

28. Practice Activity: The Leitner Box

The Leitner Box, which was developed by a German scientist called Sebastian Leitner, is a really effective, easy-to-develop practice and recall system. It's based on using flash cards to learn and then recall information, so this activity will need a whole bunch of subject-related flash cards. The cards are used as normal to record quick, easy-to-read bullet-pointed information about topics.

Leitner suggests that when we have a large amount of information to learn on flash cards, we have a tendency to gravitate towards the cards we already know and subconsciously avoid those we find difficult. To circumvent this, you create four subsections in your box (or four separate boxes):

- » **Box 1.** Here you put items for frequent practice. This is the stuff you're not remembering well – it needs regular review and rereading because you're making mistakes when you practise recalling it or you don't know it at all. Around 40% of your time should be spent hammering the content of these cards. When you score a victory and fully recall a card, you move it down to box 2.
- » **Box 2.** About 30% of your time is spent here. It's the stuff you've only just moved out of box 1 or learning that still trips you up or confuses you in any way. This material should be moving up (if you're not remembering it) or down (if you've nailed it) fairly regularly.
- » **Box 3.** You spend 20% of your time here, and you nearly always get this stuff correct when you test yourself on it. You feel confident, even when the material is complex. However, if you dip in here and make any mistakes in recall at all, the card must be moved into box 2.
- » **Box 4.** You begin with only a small number of cards here. This is the material you consider easy. You always get it right, so you only need to spend 10% of your time checking stuff in this box. However, and this is key, nothing ever leaves this box because you know it so well. No matter how confident you feel, you still check it every now and again.

If you practise your recall in this way, you will find you won't neglect information. You won't get caught by the 'familiarity trap' – the feeling that you know something so well you never need to test yourself on it. Plus, you keep your focus where it needs to be: on the tough stuff you keep forgetting. Use the grid below to plan what information might belong in each box:

Box 1: 40% of your time	Possible topics:
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Box 2: 30% of your time	Possible topics:
Box 3: 20% of your time	Possible topics:
Box 4: 10% of your time	Possible topics:

Final Thoughts

If there's one quality we've seen that differentiates top performing students from others, it's the courage and determination to spend time focusing on weaknesses. This activity helps you isolate where your attention needs to be. It may be uncomfortable, but it will make a huge difference to your levels of performance!