviously, memory and learning go hand-in-hand. When you learn something, you're taking

FEATURE



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Can't Remember? Don't Give Up Hope Just Yet...

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random information and arranging it in a manner that means something to you.

Unfortunately, many things you probably need to remember, such as lists of items, dates, random facts, etc. can be difficult to organize into a picture because by themselves, they have no inherent meaning. So, instead of remembering only one thing that naturally flows into another, you must try to remember many different pieces of information that have no connection.

Fortunately, there are several techniques which can help you remember the information you need and help you "get the jump" on forgetfulness.

Rote Memory

While *rote memorization* is the most commonly used technique, it is sadly the least effective for remembering information over the long haul.

When you use the rote technique, you're just repeating information over and over again. Many of us use this technique when we look up a phone number and then repeat it to ourselves again and again while we rush to dial the number. This, in itself, should tell us that as soon as the repetition is interrupted, we usually forget the information.

Since we know that rote memorization is not that effective for long-term memory retention, let's focus on three techniques that are – *mental imagery*, *association* and *organization*.

Mental Imagery

As the old saying goes, "A picture is worth a thousand words." Similarly, using mental pictures to remind you of a person's name, a date, or some other important information is one way to help you memorize what is important – and maybe have some fun too. Often, it can be something as simple as a childhood memory, a building, an animal, or a color that triggers an image from which you can recall the information.

Association

This is a retrieval trick for those times when you can't quite put your finger on a name or piece of information even though you know it's in your head somewhere.

This association technique takes advantage of the fact that often when we initially store information, it is linked to other events that were going on at the same time.

Say, for example, that you and Jane spend an exciting day at the Cheese Museum in Wisconsin and later have dinner at the Purple Vegetarian Café. There, you engage in some light table

conversation about Gouda and eventually finish off with a nice espresso. Surprisingly, a year later you run into Jane in the cheese aisle at the bakery and can't quite remember her name. Normally you would concentrate on Jane's face and hope that her name pops into your head.

However, by using association, you can actively seek out her name under various memory files tucked away in your brain. For instance, where were you the last time you saw her? Maybe her name is stored under Bread Museum. Or maybe it's part of the data filed under Vegetarian Cafes that Made Me Purple.

Either way, the more you remember about the circumstances under which you learned a piece of information, the better chance you will have of retrieving the information when you need it.

Organization

When it comes to reading, organization is priceless when it comes to memory retention – especially when you are blasted with an overwhelming amount of data at any given time. In these instances, it's a good idea to try to separate the important details from the unimportant ones so that you can apply your memorization efforts where they are needed most.

Dr. Robin West, author of *Memory Fitness Over 40*, suggests that one way to help you separate the wheat from the chaff is to use the *PQRST* method. The letters stand for **P**review, **Q**uestion, **R**ead, **S**tate and **T**est. To use this method, preview material by reading briefly and identifying the major points. Then, develop questions specific to the information you want to remember. Read the

material carefully. Repeat to yourself the central ideas and finally, test your comprehension by answering the questions you came up with.

Recall

Regardless of the method or strategy you use to help you remember the things you need to remember, the final challenge is always being able to find it again when you need it. In other words, now that your mind has a viselike grip on the information, how do you get it back out?

To give yourself a winning chance, there is one piece of advice that memory experts share. Their advice is to pay attention to your mood and physical state.

It is often easier to recall information you stored when you are in the same condition as when you learned it. When you are sad, sad memories seem to come to the surface. Likewise, when you are in pain, painful memories from the past can often pop up. Obviously, you can't just turn your body on and off in order to recall what you learned when you were in a particular state of mind or mood. However, there is a way around it.

Before sitting down to a learning task, try a few relaxation exercises to place yourself in a calm physical state. Then, when you need to recall it, repeat those same exercises to place yourself in the same state as when you first learned the information.

Still wondering
about your
memory's
mysterious ways?
Why not test
yourself to see how
much you really
know.

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Source Material:

Memory Fitness Over 40, by Robin West, Ph.D.