

Learning to Learn

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Reviewing to Remember

Did you know that your brain is designed to forget more than it remembers? The fact that you can listen to a lecture and make sense out what your instructor is saying, for example, has very little to do with how much of that information you will be able to remember a couple of days later.

And taking good notes, while essential, isn't even enough to ensure you remember new information that you get in class. It's what you do with your notes *after* you take them that makes the real difference in long-term recall.

Research into short-term and long-term memory suggests that most of what you pay attention to and notice at any one time will disappear from your memory a few seconds or minutes later. Once you no longer see a real need for that information it is dumped to make room for something else. So, without notes, most of what goes on in class or when reading will be gone for good (or ill) in a very short time.

But even when you do take notes, the same thing happens. If you just put your notes away in your backpack and never look at them again until the test, most of what you noted will have to be learned all over again from the beginning—not a good use of your time.

So how can you make the learning process happen quicker and with longer lasting results? One way is to institute a structured review process for every class or study period.

Review Right Away

Since the mind starts to forget information within a few minutes, make it a habit to review your notes for the first time within 20 minutes of class if you can. Make sure you fill in any gaps and understand the key concepts in your notes before you start doing other things. Make margin notes identifying the main points in your notes and come up with some likely test questions for later review. This review might only take 15 to 20 minutes, but it will help to get your long-term learning underway.

Then, within 24 hours, go back and, using only your margin notes, test yourself *before* you re-read your notes. How much do you recall? How well can you answer your questions in the margin or describe the main points and details? After self-testing, do a careful review to fill in gaps and correct errors in recall. This second review will carry you for another few days.

Finally, at the end of the week, do a third review of the material from each class that week. Be sure to do another self-test *before* you re-read your notes, otherwise you will fool yourself into thinking you “know” the information when, in fact, you are just re-reading it.

Try an experiment yourself by putting this review strategy into effect on one set of class notes and leaving another set alone for a few days. Then compare how much you remember from both sets of notes before you look at them again.

Taking a few minutes to review regularly can save a lot of time re-learning when preparing for an exam. And that is when time becomes very precious, indeed!