

## Unforgettable: How to Make Anything Memorable

Your brain is a memory machine. It remembers absolutely everything that it notices, whether you like it or not. It files away bad punch lines from bad TV shows and statistics on Miss America 2002 and the recipe for your mother-in-law's turkey dressing. It records in gory detail the circumstances surrounding that stunning tumble over your shoelaces as you reached for the diploma and then—is if that weren't enough—replays it for you *ad nauseum* as you try to fall asleep. The brain is what makes it possible for toddlers to parrot back—in front of the minister no less—the one word in a million you really shouldn't have let fly when you dropped the iron on your toe.

“But, if the brain recalls everything,” you protest, “why won't it remember the meaning of the word, ‘obfuscation’ even after I've repeated it a hundred times?” Why does it conveniently forget the combination to your school locker on the one hundred and twelfth day of school? Why doesn't it remember to grab the keys from the ignition before locking the car door?

The question is really, “Why does it remember so much that we never try to remember and forget so much that we need to recall?” and more importantly, “How can we fix it?” This last is the question to which we will now turn our attention. I assure you, it can be fixed. You can learn to recall practically anything with minimal effort. I'll leave the “how to forget what *should* be forgotten” question to the therapist.

### ***Rote Learning is for Suckers***

Ever catch a whiff of rose-scented perfume or the smell of bacon frying and suddenly feel like you're five years old and standing in your grandmother's kitchen again? Do you remember the hours you spent rehearsing that bit of information? “This smell should make me remember grandmother's kitchen. This smell reminds me of grandmother's kitchen.” Don't you recall all the late-night cramming sessions it took to get that through your head? The flash cards? The pages of notes? The pop quizzes?

What? You say you did *none* of those things? Your brain memorized it without you ever reviewing it even once? You must be some sort of genius!

The fact is we are all able to recall, with perfect clarity, things which we have never reviewed. Do you remember the last auto accident you were involved in? Who was driving? What time of day it was? What the weather was like? What the other driver looked like? How long it took the police to show up? Probably you do. You may even remember where you were headed and what you were wearing.

Now try and recall what you were doing one month prior to that accident at the same time of day. Not a clue? Welcome to my world.

What makes the difference? Why can you remember that one minute with such lucidity and not the other? I'm sure you have an idea. You remember the accident because it involved your emotions. It was alternately frightening, and angering, and then filled with relief or sorrow. It was also very unusual (one would hope). You don't get in accidents every day. But why, do you remember things like the time of day on which the accident occurred or what the police officer's name was? Those tidbits weren't emotional or unusual.

The answer is that we recall those things because the brain doesn't discriminate between important and unimportant facts in such situations. It takes a snapshot, or more accurately, it makes a sense-filled movie of everything that happened, recalling sights, sounds, smells, feelings, and even tastes.

It's really a survival mechanism. Your great-great-great-great grandmother learned that that ominous buzzing sound was associated with an angry rattlesnake and ensuing pain and terror. She also learned that locations where there were rocky ledges warmed by the sun on cool days can be areas to avoid. The brain didn't know which details might be important so it remembered all of them. It would make her that much more vigilant the next time she experienced some of the same sensory inputs.

But the brain doesn't just pay attention to negative emotional situations. It also remembers things associated with positive emotions. It recalls that fat, red apples taste better than the little green ones. It remembers that the man with the funny hat and the

cane made you laugh, and that you saw that attractive person in the greeting cards aisle at Target. This is also for survival. Great-great-etc. granddad had to remember where he saw great-great-etc. grandmom or you wouldn't be here. He also had to remember where to find the tastiest berries to offer a potential mate and how to make great-great-etc. grandmom laugh, or again, you might not be here.

All of this tells us all we need to know about how memory works. We remember best those things that are unusual and emotional—things that involved all our senses—AND the things associated with them. Think about it, the things we recall most vividly are often onetime events, like accidents or first kisses. We never forced ourselves to review these things. They stuck after a single occurrence.

Now let's think about rote memorization...you know...repeating something over and over again until you can recall it. For example, "The study of bees is apiology.... The study of bees is apiology.... The study of bees is...." You get the idea. Is this emotional? No. Is it unusual or out of the ordinary? Maybe at first, but not after you repeat it a hundred times. Does it involve all your senses? No. In fact, it's just the opposite. You are taking the fact to be memorized and stripping it of all emotion, novelty, and sensory stimulation.

