

11.3 How to remember

READING The memory palace

- 1 You are going to try to remember a list of words. Turn to page 177.
- 2 Work in pairs. How many of the words from page 177 did you remember? Did you use any special technique for remembering? Why did you remember certain words and not others?
- 3 Read the article. Answer the questions.
 - 1 What are the three ways that we can remember better?
 - 2 Who has shown that each of these techniques works?
 - 3 Can you explain how a memory palace works?
- 4 Read the article again. Are the sentences true (T) or false (F), according to the author, or is there not enough information to say (NI)?
 - 1 We don't give our memories enough credit for the good job that they do.
 - 2 The computer age has actually increased the ability of our own brains to store information.
 - 3 People these days read a lot but they don't retain very much of what they read.
 - 4 In the past, humans used their memories to recognize physical objects and to remember where things were.
 - 5 The memory techniques used in memory palaces are only useful for memory competitions.
- 5 Find the words and phrases in bold in the article. Choose the correct meaning (a–f). Then answer the questions.
 - 1 Can you think of an example of an **apposite** quotation that you use or like?
 - 2 What important information do you store on your **hard drive**?
 - 3 What amenities or types of shop are **thin on the ground** in your town?
 - 4 Why does the author say that intense focus and repetition are **out of fashion**?
 - 5 How do people **harness** solar energy?
 - 6 What geographical facts can you **reel off**?
 - a scarce, with very few existing
 - b give a (long) list without having to think
 - c very clearly not popular
 - d a computing device for storing large amounts of data
 - e relevant and fitting a particular situation
 - f use the power of something to do a particular job
- 6 What do these words from the text refer to? What words have they been substituted for?
 - 1 do (line 3)
 - 2 we are (line 9)
 - 3 it (line 9)
 - 4 it (line 24)
 - 5 Such people (line 27)
 - 6 this (line 28)
 - 7 Thus (line 52)
 - 8 the ones (line 60)

VOCABULARY Learning and memory

- 7 Look at the expressions (a–b) in bold from the article to do with memory. Then choose the correct options to complete the sentences (1–8). There is sometimes more than one answer.
 - a ... learned scholars who could **recite by heart** ...
 - b ... so that you absorbed and **assimilated** the content.
 - 1 It's difficult to *acquire / develop / hone* new skills at the age of 55.
 - 2 You have to *call to mind / retain / take on board* the lessons of the past. Someone said, it's a fool who keeps on doing the same things, expecting a different result.
 - 3 I learned how to repair watches on the job, but I couldn't have done it without Doug. Everyone needs a *coach / educator / mentor* in their career and he was mine.
 - 4 I've never really *got the hang of / picked up / taken in* how to read phonetic script in a dictionary.
 - 5 Some facts – e.g. multiplication tables – are best taught through *distance / self-directed / rote* learning.
 - 6 A 1970s' experiment on visual memory showed people could *reminisce / recall / revive* 80 per cent of the 10,000 photos they had been shown the previous day.
 - 7 Certain smells – like fresh laundry – always *excite / evoke / enshrine* childhood memories for me.
 - 8 Repetition is the best way to *commit / consign / reinforce* facts to memory.
- 8 Work in pairs. Compare your answers from Exercise 7 and explain your choices. Then discuss the truth of these statements from your own experience.

SPEAKING Memory tips

9 21st CENTURY OUTCOMES

Work in small groups. Look at the list. Then discuss the questions (1–3).

- Numbers: e.g. phone numbers, combination codes
- Names: e.g. of people, places, films, books
- Visual details: facial features, clothes, colours
- Spatial awareness: where things are, directions
- What you hear: e.g. stories, quotations, jokes
- English vocabulary

- 1 Which of these things do you find easy to remember and which do you commonly forget?
- 2 Can you give examples of situations where remembering has proved useful or forgetting has been embarrassing?
- 3 Do you have any tips for remembering these things?

- 10 Work with another group. Compare your findings. Are there any similarities in your results? Which tip was most helpful? What tips will *you* use in the future?



THE MEMORY PALACE

It's amazing – given all our memories have to cope with these days – that we remember as much as we do. Yet often we find ourselves cursing them because they have let us down, failing to supply the name of someone familiar-looking or a 'memorable' password or an apposite quotation. Why, we ask ourselves, aren't I fortunate enough to have the kind of above-average memory that some people seem to possess? Well, actually we are. Or to put it another way, everyone has an average memory; it's just that some people know how to get the best out of it, while others who are not in the habit of training their memories don't.

The reason we are out of the habit is partly to do with technology. Today's computers and digital devices serve as our external hard drives, storing all sorts of useful information for us outside our brains. Our phones keep our to-do lists and alert us of upcoming appointments, while our computers store any number of pertinent facts that can be retrieved at the touch of a key.

Six hundred years ago, a trained memory was not just a handy tool, it was a pre-requisite for a cultured mind. Since books were thin on the ground, memorizing the wisdom contained in them was the only way to maintain access to it. It was not uncommon to find learned scholars who could recite by heart whole tracts of religious or philosophical works. Such people became walking libraries, albeit libraries with a fairly limited stock. They were able to do this because they read intensively rather than extensively, as we tend to do now, valuing quantity over quality. Intensive reading meant taking time over what you were reading and reading it many times, so that you absorbed and assimilated the content.

Intense focus (learning without distraction) and repetition, both habits conspicuously out of fashion today, are clearly two important factors in effective memorization. But there is another key to memory training to be found further back in history. It is a technique still used by memory experts today.

The discovery of this technique is attributed to the Greek poet, Simonides of Ceos, who lived in the fifth century BC. The story goes that Simonides alone survived the collapse of a banquet hall at which he was a dinner guest. When asked to recall who the other guests had been, to his surprise, he found that without making any conscious effort to remember, he could visualize perfectly where each of the guests had been sitting prior to the disaster. Simonides reasoned that if he could remember the layout of the guests, why could he not just as easily populate a mental image of a building with other things – say, his friends in order of their birth dates or a list of the things he needed to buy at the market. Thus, it is said, the idea of a 'memory palace' was born. We can harness our facility for remembering visually and spatially (an important ability for survival in our hunter-gatherer past) and use it to help us remember other, often more abstract, ideas.

Memory palaces are used by those who participate in memory competitions to incredible effect: they can reel off the exact sequence of 156 playing cards or 250 random digits. The most successful memory experts are the ones who are able to create the most unusual or striking surroundings within their 'palace' to store each item to be remembered. It is a mnemonic device worth trying. So if, for example, you have to think of a new online password, instead of using a relative's name or a former address, try instead to come up with a more striking and unusual image. The image of a budgerigar eating soup in the kitchen might give you 'Budgie8soup'. The image of Barack Obama standing in your wardrobe wearing cowboy boots might give you 'boots4Barack'. Try it – it really does work.