



MEMORY WORKS

Strategies for Retaining Course Information

Between keeping track of our schedules, meetings, assignments, and dozens of daily tasks, our short-term memories are often taxed. So when we try to cram for exams, we overload our short-term memory and find ourselves "blinking out" when the test is on the desk in front of us.

To improve not only our performance on assessments -- but our overall learning -- we need to tap into our long-term memories. Creating memories that stick is a multi-faceted process that includes paying attention to the content, taking an interest in it and seeing its value, making connections between what you know and the new information, and finally, practicing what you know. You engaged in this process when you learned how to tie your shoes, drive a car, and navigate Westminster campus life.

But learning how to do those things took time -- and so does learning course content in this way! So how can you commit your latest biology or sociology chapter to your long-term memory? Try some of the follow strategies to improve your long-term memory!

The key to good learning IS time. Doing a little bit of studying each day for each class will allow you to create better long-term memories. Cramming just isn't worth it. You won't remember much of what you review during a late-night cram session. You're better off dividing the information into smaller chunks and studying them slow and steady over many days.

BE MINDFUL

Clear your mind before each study session by meditating or practicing mindfulness. Try apps like Headspace, Calm, or Omvana. You can also meditate prior to your exam.

CHANGE UP YOUR STUDY LOCATION

When you learn something new, your brain often connects that new information with the place in which you learned it. By reducing the context in which the information was encoded, it becomes easier for you to recall the information in a different context, like the exam room.

MIX UP THE CONTENT

Do not just focus on one topic or subject during a study session. By studying different topics, you are allowing your brain to make connections between various materials, which also strengthens neural connections that impact memory.

DEVELOP NEW NOTES

Engage with your notes from class. Rewrite them by hand and reorganize them in a different way, making connections between different sections in the chapter(s). Consider using graphic organizers, like timelines, charts, and tables to make sense of the information in a new format, instead of a basic outline or short sentences. Draw pictures and diagrams and practice them. These new tools will help you encode the information.

CREATE YOUR OWN TEST EXPERIENCE

Retrieval practice is one of the best tools available. Create a practice exam that will be similar to the one you will take, and try to emulate the experience of the test as much as possible (time constraints, no notes, etc.). The more you can practice taking the test, the more comfortable you will be when you finally take the test in class.