Does rote memorization work? Yes...eventually, but compared to the other type of learning we've been talking about—"car wreck memory" we might call it—it's like cooking steak with a candle. Let's learn how to turn on the gas.

We'll look at four different keys to making the most of your memory.

1. Frequent study breaks
2. Staggered review
3. Fully learning and getting a handle on your memories
4. Mental Movies

If you apply these four keys, you will be a memory master...a black belt in brain fu...a wizard of wiles...a (fill in your own cheesy alliteration here). Let's get to it.

## ***Frequent Study Breaks; Less is More***

Ever hear that story about the lumberjacks working together in the woods? They chopped all day, from morning to night, felling tree after gigantic tree, trimming off the branches, and cutting each tree into neat, fireplace-sized logs.

Jacques worked steadily and without pause--a manly, tree-chopping machine. He skipped breakfast, lunch, and dinner, barely even pausing to take a drink of water.

Jean Pierre, on the other hand, stopped at least once every hour, and puttered about with his axe. Jacques noted Jean Pierre's laziness with contempt, and that is why, at the close of the day, Jacques was amazed to discover that Jean Pierre had cut much more wood than had he.

*"Mon dieu! How can zis be?"* gasped Jacques.

Jean Pierre grinned, *"Mon frer, perhaps you deed not notice. I stopped frequently to sharpen my axe. It is no wonder you have had such a hard time, working wiz a dull axe."*

Psychology studies show that this principal applies to learning as much as it does to lumber. During a study session, whether it's listening to a lecture or reading a book, you will tend to remember best that which you studied first—psychologist call this the Primacy Effect—and that which you studied last—that is known as the Recency Effect. Your memory of those things in the middle of the study session is much poorer. How can this be fixed?

Take a break right in the middle—five minutes spent doing something different is enough. What you do by this is double the number of beginnings and endings you have during the same hour. Twice the Primacy Effect. Twice the Recency Effect.

But another effect comes into play as well. A psychologist named Von Restorff noticed that when he gave test subjects a random list of words—cat, bench, digital, art, canopy, Zimbabwe, fish, etc.—they tended to recall best words at the beginning and end of the list, just as we would expect, but they also recalled odd words, such as "Zimbabwe." Not only that, they tended to better recall the words on either side of the odd word. This tendency to recall the novel or odd, as well as the things associated with it, is known as

the Von Restorff Effect. You can take advantage of this by doing something novel during your study break.

Use your break to watch Seinfeld, or play basketball, or talk to a friend on the phone. Anything you can do to make the break interesting and different from the study time will increase your memory of the studying on either side of the break.

So set an alarm to go off every thirty minutes or so when you are studying. When it goes off, take a five-minute break and do something interesting. You will be amazed at how much more you can recall.

As an added bonus, the frequent breaks will keep you from tiring as quickly. You'll find it easier to study for longer periods.

How great is that? Study less and remember more!

### ***Don't Review Any More Than You Must***

I don't know about you, but I don't particularly enjoy reviewing my notes or flashcards. In fact, I'm downright lazy about it. That's why I want to do it as little as possible. If you're like that too, then staggered review is for you.

Let me explain. Imagine you just spent an hour of your life learning one hundred new facts. Studies show that, within an hour, you will have forgotten almost fifty of those facts. By the next day, you will be down to about thirty-five. A week later? Twenty. Within a month you are down to a grand total of fourteen facts. You spent an hour of your life learning a hundred facts and now all you have to show for it is fourteen facts. Now what if you have a test on those hundred facts the next day? You spend forty-five minutes re-learning the other eighty-six facts, and by test time tomorrow, you *may* recall seventy-five.

Surely there's a better way. Psychology to the rescue! Research shows that well-timed reviews can plug the leak in our memories. An hour after you do your initial, one-hour, study session review the material. Review, by the way, does not mean look back over your notes. Review means you force yourself to recall the material. With vocabulary words, for example, you might look at the word and force yourself to recall

the definition. Reviewing an hour's worth of facts that you learned well should take about five minutes max.

Go through this review process again just before bed. Studies show that your brain consolidates memories while you sleep, so things that you review just before bed will be easier to recall in the morning. Do the review again the next night before bed—another five minutes. Again three days after that, then again in seven days, then three weeks later.

