

# Everyday memory strategies

The most frequently used everyday memory strategies are:

- writing calendar or diary notes
- putting things in a special place
- writing reminder notes
- writing shopping lists
- using **face-name associations**
- mentally rehearsing information
- using a timer
- asking someone else to help

Of these, all but two are [external memory aids](#). With the exception of face-name associations, **mnemonic strategies** (the foundation of most memory-improvement courses) are little used.

## How effective are these strategies?

In general, external aids are regarded as easier to use, more accurate, and more dependable. In particular, external aids are preferred for reminding oneself to do things (**planning memory**). Mental strategies however, are equally preferred as retrieval cues for stored information. The preferred strategies are mentally retracing (for retrieving stored information) and mentally rehearsing (for storing information for later retrieval).

Note that these preferred strategies are not those that are most effective, but those strategies that are least effortful. The popularity of asking someone to help you remember has surprised researchers, but in this context it is readily understandable — asking someone is easiest strategy of all! It is not, however, particularly effective.

Older people in particular, are less inclined to use a strategy merely because it is effective. For them it is far more important that a strategy be familiar and easy to use.

Learning effective strategies does require effort, but once you have mastered them, the effort involved in using them is not great. The reason most people fail to use effective strategies is that they haven't mastered them properly. A properly mastered skill is executed automatically, with little effort. (see **Skill learning**)

## Reference

Intons-Peterson, M.J. & Fourrier, J. 1986. External and internal memory aids: when and how often do we use them? *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 115, 267-280.

# External memory aids

## What are external memory aids?

External memory aids include such strategies as:

- taking notes
- making shopping lists
- entering appointments in a diary or on a calendar
- writing a memo to yourself
- writing on the back of your hand
- taking photographs
- using clocks, oven timers, alarms on watches, etc
- putting objects in a conspicuous place
- putting a knot in your handkerchief
- asking someone to help you remember

## Making lists

Making lists or writing reminder notes to yourself, is one of the most widespread external memory aids. It seems that list-making is primarily helpful as a way of organizing (encoding) information, rather than its more obvious role in retrieving. More often than not, people do not actually use the list or note to 'remember'. The act of making it is sufficient to aid later recall.

However, there are situations where list-making appears appropriate but is not in fact the best strategy. For example, one study found that waitresses who went from table to table to take drink orders were much better at remembering the orders if they visualized the drinks in particular locations rather than when they wrote the orders down [1]. It is perhaps the time pressure in that kind of situation that makes an internal strategy more effective than an external one.

## When to use mental strategies

- when you can't rely on external prompts (e.g., acting in a play)
- when external prompts are difficult to prepare (e.g., because you lack writing materials) or hard to use (you have OOS in your writing hand)
- when you didn't expect to need to recall something, and have nothing prepared
- when using external aids interferes with other behavior (understanding what's going on; taking orders; etc)
- when carrying external aids would be undesirable or inconvenient (e.g., when driving)
- when the interval between learning and recall is very short (as when you need to remember a phone number only long enough to dial it)

## When to use external memory aids

- when a number of interfering activities occur between encoding and recall (e.g., having to remember to buy groceries after work)

- when there is a long time between encoding and recall (e.g., needing to make a doctor's appointment two months in the future)
- when internal aids are not trusted to be sufficiently reliable (as when precise details need to be remembered; or strict timing — when to check a cake in the oven)
- when information is difficult, and doesn't cohere easily (e.g., remembering lectures)
- when there is insufficient time to properly encode information
- when memory load is to be avoided (as when you are attending to more than one activity)

### **How effective are external memory aids?**

In general, external aids are regarded as easier to use, more accurate, and more dependable, than mental strategies. However, with the exception of note-taking, there has been little research into the effectiveness of external memory aids. The most that can be said is that, by and large, people believe they can be effective (with the emphasis, perhaps, on 'can').

One problem with external aids is that most of them are highly specific in their use. Their effective use also requires good habits. It's no good remembering to make a note in your diary if you don't remember to look in it.

### **References**

Intons-Peterson, M.J. & Fourrier, J. 1986. External and internal memory aids: when and how often do we use them? *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 115, 267-280.

Intons-Peterson, M.J. & Newsome, G.L. III. 1992. External memory aids: effects and effectiveness. In D. Herrmann, H. Weingartner, A. Searleman & C. McEvoy (eds.) *Memory Improvement: Implications for Memory Theory*. New York: Springer-Verlag.

[1]. Bennett, H.L. 1983. Remembering drinks orders: The memory skills of cocktail waitresses. *Human Learning*, 2, 157-169.

## **Remembering names & faces**

There are two well-established strategies for remembering people's names. The simplest basically involves paying attention. Most of the time our memory for someone's name fails because we never created an effective memory code for it.

### **An easy strategy for improving your memory for names**

We can dramatically improve our memory for names simply by:

- paying attention to the information
- elaborating the information (e.g., "Everett? Is that with two t's?"; "Rankin? Any relation to the writer?"; "Nielson? What nationality is that?")
- repeating the information at appropriate times.

### **The mnemonic strategy for remembering names and faces**

The other method, of proven effectiveness but considerably more complicated, is a mnemonic strategy called the **face-name association method**.

You can find details of this strategy in most memory-improvement books, including my own. It is one of the most widely known and used mnemonic strategies, and it is undoubtedly effective when done properly. Like all mnemonic strategies however, it requires considerable effort to master. And as with most mnemonic strategies, imagery is the cornerstone. However, physical features are not necessarily the best means of categorizing a face.

### **What research tells us**

Specific physical features (such as size of nose) are of less value in helping us remember a person than more global physical features (such as heaviness) or personality judgments (such as friendliness, confidence, intelligence). Rather than concentrating on specific features, we'd be better occupied in asking ourselves this sort of question: "Would I buy a used car from this person?" [1]

However, searching for a distinctive feature (as opposed to answering a question about a specific feature, such as "does he have a big nose?") is as effective as making a personality judgment. It seems clear that it is the *thinking* that is so important.

To remember better, *think* about what you want to remember.

Specifically, make a judgment ("she looks like a lawyer"), or a connection ("she's got a nose like Barbara Streisand"). The connection can be a visual image, as in the face-name association strategy.

### **Reference**

[1]. Winograd, E. 1978. Encoding operations which facilitate memory for faces across the life span. In M.M. Gruneberg, P.E. Morris & R.N. Sykes (eds.) *Practical aspects of memory*. London: Academic Press.