

Memory Techniques for Exam Preparation: 10 Astonishing Ways to Harness the Power of Your Brain



One of the biggest fears every student has as they enter the exam hall is that their mind will go blank and they will suddenly forget every last thing they know.

It's the stuff of nightmares, but fortunately, it's highly unlikely to happen. First of all, you'd be amazed what facts start to come flooding back to you once you pick up a pen and start answering a question. Second of all, there are lots of memory tricks you can use that will help you recall information in a more formal and structured way. In this article, we're going to show you just how much you can do to commit facts and figures to memory ready to recall them in exams, and we hope that as well as boosting your confidence, this should also ward off those nasty pre-exam nightmares!

1. Get organised

Before we even get started on memory tricks, there's something fundamental we need to begin with. If there's one enemy of a good memory, it's disorganization. A cluttered working space with unfiled notes here, there and everywhere; a notepad filled with scrawl on numerous different subjects with no particular order; a poor computer filing system. All these spell disaster for your ability to recall facts in the exam room. So, start by getting yourself organised. Tidy your room, or whichever space you're using for studying. Get your notes organised neatly into different subjects. Physically decluttering and bringing about order in your environment has the strange effect of doing the same to the mind (perhaps there is something in feng shui), making you far better able to cope with memorising and recalling facts.



Tidying your desk should be top of your to-do list.

2. Mind palaces

If you're a fan of Sherlock you're probably already familiar with the concept of a mind palace, but just in case you aren't, let's go over it again. Officially known as the 'method of loci', the memory palace can be used to memorise huge volumes of information, and best of all, because it's all down to your imagination, you can constantly expand it. It works like this:

1. Visualise a building or road. Populate your mental image with details, such as what you see in each room or what's on either side of the road.
2. Mentally connect an image of each of the features you see – such as a chair in your imagined house, or a tree by the side of your imagined road – with a manageable chunk of information (such as a chemical formula). Think about the two together in depth and make sure you've really learned the information and its associated image.
3. To recall the information in the exam, simply retrace your steps through the building or down the road and pick out the objects you've associated with the information.
4. When you want to add additional information to your memory bank, you can simply add another room to your imaginary building or take a turn off your imaginary road that will house this new information. This must be a foolproof memory trick because it's been in around since Greek and Roman times. The Roman orator Cicero, who needed to be able to recall large amounts of information from memory when giving speeches, described them in his treatise on oratory, *De Oratore*. If it was good enough for him, it's good enough for us!



Mind palaces are used in the BBC series Sherlock. Still from Sherlock (BBC, 2010).

3. Mnemonics

You'll be pleased to hear that the concept of a mnemonic is a lot simpler than its confusing spelling. It involves translating information into an alternative form that you're more easily able to remember. One way of doing this is by taking the first letters of a string of information you want to remember and then using them to create a more memorable phrase that you find easier to recall than the original information. For example, some people remember the points of the compass with the mnemonic 'Never Eat Shredded Wheat' (North East South West). The first letters of the information can also make up a word in their own right, as in the case of the colours of the rainbow, the mnemonic of which is the name 'Roy G. Biv' (Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo, Violet).



An alternative way of remembering the colours of the rainbow is 'Richard of York gave battle in vain'.

4. Rhyming

Putting information into a rhyme is another way of making it easier to remember. An example is the rhyme that helps people remember how many days there are in each month:

30 days hath September, April, June, and November.
All the rest have 31
Except February my dear son.
It has 28 and that is
fine But in Leap Year it
has 29.

This may prove a more effective way of memorising bigger chunks of information than the mnemonic examples we gave above. Your rhyme could be a little more modern-sounding to help you remember it, or you could use some tried and tested rhyming schemes such as rhyming couplets to help cement facts in your brain. Here's a truly terrible example I just made up to help you memorise the order of the planets:

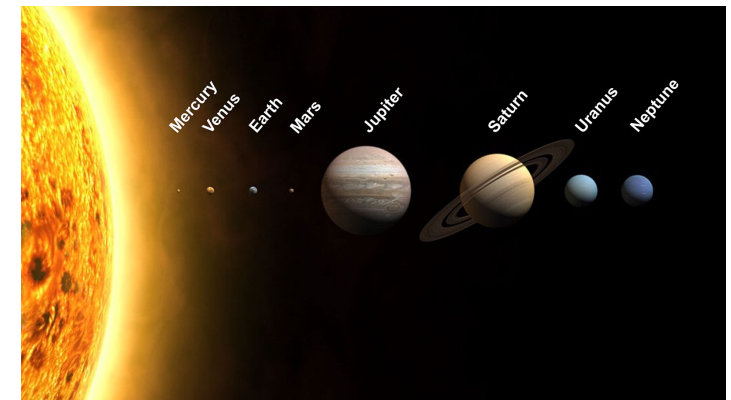
Close to the Sun, hottest and between us
Are the burning fireballs of Mercury and Venus.

Next come homely Earth then Mars, then gas giants Jupiter and Saturn – Are you starting to see a planetary pattern?

Are you starting to see a planetary pattern?

Icy Uranus and Neptune follow, and, bringing up the rear, Humble Pluto – no longer a planet – sheds a tear.

As you can see from my embarrassing attempt, you don't have to be an accomplished poet to do it!



Alternatively, 'My Very Eager Mother Just Served Us
chocolate'.

5. Making the most of a photographic memory

If you're lucky enough to possess a photographic memory, you can make the most of it by combining images with text to reinforce what you've learned. This makes it easier to recall the information, because all you have to do is bring to mind the image and you should be able to recall the information. Even if you don't have a photographic memory, you can apply the same principle. Arrange your notes in a pictorial fashion, such as in a spider diagram (where you have the concept in the middle and arrows pointing out of it to different pieces of information). Then, when you need to recall a particular piece of information, the idea is that you remember whereabouts it was on the page and that jolts your memory of what it was about.

