
make it stick - The Science of Successful Learning

A notebook and summary

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1 Learning Is Misunderstood

- Learning is deeper and more durable when it's effortful.
- *Rereading text* and *massed practice* of a skill or new knowledge among the least productive study strategies.
- *Retrieval practice* - recalling facts or concepts or events from memory (eg testing) - is a more effective learning strategy than review by rereading. Flashcards are a simple example.
- A single, simple quiz after reading a text or hearing a lecture produces better learning and remembering than rereading the text or reviewing lecture notes.
- Periodic practice arrests forgetting, strengthens retrieval routes, and is essential for hanging onto the knowledge you want to gain.
- When you space out practice at a task and get a little rusty between sessions, or you interleave the practice of two or more subjects, retrieval is harder and feels less productive, but the effort produces longer lasting learning and enables more versatile application of it in later settings.
- Trying to solve a problem *before being taught the solution* leads to better learning, even when errors are made in the attempt.
- Learning styles, for example an auditory or visual learners, are not supported by the empirical research.
- When you're adept at extracting the underlying principles or "rules" that differentiate types of problems, you're more successful at picking the right solutions in unfamiliar situations.
 - This skill is better acquired through interleaved and varied practice than massed practice.
- In virtually all areas of learning, you build better mastery when you use testing as a tool to identify and bring up your areas of weakness.
- Elaboration is the process of giving new material meaning by expressing it in your own words and connecting it with what you already know. The more you can explain about the way your new learning relates to your prior knowledge, the stronger your grasp of the new learning will be, and the more connections you create that will help you remember it later.
 - Warm air can hold more moisture than cold air; to know that this is true in your own experience, you can think of the drip of water from the back of an air conditioner
- Learning is stronger when it matters, when the abstract is made concrete and personal.
 - Pilot that trains how to react to an engine failure.
- It makes sense to reread a text once if there's been a meaningful lapse of time since the first reading, but doing multiple readings in close succession is a timeconsuming study strategy that yields negligible benefits.
- Mastering the lecture of the text is not the same as mastering the ideas behind them. However, repeated reading provides the illusion of mastery of the underlying ideas.

- Questions to ask oneself:
 - Could you look at a concept define it, and use it in a paragraph?
 - While you were reading, have you thought of converting the main points of the text into a series of questions and then later tried to answer them while you were studying?
 - Have you at least rephrased the main ideas in your own words as you read?
 - Have you tried to relate them to what you already knew?
 - Have you looked for examples outside the text?
- Most people fall victim to 2 liabilities:
 - a failure to know the areas where their learning is weak
 - a preference for study methods that create a false sense of mastery
- Mastery requires both the possession of ready knowledge (memorized facts) and the conceptual understanding of how to use it.
- One of the best habits a learner can instill in oneself is regular selfquizzing to recalibrate one's understanding of what one does and does not know.

2 To Learn, Retrieve

- Reflection can involve several cognitive activities that lead to stronger learning: retrieving knowledge and earlier training from memory, connecting these to new experiences, and visualizing and mentally rehearsing what you might do differently next time.
- Retrieval makes learning stick far better than reexposure to the original material does.
- To be most effective, retrieval must be repeated again and again, in spaced out sessions so that the recall, rather than becoming a mindless recitation, requires some cognitive effort.
- Students who take practice tests have a better grasp of their progress, spot gaps and misconceptions. Giving students corrective feedback after tests keeps them from incorrectly retaining material they have misunderstood and produces better learning of the correct answers.

3 Mix Up Your Practice

- The mixing of problem types, which boosted final test performance by a remarkable 215 percent, actually impeded performance during initial learning.
- Placing too much emphasis on variety runs the risk of underemphasizing repeated retrieval practice on the basics.
- Daily reflection, as a form of spaced retrieval practice, is probably just as critical in the real world as quizzing and testing is in school.

