

A short guide to memory techniques for revision



Important things to know about your memory and revision

- **Make your brain take notice:** Paradoxically, the reason you might struggle to remember things is because your brain is so efficient. When the brain sees things that are familiar and unthreatening, it tends to register them as unimportant. If you want to remember things, you have to make your brain stop and take note.
- **Engage with the info:** Just reading, highlighting or copying will not work. You need to engage with information on a deeper level to remember it. You should re-organise the content of your notes, hand-outs and books, turning it into charts, mind maps or pictures.
- **Take a break:** Studies have shown that recall goes down if you work solidly for too long. Once you have had a break, try testing yourself on what you revised before it.
- **Little and often:** The more times you encounter something, the more likely you are to recall it. Therefore, it is better to cover the same thing several times for short periods, rather than spend a long time revising the same material on just one occasion (Cottrell, 2006).
- **Variety is key:** We build up a more exact memory if we are exposed to the same information from lots of different perspectives. It is a good idea to revise using different books, journals and sources rather than reading the same handout or book all the time.
- **Get your sleep:** When you are in deep, slow wave sleep, your brain goes on working, making sense of what you have learned and experienced during the day. So sleeping well during your revision and exam period is important.

Memory Techniques to try

Different techniques work for different people. Try out some of the memory techniques below to see what suits your learning style. But remember: understanding your subject enough to apply, adapt and scrutinise information is the key to exam success.

Mnemonics

Mnemonics are memory tools that you can create yourself, to form associations with information that is otherwise difficult to recall. This might involve creating vivid mental pictures; making up stories to remember a sequence of information; or picturing facts as locations on a map.

For example, if a medical student wanted to recall that the three types of depressants are **barbiturates**, **alcohol** and **tranquilizers**, they could picture a depressed **bat** who had taken all three.



Creating a Memory Palace

This technique uses your spatial memory to help learn sequences of information. Turn the individual chunks of information into vivid mental images, then connect the images in a story that unfolds throughout a location you know well. You could picture your first image by the front door of the house you grew up in; then imagine wandering into the kitchen and finding your next two images arguing in there, whilst the next three dance together in the living room...

You can find an example in Ed Cooke's memory blog in the Telegraph (Cooke, 2013).

Mind Maps

Mind maps are a good way of organising and simplifying information, and seeing connections between the different aspects of a topic. They can be an effective memory trigger because, often, it is the actual act of drawing out a mind map that you recall in an exam.

Force yourself to condense your revision notes down to key words. Use colours and images to help make the information meaningful and memorable. Stick up your mind maps around your home, and look at them throughout your revision and exam period.

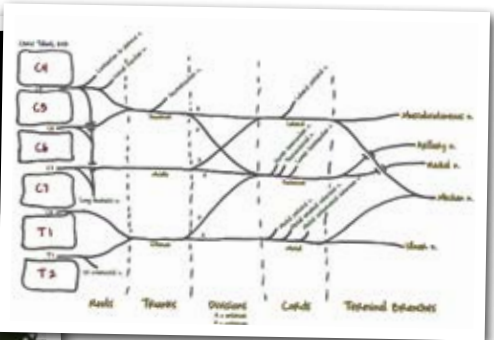


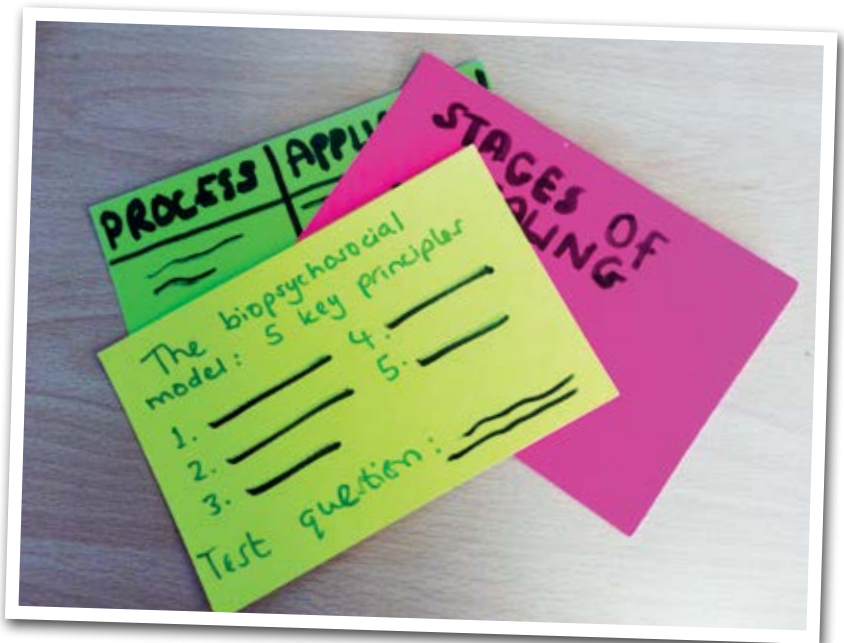
Image – ©Unknown 2014-10-03
http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Brachial_Plexus_Logical_Schematic.svg

