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How Can I Improve My Memory Skills As I Study?

Terry Teigeler

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A weekly question/answer column

How Can I Improve My Memory Skills As I Study?

Terry Teigeler answers:*

There are two ways to memorize: by rote (mechanically) and by understanding. Multiplication tables and telephone numbers are learned by rote. Ideas, concepts, and theories are best learned by understanding. Never be satisfied with a hazy idea of what you are reading. If you are not able to follow the thought, review the reading. Relate new ideas to your current knowledge.

- Survey the reading. When studying, break the material into parts, but keep the whole in mind. Experiments indicate that a quick survey of the material headings and summaries before reading gives an orientation which increases retention.
- Rapid forgetting, which is common after a reading session (up to 60 percent), can be significantly reduced by spaced verbal or written reciting of the material. Reciting can take place as you read each section or paragraph and should be in your own words. Read aloud passages you find difficult.
- Make up illustrations of the material you've studied. Your own examples will be easier to remember at exam time. Flash cards are useful when studying languages. Outline a chapter or lecture and fill in key words, concepts, or write in examples. As you write the material, you will know immediately whether you have learned the information.
- Review information immediately. The best review time is soon after learning has taken place. The beginning and the end of material studied is the best remembered, so pay close attention to the middle as you study. Review the material to refresh your memory before going to bed unless you are physically or mentally overtired. Freshly learned information is better remembered after a period of sleep than after an equal period of daytime activity.

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