

MEMORIES

"Memory, the warder of the brain." *Macbeth*.

Memory is more than an exam tool. It plays a key role in any viva, seminar or interview, and it informs and supports our study generally. It also happens to be a crucial part of what we are.

So, what do you associate with the phrase 'an amazing memory'? Sheer amount remembered? A genetic gift? 'Eye-photography'? Okay. But what about 'preparation' or 'planning'? After all, the very words 're-mind' and 're-member' imply something ordered, already (or previously) arrayed or formed. In preparing this sheet, my 'memory' took the form of last week's carefully indexed notes. That's cheating, of course – but it illustrates my key point: there are many ways we can prepare and arrange things so they'll come easily to mind.

Any memory aid, technique or ploy is called a **mnemonic**, from (ancient Greek) *mnêmôn*. This means 'mindful'. Ah – that's much more pleasant in its associations than 'cramming' or 'mugging up'. *Mindful* wafts a Zen fragrance of awareness. It suggests a (positively) fulsome mind. It reassures me that I can build the habits and structures which will allow me to 'bear in mind' the various weights I'll have to carry there. It seems to me that huge chunks of homogeneous text are less easily carried in that mind than lived experience. The secret, then, is to transform bland or factual material *into* a sensory experience, by associating it with a **Story, Word/ Sound, Image or Place**. In a fluent 'learning-memory' process of encoding → storage → retrieval, mnemonics can help to effectively encode/store new information; by tying that information to existing knowledge (familiar words, etc) they make retrieval easier too.

Mnemonic Type 'A'.

MEMORY AS NARRATIVE.

The memorability of narrative is probably genetic because, long before writing was invented, stories were essential in passing on information. So, to memorise the number sequence

1 3 7 5 3 1

I might spin a yarn like so: "Last night (**1** am) I was squinting through my **3** bedroom windows at (lucky me!) **7** UFOs. Lifting a hand against the glare, I saw the **5th** UFO sprout a **tripod** of legs. It squatted on my **1 and only** dog." I'll remember that story till the sun freezes. I chose colourful words to help it stick. Plus, I *do* hit the sack at about 1am and my room indeed has 3 windows. My lucky number is (usually) 7, and my raised hand reminds me of its 5 digits. But I *don't* have a dog. Then I notice: the sequence is partly symmetrical. That clinches it.

Mnemonic Type 'B'.

MEMORY AS SOUND/ WORDS.

An **acronym** is a word formed from the initial letters of other words, often to condense a definition or simple description (look up CERN, LASER, AIDS). Strictly, 'non-words' like NGO won't do; but this is often relaxed. Acronyms usually need a nudge to get there. Eg, here's (my interpretation of) Italo Calvino's 'recipe' of essentials for literature's next millennium:

Lightness Reference Rapidity Visuality Precision

which yields: **L-R-R-V-P**. Hmm. No vowels; repeated letters. Hence not memorable. But let's be active rather than passive. Change *Reference* to *Intertextuality* (again, my interpretation) and *Precision* to *Exactness*, then juggle the order...

Lightness Intertextuality Visuality Exactness Rapidity

giving: **Italo Calvino's L-I-V-E-R**. Much better; and a real noun. But I tend to forget what that 'E' stands for. Hence: **Italo Calvino's L-I-V-E-R is E-xact**. Yep. To the grave.

There are lots of ways of doing this kind of thing ('acrostics', etc); also, apart from words, memory can thrive on other forms of patterned sound such as music or song. But let's not get bogged down in all that. Just invent your own mnemonic forms and hybrids to suit: extract letters, words, part-words, numbers, names to build memorable phrases. Here's a recent improvisation from my own files. Don't mind the content much; just focus on the process...

JAKOBSON MODEL		
addresser	context message contact code	addressee

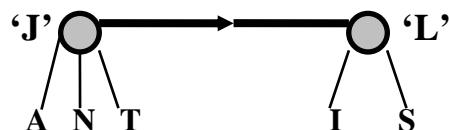
This gives: "**Jakob! Dress her messily externally, but tactfully odd – see?**" Okay – so I'm weird. But I hope you get the drift.

