Improving Your Memory

Myth: Most people remember fewer than 10% of the names of people that they meet.
Fact: We remember the face, but we have made no real connection between the face and name.

Myth: Most people forget 99% of the phone numbers given to them.
Fact: Most people don’t really choose to remember most phone numbers.

Myth: Memory is supposed to decline rapidly with age.
Fact: Memory declines with age only if it is not used. It can improve throughout your lifetime.

Myth: Most people confess to having a bad memory.
Fact: Most people use the excuse of "only being human," because they don’t know how to improve their memory.

Our memories are far better than we give them credit!!

• Most people have dreams of family, friends, places, and situations that they may have not experienced in 10 to 30 years. Most of these images are perfectly clear with color and in great detail.

• Everyone has had the experience of turning a corner and suddenly recalling events from the past. A single smell, touch, or sound might at any time bring back a flood of memory.

• A Russian journalist named Shereshevsky never took or made notes. He could, however, listen to long speeches and recall line for line, word for word, what he had just heard. Scientists concluded that he was not a freak and did not have anything more than an average intelligence. Shereshevsky did use basic memory principles in his everyday life.

• Professor Rosenweigs studies in the 1970’s concluded that if our brains were fed 10 new items of information every second for the rest of our life, that we would never half fill our memory potential.

• While working on a side project, the noted Professor Penfield found that by electrically stimulating certain brain cells, his patients were vividly recalling happenings from their past. The memories included the smells, tastes, colors, noises, and movements associated with the happening.

• Professor Anokhin proved that memory is formed in small electrical patterns among the interconnecting cells of the brain. We know that the brain contains over a million million (1,000,000,000,000) cells. The possibility of different combinations or connections of memories between these cells is limitless.

• In near-death type happenings, most people confess to having "my whole life flash before my eyes." We laugh and tell them they probably just sorted through a few highlights.
my eyes." We laugh and tell them they probably just sorted through a few highlights. Studies show that most of these people are serious and that they even recalled events totally forgotten for many years.

- Studies show that if you are shown 1000 pictures at the rate of one picture per second, that you could, with 99 percent accuracy, pick those pictures out even if someone mixed in 100 new pictures that you had not seen. We all border on the limits of having a photographic memory.

- Memory techniques are not new and have been used since the time of the ancient Greeks. Recent studies show, however, that if you can master any one technique and score 9 out of 10 on a standard test, that you will proportionally score 900 out of 1000 and so on. Memory techniques work across the board with different cultures studying different type subjects.

Why don't we use our memory to its fullest potential?

For some odd reason, we tag certain information and remember it well. On the other hand, we poorly tag information that must be remembered and are never able to recall it. The "GIGO" syndrome does not work well for students at Texas A&M. Students who poorly tag or attempt to put "Garbage In" will most certainly not be able to remember and will get "Garbage Out" at test time.

If you have habits of losing things like eye glasses and car keys, or forget everything you study for tests, you probably are passively tagging these mental images. Things that are done and remembered as everyday ordinary occurrences have not been tagged in your memory as important. Memory that has not been tagged as important will in most cases be stored as FYI and your mind does not see the need to remember it with any authority.

Tagging input information in different way to make it memorable is not a new concept. "Mnemonics," or memory enhancement techniques have been studied since the time of ancient Greeks and Romans. In the following pages, we will discuss several simple techniques that scholars and memory tricksters use to improve their memory abilities.

The Link System

The link system is the quickest and most simple to learn. It creates a memory foundation that makes learning advanced systems easier. The link system is best used to positively tag information like shopping lists or class test lists. By using principles like imagination, symbolism, sight and touch we incorporate both left and right brain memory strengths. The key to connecting any series in a list is to tag each entry with as much information as possible. Making any list something unusual or bizarre keeps it from being routinely stored and easily forgotten.

Example: Pick any list of items you wish to remember. It could be a shopping list or a listing of answers for a particular test. For my example, we will use a short shopping list. In most cases we
forget to make or bring our shopping list. We then get home and remember exactly what we forgot to buy. Here’s our list.