- What happened?
 - What did I do?
 - How did it work out?
 - enhanced with elaboration (What would I do differently next time?).
- Scientists call the heightened performance during the acquisition phase of a skill “momentary strength” and distinguish it from “underlying habit strength.” The very techniques that build habit strength, like spacing, interleaving, and variation, slow visible acquisition and fail to deliver the improvement during practice that helps to motivate and reinforce our efforts.
- The simple act of spacing out study and practice in installments and allowing time to elapse between them makes both the learning and the memory stronger, in effect building habit strength.
 - The interval should be big enough so that practice doesn’t become a mindless repetition.
 - At a minimum, enough time so that a little forgetting has set in.
 - Sleep seems to play a large role in memory consolidation, so practice with at least a day in between sessions is good.
- Something as simple as a deck of flashcards can provide an example of spacing.
- The better your mastery, the less frequent the practice, but if it’s important to retain, it will never disappear completely from your practices.
 - Beware of the familiarity trap: the feeling that you know something and no longer need to practice it.
- Interleaving two or more subjects during practice also provides a form of spacing.
 - Interleaving can also help you develop your ability to discriminate later between different kinds of problems and select the right tool from your growing toolkit of solutions.
 - In interleaving, you don’t move from a complete practice set of one topic to go to another. You switch before each practice is complete.
- Something the researchers call “blocked practice” is easily mistaken for varied practice. It would be like always practicing flashcards in the same order. You need to shuffle your flashcards.

4 Embrace Difficulties

- Shortterm impediments that make for stronger learning have come to be called *desirable difficulties*.
- How readily you can recall knowledge from your internal archives is determined by context, by recent use, and by the number and vividness of cues that you have linked to the knowledge and can call on to help bring it forth.

- It is a critical point that as you learn new things, you don't lose from long-term memory most of what you have learned well in life; rather, through disuse or the reassignment of cues, you forget it in the sense that you're unable to call it up easily.
 - Context can unleash memories, as when the right key works to open an old lock.
- The easier knowledge or a skill is for you to retrieve, the less your retrieval practice will benefit your retention of it.
- In all of these examples, the change from normal presentation introduces a difficulty - disruption of fluency - that makes the learner work harder to construct an interpretation that makes sense. The added effort increases comprehension and learning.
- In testing, being required to supply an answer rather than select from multiple choice options often provides stronger learning benefits. Having to write a short essay makes them stronger still.
- "write to learn": students reflect on a recent class topic in a brief writing assignment, where they may express the main ideas in their own words and relate them to other concepts covered in class, or perhaps outside class.
- Not all difficulties in learning are desirable ones. Anxiety while taking a test seems to represent an undesirable difficulty.
 - Intuitively it makes sense that difficulties that don't strengthen the skills you will need, or the kinds of challenges you are likely to encounter in the real-world application of your learning, are not desirable

4.1 How Learning Occurs

Learning is at least a three-step process: initial **encoding** of information is held in short-term working memory before being consolidated into a cohesive representation of knowledge in long-term memory. **Consolidation** reorganizes and stabilizes memory traces, gives them meaning, and makes connections to past experiences and to other knowledge already stored in long-term memory. **Retrieval** updates learning and enables you to apply it when you need it.

5 Avoid Illusions of Knowing

- System 1 is automatic and deeply influential, but it is susceptible to illusion, and you depend on System 2 to help you manage yourself: by checking your impulses, planning ahead, identifying choices, thinking through their implications, and staying in charge of your actions.
- Imagination inflation refers to the tendency of people who, when asked to imagine an event vividly, will sometimes begin to believe, when asked about it later, that the event actually occurred

- Another type of memory illusion is one caused by suggestion, which may arise simply in the way a question is asked.
- Interference from other events can distort memory.
- Accounts that sound familiar can create the feeling of knowing and be mistaken for true.
 - Even a big lie told repeatedly can come to be accepted as truth.
- Confidence in a memory is not a reliable indication of its accuracy.
 - Respondents' most emotional memories of their personal details at the time they learned of the attacks are also those of which they are most confident and, paradoxically, the ones that have most changed over the years relative to other memories about 9/11.
- The better you know something, the more difficult it becomes to teach it.
 - As you get more expert in complex areas, your models in those areas grow more complex, and the component steps that compose them fade into the background of memory (the curse of knowledge).
- The failure to recognize when your solution doesn't fit the problem is another form of faulty self-observation that can lead you into trouble.
- Incompetent people lack the skills to improve because they are unable to distinguish between incompetence and competence.
- The answer to illusion and misjudgment is to replace subjective experience as the basis for decisions with a set of objective gauges outside ourselves, so that our judgment squares with the real world around us.
- Don't make the mistake of dropping material from your testing regime once you've gotten it correct a couple of times.
- Pay attention to the cues you're using to judge what you have learned.
 - Ease of retrieval after a delay, however, is a good indicator of learning.
 - How ably you can explain a text is an excellent cue for judging comprehension.
- In many fields, the practice of peer review serves as an external gauge, providing feedback on one's performance.

6 Get Beyond Learning Styles