

# IMPROVING MEMORY

A good memory is such a valuable personal and professional skill. Yours is tested every day: what you heard, what you read, what you did, as well as the names of the new people you met. It's amazing we are taught so little about memory, and unsurprising that so many of us want ours to improve.

If I asked you to remember a list of 15 items, and recite them in order, how many would you recall? Most people tell me somewhere between five and ten.

Suppose I introduced you to 15 of my friends at a party, how many of their names would you remember? This question is met with far less confidence – some predict that they would remember none.

### **Your memory is already better than you think**

Has a smell ever taken you back years to a particular place and time? Suddenly you recall a conversation or a situation from the past in vivid detail. Given the right conditions, your declarative memory is superb.

### **How to make it better still?**

1. Improving your overall brain fitness, as described in the first chapter, will enhance all of your brain functions, of which memory is one. Upgrade your hardware and your software will work better.
2. Understand memory as a process and use the best memory techniques.

Over the coming pages we'll explore memory as a process, and I'll show you the best techniques to help you memorize lists, names, and everything you read.

First, let's assess the current state of your memory.

## **EXERCISE: MEMORY TEST**

Spend a few of minutes trying to memorize the list of 15 items below.

When you're ready, turn the book over and write the list of items down in *sequence*.

1. Clock
2. Lemon
3. Book
4. Coffee
5. Football
6. Computer
7. Fire
8. Chicken
9. Guitar
10. Ice
11. Boat
12. Wine
13. Car
14. Pen
15. Brain

# THE MEMORY PROCESS

Your memory is only ever tested at the final step of a three-stage process. But if you cannot recall things, it doesn't necessarily mean your memory is bad. It may simply mean you haven't done stage one and two very well.

## THE MEMORY PROCESS



See it like creating and saving a document or file on your computer.



If you create and save a file, a search will easily find it. But if you never created it, or you didn't save it, you'll never find it. Memory is the same. To improve step three, you need to improve steps one and two.

# IMPROVING EACH STEP

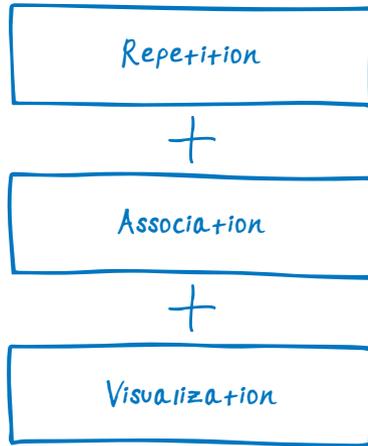
## STEP 1: ENCODE/CREATING THE FILE

How often are you introduced to somebody and forget their name immediately? That's not a fault of your memory. It's a fault of your attention. Pay closer attention. This can be as simple as deciding you're going to remember. You can also strengthen your focus by practising meditation (see page 107).

## STEP 2: STORE/SAVING THE FILE

This is the most active part of the process, and the one you can develop the most. The best ways to store a memory are through:

- **Repetition** – repeat to remember; memories become stronger through reinforcement.
- **Association** – learn by association and assimilate new information based on what you already know.
- **Visualization** – use your imagination, and images in particular.



### STEP 3: RECALL/FINDING THE FILE

If you do step one and two properly, step three will be easy. You will remember.

Let's now look at using specific memory techniques to help you remember lists, names, and everything you read.

# REMEMBERING LISTS

Imagine walking into your bedroom. If I asked you to name the first piece of furniture you'd see on your left, could you? Could you tell me what other furniture you have in there? Of course you could.