Hair comb
2 Glass tea pitchers
Grapes
1 Bar of hand-soap
Eggs
Clothes detergent
Dental floss
Bread

The Link System: Now imagine yourself walking out the front door with a large metal comb in your mouth. Feel the smoothness of the metal and then the point of each tooth on the comb. Balanced on that comb are two large tea pitchers that glimmer in the afternoon sun. Hear the tinkling of the glass as each of your steps makes the pitchers bump together. You now hear a smushing sound and you stop. From under your shoe you see a river of grape juice and seeds flowing. The cuff of your jeans is now stained deep red. This alarms you and your first reaction is to step back. As you step back, you find yourself on a foaming bar of soap in the shape of a surf-board. Now see yourself surfing on a sea of grape juice leaving a trail of suds from your soap surf-board. Feel the soap as it squishes up from between your toes. Smell the contrast of grape mist and clean soap aromas. Suddenly you take a big spill and now your clothes are all stained with grape juice. You’re now so nasty that you have to return home.

Now you’re really tired. It took you 8 hours and 12 boxes of detergent to get that grape stain out of your favorite jeans. Tired, hungry, and out of detergent, you forge out to go shopping again. You’re really getting good at balancing the tea pitchers on that comb. So good that you will jump rope and balance the pitchers all the way to the mall. Can you guess what the jump rope is made of? If you guessed it was made of thousands of strands of dental floss, you were correct. See and feel the rope in your own mind.

Now that you see how the Link System works, finish this story so that you can incorporate the last two items on our shopping list—bread and eggs.

The Number-Shape System

Most of us are fairly familiar with the numbers 1 through 10. For each number, all of us can come up with an image or shape that (maps) reminds us of that number. For example, I can see a curved swan’s head and neck matching the curved top section of the number 2. Some people use a boat or sailboat for the number 4 because it looks like a boat’s sail. The key point is to associate a word that represents a specific number for you and only you.

Examples:
1. = Paintbrush
2. = Swan
3. = Heart
4. = Boat
5. = Hook
6. = Elephant’s Trunk
7. = Cliff
8. = Hourglass/Time
9. = Stick & Balloon
10. = Bat & Ball

The Number-Shape System: Let’s say you wanted to memorize this short list of items. This might be a grocery list or a list of possible answers for a major test.

1. Symphony
2. Prayer
3. Watermelon
4. Volcano
5. Motorcycle
6. Sunshine
7. Apple Pie
8. Blossoms
9. Spaceship
10. Field of Wheat

We would then construct this Number-Shape System:

1. (Paintbrush) The Symphony painted a good melody.
2. (Swan) He bowed his head in prayer like a swan.
3. (Heart) He loved Watermelon.
4. (Sailboat) We sailed away from the harbor as the Volcano erupted.
5. (Hook) He became hooked on Motorcycles.
6. (Elephant’s Trunk) Dumbo lifted his trunk towards the Sunshine.
7. (Cliff) I’d jump off a cliff for Mom’s Apple Pie.
8. (Hourglass) It took time for the Blossoms to bloom.
9. (Stick & Balloon) The Spaceship floated like a child’s balloon.
10. (Ball & Bat) Our old baseball field has been converted into a *Field Of Wheat*.

These are, of course, the examples I would use. You must personalize your Number-Shape System to fit your own style. Your own system and images will tag the information you wish to remember in a much more efficient manner.

**The Number-Rhyme System**

The Number-Rhyme System works much like the Number-Shape System except we substitute sounds for images associated with the numbers 1 through 10.

*Examples:*
1. = sounds like bun or sun.
2. = sounds like shoe or pew.
3. = sounds like tree or flea.
4. = sounds like door or poor.
5. = sounds like dive or drive.
6. = sounds like sticks or bricks.
7. = sounds like heaven or eleven (7-Eleven).
8. = sounds like skate or gate.
9. = sounds like line or wine.
10. = sounds like pen or men.

*The Number-Rhyme System*: Lets say you wanted to memorize this short list of items. Again, this could be anything from a shopping list to a list of possible answers for a test.

1. Atom
2. Tree
3. Stethoscope
4. Sofa
5. Alley
6. Tile
7. Windscreen
8. Honey
9. Brush
10. Toothpaste

We would then construct this Number-Rhyme System:

1. (Sun) The *Atom* blast glared brighter than the sun.
2. (Shoe) Not everyone owns a shoe *Tree*.
3. (Tree) The tree-doctor put a *Stethoscope* around the trunk.
4. (Door) We moved the *Sofa* near the door.
5. (Drive) We had to drive in the Alley.
6. (Bricks) The western house had bricks arranged like Tile on the floor.
7. (Eleven) The car drove through the Windscreen at the 7-Eleven.
8. (Bait) We used Honey as bait for the flies.
9. (Line) The artist used a fine Brush to paint the line.
10. (Men) The shipwrecked men had not used Toothpaste in 2 years.

