

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 a chemist's son,
Simon is no more,
For what he thought was H₂O,
Was H₂SO₄.

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.