6. Setting facts and figures to music

An extension of the rhyming idea is setting your notes to music. I don't know about you, but I find it much easier to remember the lyrics to my favourite songs than I do to recall dry information such as the names and dates of the English monarchs or Roman emperors. If you're struggling to commit a chain of information to memory, try putting a tune to it. Even a rap will do! Then all you need to do is remember the tune and the words should come flooding back. To make it easier to recall, you could try using a tune you already know – perhaps even a children's nursery rhyme, if you can bear to associate a childhood favourite with your present exams! As long as you're guaranteed to remember it, though, anything goes.



The only problem with this strategy is that in several years' time, the song you used will come on the radio and you'll be belting out French verbs before you know it.

7. Experience things practically

By ‘experience things practically’, we mean: don’t just learn from books. It can be very difficult to remember things if your only experience of them is reading them in a book. To take an extreme example, you couldn’t learn to ride a bike simply by reading about it; you need to learn by doing it. If what you’re learning about can be experienced in person, try to do so, because this is a much better way of learning and the information is far more likely to stick with you. For example, if you’re learning about a scientific experiment, try to do it in real life rather than simply reading about it in a textbook. That way, when it comes to the exam, you’ll have practical experience to draw on and you can recall what really happened when you undertook the experiment. Similarly, if you’re studying a piece of music in A-level music, try to play it on an instrument if you can – it will give you a far deeper appreciation of it. This trick can even apply to English literature; if you’re studying war poetry, for example, try visiting a war museum – or even what’s left of the trenches in northern France – and reciting the poem you’re studying in such an environment. It will give it much greater meaning, help you understand and appreciate it in the spirit and surroundings in which it was intended, and help you emotionally engage with what you’re learning – thus making it easier for you to recall information about it in the exam room.



‘Their name liveth for evermore’ the Gateway claims.
Was ever an immolation so belied
As these intolerably nameless names?’ – Siegfried Sassoon,
‘On Passing the New Menin Gate’

8. Utilise your sense of smell

Your sense of smell can be a powerful memory aid, as you'll know if you've ever experienced that odd sensation of smelling something for the first time in years and instantly being transported back to the moment you last smelt it. You could try using this to your advantage by dabbing your wrist with a particular perfume or aftershave each time you study material for a particular exam. Then, when that exam comes round, you put on the same perfume or aftershave and (theoretically) it should help transport you back to the time you were learning the information in the first place. You could try using different scents for different subjects, wearing the corresponding scent for the relevant exam.

9. Make up a story

To help your brain absorb bigger chunks of information, another trick you could try is to break the information down and make up a story linking together each piece of information. It's a little like the memory palace idea we discussed earlier in this article, but it plays with the imagination to a greater extent because the story you make up doesn't have to be spatially limited in your mind. For example, if you need to memorise a complicated chemical formula, you could name the molecules with human names beginning with the same letter (Carol = Chlorine, for example) and make up a little story in which the actions of the characters mirror those of the molecules in the formula. This can be a remarkably effective method of learning trickier, drier information, as it helps to bring it to life a bit and gives it a more human touch that makes it easier to relate to.

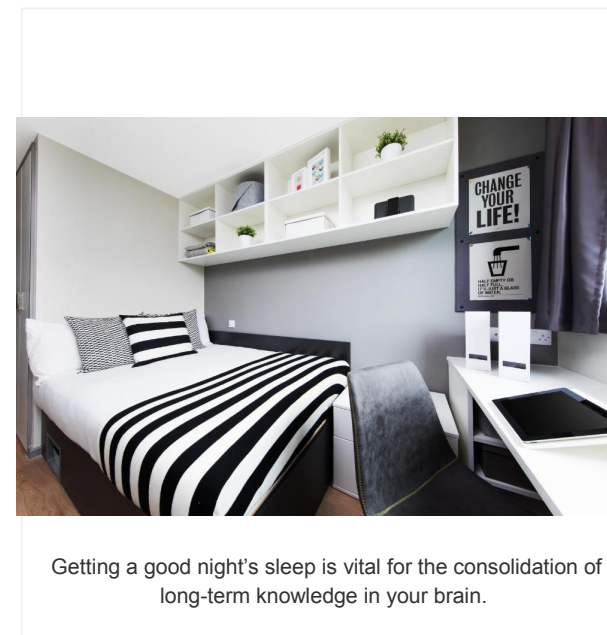


Simon was the son of a chemist,
Simon no longer exists,
Because what he thought was HO_2
was HSO_2

10. Get a good night's sleep

It may not sound like it, but one of the best things you can do to help you remember things is to get a good night's sleep – not just the night before the exam, but every night. We're not just saying that because getting the right amount of sleep will help you perform better, retain mental agility and ward off stress and tiredness. We're saying it because it's when you're sleeping that your brain performs the vital task of converting facts from short-term memory into long-term memory. During the course of a good night's sleep, your brain processes the information you've learnt during the day and stores it, meaning that you're far more likely to be able to recall it than if you barely slept. So, get the recommended eight hours' sleep each and every night. Sleep may feel like a luxury you can't afford right now, but believe us, it's one of the most important things you can do for exam success!

So there we have it: ten simple tricks and tips that will greatly help you to increase your capacity for learning all kinds of facts and figures, no matter how much you've struggled with them up to now. Rest assured that your brain is more than capable of housing the vast swathes of information you need to learn in order to pass your exams: you just have to make it easier for it to absorb more than usual during the busy exam period!



Getting a good night's sleep is vital for the consolidation of long-term knowledge in your brain.