

Improving Memory

Students frequently express concern about their memory. They worry that it is not as good as another student's or that it has grown worse with age. While some students may have unusually good memories, we all have to work to retain information. Memory and recall degrades quickly. Consequently, it is helpful to build a process of reviewing into one's study habits.

Long and Short Term Memory

Memory degrades quickly. Psychologists estimate that we forget 80% what we've learned within 24 hours. To be able to recall new information at a later date for, say, an exam, a student must transfer new information from short-term to long-term memory. Several strategies can help.

- **Review and expand on your notes within twenty-four hours.** One simple way to do this is to remain in your seat after class and fill in whatever you have missed. Use the Cornell method of note-taking.
- **Over-learn difficult material.** Make certain that you have learned the material thoroughly by testing yourself without looking at the material.
- **Connect new information to old knowledge.** It is much easier to learn new material when it seems familiar.
- **Reduce interference.** Interference causes much of the degradation of our memories. For instance, you've studied Organic Chemistry for 45 minutes and then moved immediately to studying Physics for 45 minutes. Most students would find that at the end of the study session, they were able to recall the Physics but not the Organic Chemistry. Or, you've studied for forty minutes and then began a conversation with your roommate. You might recall the conversation but have little recall of what you studied.
 - You can reduce interference by studying for short periods of time, reviewing briefly and then taking a break. You might also spread out similar subjects so that you study science and then read for a humanities course.
- **Actively choose where and when to study.** In order to recall new information, you must be able to concentrate in order to learn it in the first place. Choose a quiet place to study with few distractions. Study for brief periods of time (30 - 90 minutes.) Pick a time of day when you are alert. And, most important, find time for frequent, brief reviews.
- **Use flashcards.** Discreet pieces of information such as lists of foreign language vocabulary, Greek gods and goddesses or the bones in the human body can be very difficult to learn. This type of information can only be mastered through repeat drilling. Use flashcards and carry them with you to help you review whenever you have some low quality study time available, such as waiting for a friend in a café.

Adapted from: Pauk, W. (1989). *How to Study in College* (4th Ed.), Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin; Reynolds, J.A. (1996) *College Success: Study Strategies and Skills*, Boston, MA, Allyn & Bacon.