Why does the interval between reviews get longer and longer? Every time you force yourself to recall the information, you strengthen your memory of that piece of information so you can go longer before you review it, and, as I said, I'm lazy. I don't want to review it anymore than I must. I assume you're the same.

Now count up how much time you will have spent reviewing. With the old-fashioned way, you would spend an hour learning the information initially, and forty-five minutes reviewing the night before the test, only to get a seventy-five the next day. With this method, you still take the initial hour to learn the info, then five minutes an hour later, five minutes that night and the next night, and so on. It works out to about one hour and thirty minutes—less time than the old-fashioned way—and you will find your recall closer to one hundred percent. Study less; remember more!

### ***Get a Handle on Your Memory***

Ever been introduced to someone and been thinking so much about what you are going to say that you forget to listen to their name? Don't worry, you aren't alone. Everyone does that. The point is you can't remember something that you didn't learn in the first place. Sounds obvious, but this is a very real problem for even the best students.

I had a student call me and schedule a study session because she wasn't doing any better on the verbal section of the GRE, even though she said she had memorized over three-hundred new GRE vocabulary words. When we got together, I started asking her the definition of various words in the GRE top two hundred list. She knew a short definition for every word I asked her, but when I asked her to use the word in a sentence... "Uhhh." She had spent her time learning the word and a short definition.

“Turbid” means “cloudy.” But she didn’t really know what the word meant. You can’t remember something that you didn’t learn in the first place.

It’s as if you had never seen a lion and just memorized the phrase, “a lion is a large African cat.” Do you know what a lion is at that point? Absolutely not. But what if you go on safari and see lions in their natural habitat? Now you know what a lion is.

On the other hand, it takes forever to memorize the entire dictionary definition of even the simplest words. What’s a brain to do?

The answer is to learn the full meaning of the word. Look at it used in context, like seeing the lion in its natural habitat. Make sure you can accurately use it in a sentence. Once you have done that, boil the definition down to one or two easily memorized words, “lion – large African cat.” Those words will serve as a handle that will enable you to pull up the entire meaning from the depths of your memory.

### ***Mental Movies; Making a False Memory***

We know that car wreck memory occurs when something is emotional and unusual. We also know that it’s multi-sensory. So how do we take something, like the definition of the word “turbid” and make it multi-sensory, unusual, and emotional?

You aren’t going to believe me when I tell you. It’s actually very easy, and it doesn’t seem real, but it absolutely works! Here it is in a nutshell. Ready? Take the word and the definition, break them into pieces, turn those pieces into objects or actions you can picture, and then make a false memory. I told you you wouldn’t believe it. Nevertheless, it works.

Maybe an example will help clarify (but you still won’t believe it). Let’s take the word “turbid.” Know what it means? Think of where you might have heard it before. What other words does it sound like? If all else fails, look it up. Turbid means cloudy, but not cloudy as in, “it’s cloudy outside, guess we can’t go to the pool.” Turbid means clouded up by motion, as in “I’m sorry I drove my muddy jeep into your clean swimming pool, Mrs. McKenzie. I guess I made it a bit...turbid.” There it is...the word and the definition. Turbid means cloudy. (We can dispense with the full definition. “Cloudy” will be the mental handle that helps us retrieve the full meaning.)

What's next? Ah, yes. Break them into pieces and turn the pieces into objects or actions we can memorize. "Tur" or "turb." Does that remind you of anything? What words start with that sound? What do those sounds remind you of? How about "turban" or "turkey?" Maybe "tore" or "tear" or "turnip?" Any of those will work. Let's use "tore," as in "When I reached down to pick up the donut, my leotards tore." Second part; "bid." How about "bed" or "bite" or "bit?" We'll use "bed," as in "Early to bed, early to rise, means you're getting old." And finally, "cloudy." I can picture "cloudy" without having to turn it into something else. So we're good; "tore," "bed," "cloudy."

Now we are going to make a false memory that uses these three things in order. For example, "I tore my bed and it became cloudy." Hmm. Not too memorable. Certainly not emotional, unusual, or multi-sensory. Let's try again. "In a fit of anger, I tore the fabric of my mattress/bed, and the white stuffing came out. The ceiling fan was on high, and the fluff began to cloud up the room. It got in my eyes and throat, and I began to cough uncontrollably." Better!