This is again, an example I would use. The more vivid and/or ridiculous the rhymes are made will have a greater impact on how well your memory attempts to tag this information. Remember to personalize this system so that it fits your imagination and learning style.

The Major System: How to remember Phone Numbers and Dates in History

The Major System is the ultimate memory enhancement tool. It has been used, studied, and improved upon for nearly 400 years. This versatile system will allow you to memorize limitless lists of facts, dates and series of numbers. It also enables you to organize lists in a variety of orders, so that memorization is customized to best fit your learning style. The basic structure of the Major System is to designate consonant letter codes for the numbers 0 through 9.

Example: 0 = s,z = s & z are the first sounds of the word "zero."
1 = d,t = d & t have one pen downstroke.
2 = n = n has two pen downstrokes.
3 = m = m has three pen downstrokes.
4 = r = r is the last letter in the word "four."
5 = l = the top of the number 5 is an "L."
6 = j,sh = j is the mirror image of the number "6."
7 = k, ch = k is shaped like two "7's."
8 = f, v = f, when handwritten, has two loops like an "8."
9 = b, p = b & p are mirror images of the number "9."

Examples: The Major System for Phone Numbers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your Tennis Partner</th>
<th>640-7336</th>
<th>= (7336/c,m,m,sh)</th>
<th>= Can Make Masterful SHots</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local Theatre</td>
<td>869-9521</td>
<td>= (9521/p,l,n,t)</td>
<td>= Produce Laughter -N- Tears</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favorite Restaurant</td>
<td>354-6350</td>
<td>= (m,l,r, - ch,m,l,s)</td>
<td>= My Local Restaurant CHarges Moderate Lunch Specials</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Examples: The Major System for Appointments
Examples: The Major System for Historical Dates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>System</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1666</td>
<td>Great fire of London</td>
<td>(666/sh,sh,sh)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>aSHes,aSHes,aSHes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1454</td>
<td>First Printing Press</td>
<td>(454/r,l,r)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>RoLloR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1789</td>
<td>French Revolution</td>
<td>(789,k,f,p)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>King Fights People</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The more you practice the Major System, the more powerful your memory will become. This system will strengthen both the short and long term memory. Increasing any memory will help you recall more data for tests.

**Other Tips for Memory**

The best system is one you customize and create yourself.

When reading to remember, scan graphs, side-notes, margins, intro, and summary paragraphs.

*When Highlighting:* Highlight areas you are not comfortable with.

- Single words or sentences that "define" headings.
- Skip explanations and extra examples.
- Also highlight your notes when possible.

Understanding what the concept is saying or explaining helps increase long-term memory.

When trying to remember words, it’s always helpful to see the parts or construction of the word rather than the whole word.

Memorization is as easy as teaching yourself to "cue" and "review."

**The Roman Room System**

The Romans were great advocates of mnemonic systems. In their time, they created a system popularly called the Roman Room. Each Roman would detail a permanent vision of their own home within their mind. The home is a familiar place that each person generally visits several times a day. To this permanent vision they would attach items they wished to remember.

Try to picture your present home’s front door in your mind. See the trim and fixtures like a Roman
would see the stone entry-way and marble pillars of the olden Roman home. If you can’t visualize your own home, create a vision of what you might imagine as any Romans doorway might look like.

Remember to always see your door and trim like the Romans’ pillars and stone archway.

The Roman might, for example, have constructed his mental image of the entrance and front room with two gigantic pillars at either side of the front door, a carved lion’s head as the doorknob, and an exquisite Greek statue on the immediate left as he walked in. Next to the statue might be a large sofa with the fur of one of the animals the Roman had hunted.