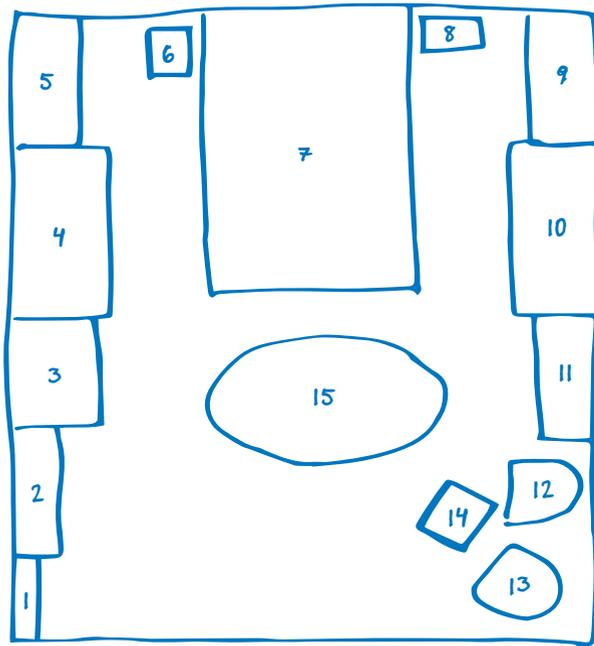
This provides the basis for one of the most powerful memory techniques, often used by memory champions: the Memory Palace. This technique uses what you already know (the layout of your home) to help you remember what you don't (for example, 15 items on a list).

## EXERCISE: THE MEMORY PALACE

### Create your memory palace

1. Get a pen and paper.
2. Decide on the room you'd like to use (for example, your bedroom, sitting room or kitchen).
3. Draw a bird's-eye view of the room on the paper.
4. Decide on a route to walk around the room (for example, in through the door and clockwise).
5. Identify 15 locations around the room (such as pieces of furniture) that you would pass in sequence.
6. On the diagram of your room, write the numbers 1-15 on the relevant furniture or landmarks around your room.

For example, moving clockwise in the room below:



### Memorize your memory palace

To memorize your memory palace, close your eyes and imagine walking around your room in the right direction, and check you correctly identify each point, 1-15. When you've finished, try doing it backwards. Make sure you can identify each point in order.

### Memorize the list of 15 items using your memory palace

To memorize a list of 15 items, you now imagine each item, on each of the 15 consecutive points in your memory palace. For example,

the first item on the list is a clock. Close your eyes and imagine walking into your memory palace. Walk to the first point (such as the table in your sitting room) and imagine that on the table there is a clock. Then move to the second point in your memory palace and place the second item on the list (a lemon), there. Continue until you've placed all 15 items on the list at your 15 points around your room, in the right sequence.

- **Make the images as rich and vivid as possible.** Big, bright and colourful. Use your imagination and make the images bizarre, silly, and cartoonish.
- **Use all your senses.** The more senses you use, the more you'll engage your brain, and the more memorable your 'engram' will become. Can you hear the clock ticking? Perhaps you can hear the alarm going off?

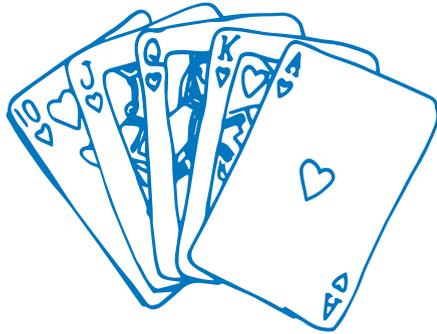
Now go back to the list of items of page 93, and now use your memory palace to remember each item.

### Recall the list

To recall the list, all you need to do is to imagine walking through your memory palace, and you'll see your items at each point. When you're ready, turn this book over and recall the list.

What did you notice remembering the list this time? Did using images and the memory palace help? For which items was it easiest to create images, and how did that affect your recall? Which could be associated with sounds, smells, or other senses, and did that help?

## EXERCISE: MEMORIZING A DECK OF CARDS



If you're up for a challenge, use your memory palace to memorize a shuffled deck of cards:

1. Extend your palace to 52 places – you'll need multiple rooms for this; for example, your lounge 1-20, kitchen 21-40, bedroom 41-50, and bathroom 51-52.
2. Create a specific image for each card in the deck. I created an image for each card (Ace to King) and then altered that image to represent the four different suits. For example, I made the three of diamonds a Christmas tree ('tree' because the card is a three, and 'sparkly' because the suit is diamonds).
3. Memorize each card around the new memory palace. If the first card in the deck was the three of diamonds, I would imagine walking into my memory palace, and I'd place a Christmas tree on the first spot. And so on...

