

Bureau for Student Counselling & Career Development
Study skills pamphlets

My memory - can I improve it?

While doing your assignment or writing examinations at Unisa, you have probably found that you are expected to do quite a number of things with your academic texts. Often you will need to argue a point of view, form an opinion or critically analyse academic text. But before you do these difficult things you need to have some basic study skills. You will often need to memorise basic facts, ideas and key words. Thereafter, you will be able to develop and implement reasoning skills based on your sound foundation of facts.

In this section we will concentrate on a few learning skills you can try in your studies. However, to generalise across all learners and across all learning contexts without regard for how you, the individual learner, would like to go about it, would be like trying to force you into a mould. So, in doing this we are not trying to force you into a mould, or insisting that all students should go about learning in the same way. What we are trying to achieve, however, is that you choose the way you would like to learn; and adopt and use learning methods that you find useful to achieve your particular study goals.

Why do we sometimes find it difficult to change our patterns of learning?

It is difficult, because:

- it is painful for some of us to un-learn rote learning techniques
- it seems to threaten the ways we are used to doing things
- it takes time and effort to change habits
- the new advice sometimes sounds unappealing and impractical

You are probably able to add a few of your own reasons why you may find it difficult to change old habits!

So, is there something I can do to help my memory?

The answer is a definite YES to this question. Often, you will first be expected to memorise basic facts, ideas and key words before being able to reason a point of view or to think critically about certain points. And this all starts with reading for meaning.

Reading for meaning

The purpose of reading something is not to be able to store the whole text in your mind. Even the author of your prescribed books will not be in a position to recall in detail all that is written in the chapter you are reading. What is important is that you be able to 'think' with the ideas the author has presented. Write down the main ideas and keywords that you would like to retain. Remember that it's what you understand that counts.

How do I go about remembering the facts which I understand?

Memory strategies (mnemonics) can often be used to help us remember basic information from our academic texts. We will briefly describe a few memory strategies that you might consider using in your studies. Classifying information is where one usually begins to get some order in one's studies.

Classification

Printed material often needs to be restructured and reorganised if we are to understand it better. Classification means that information on the same topic is grouped together. An appropriate word which best defines or explains the information is used as a heading to summarise the information. Once one has found an overall heading, the items can be further sub-divided on the basis of shared characteristics.

Acronyms

Acronyms are widely used to represent organisations and corporations. "Unisa" stands for the University of South Africa; "WHO" stands for the World Health Organisation and you can probably think of a few of your own. The reason why an acronym is used is that it helps people remember an organisation or idea.

You can use the same principle in your studies. Identify the keywords in your passage, take the first letter of each key word and form a new word. This is a very widely-used memory strategy and it works very well to help you remember basic facts.

Visualisation technique

Instead of rehearsing the basic information in your academic text over and over again, you could consider implementing visual images. Imagery involves consciously creating visual images in your mind concerning the information you would like to remember.

How does one go about forming effective visual techniques?

To make visual associations effective, try to make your images

- visual and vivid
- bizarre
- include some kind of interaction between your images.

Try these techniques in your studies, especially with key words you have difficulty remembering, and see how your memory starts working for you.

Further MEMORY IMPROVEMENT resources on the Internet

- Learning & Remembering (University of Waterloo, Canada)
<http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infocs/Study/learn.html>
- Remembering (Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University)
<http://www.ucc.vt.edu/stdysk/remember.html>
- Learning Skills Program : Remembering (University of Victoria)
<http://www.coun.uvic.ca/learn/remember.html>

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