The Roman would then start a typical day by arranging a shortened list of things he/she wished to do and remember for that day. Let’s say that the Roman wanted to remember to buy a new pair of sandals, to get his sword sharpened, to buy a new house maid, and to finish the weeding in his grape vineyard. He would simply imagine the first pillar outside his doorway arranged with thousands of sandals, the leather polished and glistening in the sun, with the smell of fresh leather filling the air. He would imagine sharpening the sword on the second pillar, hearing the scraping with each stroke, feeling the edge as it gets sharper and sharper. The Roman would then pull on the ornate doorknob, revealing the front room, and looking to see if the new house maid had arrived yet. She would be there, sitting on the lion skin sofa, which would materialize into a raging lion that gave the servant a galloping ride over to the only statue in the room. The servant would then pluck a withered, discolored grape from the dense matting of vines that encrypt the statue. The servant would then say, "Sorry I cannot offer you better fruit, but the weeds have been so bad this year that the grapes will not grow any better than this!"

Once you construct your Roman Room for each group of things you wish to remember, always mentally walk around that room a second time to familiarize yourself with the sequence, placing and positioning of all the items you place in that room.

The Roman Room System eliminates all boundaries on your imagination and allows you to remember as many items as you wish. Many people find this to be their favorite memory system, and will make lists hundreds of items long to put in their gigantic Roman Room.

**Remembering People’s Names**

One of the most important things we use our memory for is to recall people’s names. Although it’s important, most of us put ourselves in embarrassing situations where we can and do remember the face, but cannot remember the name. Our recent ancestors were lucky enough not to have this problem. It was common knowledge that people who baked bread were named "Baker." The same is true for "Blacksmiths," "Carpenters" and "Tailor’s."

Today the name game is a little more complicated. In college, we meet people in large group settings and it is extremely difficult to remember just a few of the names for any real length of time. Thankfully, there are two systems that can help us remember and connect the face to the name. Used correctly, each system builds and strengthens the other. The first system derives from the
early colonial rules of social etiquette, and the second is taken from the Mnemonic Methods we have learned about earlier in this handout.

The first or Social Etiquette System follows a series of steps that progress to the goal of remembering names for social interaction purposes. Whether for social or professional purposes, the steps will set an easily learned pattern that can help you start associating a particular name with the corresponding face.

1. Don’t "know" that your memory is terrible and not attempt to really "hear" how each person’s name is pronounced.

2. Greet people by looking them straight in the face. Look for one distinguishing feature such as hair, eyes, lips, nose, forehead, wrinkles or facial hair. Find something that makes this person unique.

3. Listen to "how" this person’s name is pronounced.

4. Always ask to repeat the name. "Did you say Joe Smith?"

5. If the name still puzzles you, ask for the correct spelling. If you were panicked by introducing yourself, this is a good way to hear the name again without being totally obvious.

6. Find closure with steps #4 and #5. Make sure that you can spell or say their name.

7. Exchange business cards if you can. You then have a hard copy for review.

8. Repeat that person’s name in conversation as much as possible. "John, do you know Joe Smith? Joe is a business major from Houston."

9. During any pauses in the conversation, internally repeat that person’s name to yourself.

10. During longer breaks, step back and recite each person’s name along with the facial characteristic that helps you to remember them.

11. When the group breaks up or you leave, use that person’s name in your farewell. "Well Mr. Smith, it was a pleasure to meet you."

12. After you leave the scene, write down people’s names and the facial characteristics that set them apart from others.

13. Set your goals slowly. If you have not tried to remember names in the past, you won’t be an expert right away. Make a goal of remembering 5 people’s names each time you get into a group setting. When this becomes easy, push your goal up to 6 or 7. You will find that once you get the 5 goal down that increasing the limit is extremely easy.
The second system in "remembering people’s names," is the Mnemonic System we have learned about in the earlier sections off this handout. By using simple association and imagination, we can mentally flag information that we choose to make interesting enough to remember. A combination of this and the Etiquette System works best for long term retention of memory.

1. Make sure you are clear about the correct way of spelling and pronouncing that person’s name.

2. Make sure you mentally repeat the person’s name at least twice in your mind.

3. Look for that one obvious head or facial characteristic.

4. Mentally reconstruct that person’s face. Use your wildest creativity to exaggerate the head or facial characteristic much like a cartoonist would.

5. Repeat that person’s name while imagining the intensified feature you made up. It sometimes helps to rhyme or spoof the person’s name. You might remember John Pane by thinking "John Wayne" Pane.

Texas A&M University

http://www.scs.tamu.edu/selfhelp/elibrary/memory.asp