# REMEMBERING NAMES

It only seems to happen with names, but our capacity to forget a single word a few seconds after hearing it is staggering. It's as if something strange happens to our brains when people introduce themselves. Our attention momentarily leaves us, and we miss encoding the name.

I remember when I was studying at the London College of Clinical Hypnosis. The college employed different lecturers for different modules, so we were regularly introduced to unfamiliar faces. One day, I walked into our room, already full of my fellow students, and at the front was a lecturer we came to know as Dr Anna.

I signed the registration form and sat down. For the rest of the day, students who asked a question or gave a comment were addressed by name. Dr Anna had, without us realizing, observed every one of us as we signed in, and memorized all our names. There were more than 20 of us. I remain impressed to this day.

Remembering names is such a vastly appreciated skill because it shows you care enough about people to give them your full attention. As French philosopher Simone Weil noted: *"Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity."*

## TO REMEMBER PEOPLE'S NAMES:

1. During the split second when somebody tells you their name, pay attention. This means being present, undistracted, and having already decided you are going to remember their name.
2. Repeat their name back to them as soon as you can, preferably immediately (them: "I'm John"; you: "Hi John"). Repetition improves recall, and it forces you to pay attention in the first place.
3. Create an image that somehow represents the name. This is what really makes the name stick. You could use metaphor, or create a more literal representation. You could incorporate the first letter or choose to represent the sound of the name. You could link it to somebody famous, or someone you already know. Use your imagination as actively as possible – the sillier the better.

Now practise. Next time you go to an event, a party, or any occasion where you meet new people, use it as an exercise. Make a point of asking people's names and remember them. Be the person who remembers everybody's name.

# READING AND REMEMBERING

Have you ever read a book or an article and then been unable to explain it to someone else because you remember virtually no specifics? If you want to remember more of what you read, don't just start reading. Put your brain into the right state, and then help it find meaning.

*"I am not a speed reader. I am a speed understander."*

**Isaac Asimov**, author.

## THE SQRQS MODEL

The five-step process to recalling what you read is best remembered by the acronym SQRQS. This simple process takes very little extra time but dramatically boosts your recall.

### **Step 1. S – SCAN**

Before you start reading, scan the document. Decipher the length and how the information is presented. This will give you an overview of how long the text should take to read, and give you a few seconds to focus.

### **Step 2. Q – QUESTION**

Now ask yourself: "What do you know about this already? What do you hope to find out?" This helps you establish a context and find

meaning. Remember, you learn by associating new information with what you already know.

### Step 3. R – READ

Now read the document. If you pause in between sections you'll increase your recall even further.

### Step 4. Q – QUESTION

Put down the document and test yourself. What specifically do you remember? How would you explain it to someone else? What do you think about it? Did you disagree with any of it? It is critical to test your recall, but answering these questions also helps you find meaning.

### Step 5. S – SCAN

One last scan. If you carried out the first four steps of this process, you will already have remembered what was important to you. If step 4 highlighted things you hadn't remembered but wanted to, one last scan will fill in the blanks.

## EXERCISE: SQRQS

Now practise. What does each letter stand for, and what does each step entail?

## IMPROVING MEMORY: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

A surplus of information met with a deficit in attention, means you need to remember to remember. Your memory is a muscle; train it and practise, and you'll be impressed by how quickly it strengthens.

Cultivate a habit of remembering.

## IMPROVING MEMORY: REVIEW

1. What are the three steps of the memory process?
2. What are the best ways to improve your memory storage?
3. What are the 15 points within your memory palace?
4. What were the 15 items on the list?
5. How will you remember people's names better in future?
6. What is the five-letter acronym to help you remember what you read, and what does each letter stand for?

*Specify what you will do differently from now on?*