Layering

Try the 'layering' technique for remembering complex information. First, learn the easiest and simplest facts or ideas about a topic. Use these to provide a foundation before adding gradually more complex information, layer upon layer. Working in this way means that, if you get anxious in your exam, you should still remember the foundation layer of the material. When you start making notes about that, your memory of the higher layers will flood back.

Index Cards or sticky notes

Write facts on index cards, in colour, and stick them in prominent places around your home, eg, next to the kettle or on the bathroom mirror. Look at them and say them to yourself every day. When you think you know them, put them on a pile of cards that you will later test yourself on, and put new facts in the prominent places.



Use songs

If you are good at remembering song lyrics, change the words of your favourite songs so that they become the facts you are trying to remember.

Teach it

Teaching others cements our understanding of a topic and therefore our memory of it. During breaks, you could try telling your family, friends or housemates about what you have just revised. Encourage them to ask questions.

Use past exam papers

Practise planning answers to exam questions. Making a plan will test your ability to remember concepts and connections. Jot down which areas of a topic you would draw on to answer a specific question; which approaches or research studies. Then test yourself on key facts or dates you would need for your answer.



Image – ©Unknown 2014-10-03
http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:5-Star_Generals%26Admirals_Hand_Mnemonic.png

Conclusion

Find the memory techniques that work for you when revising. However, looking at notes or just reading information is not enough. Learning and revising are active processes which should involve engaging with your course material.

Further reading and references on revision and memory techniques

Books:

Cottrell, S. (2006) **The Exam Skills Handbook**. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Articles by Ed Cook:

Cooke, E. (2013) **Building a Memory Palace**. The Telegraph [online], 2 March. Available from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationadvice/9900341/Revision-techniques-how-to-build-a-memory-palace.html> [Accessed 3 March 2013]

Cooke, E. (2013) **Revision: how to break down complex concepts**. The Telegraph [online], 23 Feb Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationadvice/9888492/Revision-techniques-how-to-learn-complex-concepts.html> [Accessed 3 March 2013]

Cooke, E. (2013) **Revision techniques: How to learn boring facts**. The Telegraph [online], 26 Jan. Available from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationadvice/9826494/Revision-techniques-How-to-learn-boring-facts.html> [Accessed 3 March 2013]

Cooke, E. (2013) **The real test of learning? Not forgetting**. The Telegraph [online], 9 Feb. Available from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationadvice/9855799/The-real-test-of-learning-Not-forgetting.html> [Accessed 3 March 2013]

Cooke, E. (2013). **Why do spider diagrams work?** The Telegraph [online], 5 Feb. Available from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationadvice/9839678/Spider-diagrams-how-and-why-they-work.html> [Accessed 3 March 2013]

General resources on exams and revision on the web:

Open University. **Revision and examinations** [online]. Available from: <http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy/revision-and-examinations.php> [Accessed 12 October 2012]

Oxford Brookes University. **Upgrade study advice service** (2012) You and exams [online]. Available from: <http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/upgrade/study-skills/exams.html> [Accessed 6 December 2012]

Skills4study Campus. (2012) **Examinations** [online]. Available from: <http://www.palgrave.com/Institutions/Birmingham.html> [Accessed 8 February 2013]

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