Now make the memory yours. Close your eyes and put yourself in the situation. You stalk in to your room, absolutely fuming about...something. What made you so angry? Fill in the details yourself. The sheets are in the washer right now, so you throw yourself down on the mattress to kick and scream. What does the mattress feel like? Is the light on or off? What time of day is it? What are you wearing? Add details to make it real. You grab the mattress in your hands and tear it. What does it sound like? How does it feel? Fluff goes everywhere because your ceiling fan is on high. What does the fluff look like? Can you smell it? Can you feel the air from the fan? Can you feel the fluff sticking to your sweaty forehead? What does it feel like to get the fluff in your eyes and throat? Can you see it swirling around you? Suddenly—blam!—somebody kicks in the door. Men in blue uniforms flash their badges at you. The mattress police! You get arrested for ripping the tags off your mattress.

Now try it out. "Turbid." Close your eyes and relive the experience.  
Tore...bed...cloudy.

What do you think now? Still don't believe it will work? Fine. I'll show you another one. How about "turgid?" Should be a good test, because it's so similar to "turbid."

So what does "turgid" mean? What does it remind you of? Where have you heard it before? If all else fails, look it up. "Turgid" means swollen and stiff, as in "I accidentally walked into a deep part of the river, and when I came out my rubber waders were turgid because they had filled with river water, three trout, and a rusty beer can." So "turgid" means "swollen." Again, we can dispense with the full definition. "Swollen" will remind us of the rest of it.

Break it down. "Tur" could be "tore" again. That's easy. "Gid" is a little tougher. Sounds like "jade" or "jet" or "Jed" or "jedi." Let's use "jedi." Might as well make a false memory starring Ewan McGregor as ObiWan Kenobi. If you aren't as familiar with Star Wars you might use Jed Clampett from the Beverly Hill Billies, or Jada Pinkett Smith. Just make sure you can picture them clearly in your mind's eye.

Okay, remember; emotional, unusual, and multisensory. How about "I tore the jedi's lower lip and it became swollen." Hmm. Needs work. Imagine yourself walking up to ObiWan Kenobi, grabbing his lower lip, and tearing it! Violent and disturbing, I know, but also memorable. He squeals and grabs his lower lip. It swells up big as a potato. Now add details of your own. Where is this taking place? What sounds do you hear? What do you feel?

Now, if you've fully participated in these mental meanderings, you will find these things very hard to forget. Turbid. Turgid. Each of these should start your little mental movies rolling.

A word of caution; using this technique is like learning to drive or type. It takes time to get good at it, but the payoff is huge. Master this technique and you will be able to memorize anything with very little trouble.

I learned this technique just before I began my graduate studies in Anthropology. One of the first classes I had to take was Human Osteology (bones), and our first exam was over the bones of the skull. There are twenty-three different bones that make up the

skull; bones such as the ethmoid, sphenoid, vomer, zygomatic, occipital, parietal, and others. We had to know all those weird names, and we had to know what bones each of those articulated with. That was quite a challenge considering that some bones connect to as many as twelve others. It was *hundreds* of pieces of information involving a lot of strange words. It took me twenty minutes to figure out how to memorize the information using the mental movie technique and ten minutes to memorize all the information. I made a perfect score on the test with thirty minutes of studying. Other people studied for eight to twelve hours and still failed. The class average was sixty-two!

And by the way, I do not have a good memory in general. I had a roommate in college who moved out after one semester. Two weeks later I ran into him on campus and couldn't remember his name! But even my sad excuse for a memory works well when I use mental movies.

All that to say, "Try it." Commit to using this method with at least the first thirty items you have to memorize. You'll feel like a pig on roller skates at first, but you *will* get better. After thirty items you'll be hooked. This is the most effective way to memorize I have ever found!

### ***Flashlights Have "On" Buttons***

Flashlights have "on" buttons. The flashlight does you no good when you are in the dark unless you *press that button*. It's the same with the skills you've just learned. You are going to have to apply the memory techniques you learned to your memory tasks. First, take frequent breaks and do something interesting. Next, review regularly with more time passing between each successive review. Third, fully learn the information and then boil it down to an easily remembered handle with which you can pull it back up out of your memory. Finally, make a mental movie using all your senses. Make it unusual and emotional.

If you apply these four keys, memory tasks will be a cinch! What does "turbid" mean? How about "turgid?"

Told you it works.