[continued...]

You probably use some simple word-based techniques in revision already (keyword lists, etc.) but what about the rest of the sound tool-bag? In mnemonics, any type of sonic reinforcement is good... nursery rhyme, rhythm, alliteration (indeed, rhyme is one of the most ancient aids to memory: eg '30 days hath September...'). Wackiness helps too. And anything personal.

Mnemonic Type 'C'. MEMORY AS IMAGES.

We all know the saying 'a picture is worth a thousand words' and, for me, visual memory-aids are indeed among the best. In fact, we touched on this earlier when we built visual and spatial structure into overhead transparencies [see '[Presentation Skills 2](#)']. For many people, the memory 'sees' and stores spatial patterns easily. Images and icons are naturally memorable (as advertisers know!) and visual aids, when cannily constructed, can be superb for recalling **relationships, priorities, structure** and **sequence**. Here's a simple example. Don't worry what the letters stand for: rather, note how all the relationships can be understood at a glance.



Each letter stands for a chunk of familiar/ known information.

Why 'ANT IS' and not (eg) 'TNA SI' ?

Mnemonic Type 'D'. MEMORY AS 'PLACE'.

'Topic' derives from *topos* (ancient Greek) meaning 'a place'. *Topos* is memorable, I suspect, because proto-humans needed to find their way around (and back again) in order to survive. In Greek oratory, each stage of an argument was associated with a *topos*; its progression was thus symbolised by a visual/ spatial journey of the mind. Later, Roman orators systematised speeches using the places in which they spoke: e.g. this pillar = A; that statue = B... etc., with each feature having its special significance or content. In a sense, they looked around the place to 'read' the sequence of 'topics' on the 'page' of the venue! So, bear *topos* in mind next time you 'lose your place' in a talk, or when an over-used idea is described as 'commonplace'. *Topos* is not easily applied, now, in its Roman sense – unless you use that trick of 'placing' items in a familiar room or location (in your imagination) as a means of memorising them. Perhaps the modern equivalents of *topos* really occur in certain kinds of pictorial diagram, or maybe even in the abstract places we make, from icons, on that screen-sized room of our PCs.

MNEMONICS. PROs ...

- Composing them can be fun, and *itself* a useful learning process.
- They're yours: funny, rude... you choose. No intimidation. No rules!
- Encodes material according to how *you* think; ties it in to your specialisms.
- Good long-term storage tool for summaries, overviews, etc.
- Great use of short-term memory: excellent 'notes for the bus'.
- Revision: can store 'bones' of a subject in a few diagrams or phrases.
- Before exam: review mnemonics just before you go in; guaranteed result!
- In exam: jot down the essential stuff (in mnemonic form) in first 5-10 mins!
- Emergency: use as an easy start, or prompt, if blocked.
- Can store information on several levels [spatially, associatively, etc].
- Excellent for little 'knots' of easily-forgotten, but crucial, information.

CONs ...

- They're not the *whole* skill of memory. Can't rely entirely on 'memory crutches'.
- Can be overdone. Don't neglect sophisticated, extended means of revision/recall.
- Over-reliance may lead to obviousness, over-simplification, banality.
- Poor mnemonics can confuse, irritate. Good technique needs to be learned.

Take memory seriously. Take time. Take responsibility.

Auditory/verbal and visual memories differ, as do individuals, so experiment! Find out how *you* store/retrieve things best. Also, it seems we most easily lose the middles of long lists (the 'serial position effect') so keep mnemonics relatively short. Having said that, they can go much further than small, individual parcels of information. If you've the frame of mind, and a little patience, several mnemonics can be linked to make a useful '**personal module**' (see next) dealing with (say) a key subject or exam topic. Bite-sized units or related chunks are memory-friendly, and personal modules can be built upon, or even assembled into substantial blocks of material. Not worth the time, you say? In answer, let me misquote (or is it 'mis-member'?) that line from Macbeth:

"Memory, the larder of the brain."