

IMPROVE YOUR LEARNING SKILLS

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Learning is a skill and it can be improved. Everyone has the opportunity to develop their memory and learning ability. Identifying your own learning style and the methods that work for you is key. The more you use your brain the better it will work.

Learning something new always takes commitment and self discipline as well as conscious practice. Your conception of what learning is and your motivation to study will determine your success. You have to want to solve a problem even if it is demanding. No learning methods or techniques will help if the motivation to study is missing. Obstacles to learning usually have to do with one's attitudes and conception of oneself as a learner and one's conception of learning, all of which have themselves been learnt.

You have to clarify for yourself why studying is worthwhile and what are you aiming for in your studies. Learning only happens as a direct result of your own efforts.

Connect what you are trying to learn to knowledge you already have.

Processing information and learning something new go hand in hand. New information will remain in your memory if it is in some way significant to you. Learning gets easier the more knowledge you have to which new information can be connected.

You can develop your learning skills through active and critical thinking, questioning assumptions, and applying knowledge practically. How you organise new information is crucial to learning.

Tips for learning

1. Make notes

The purpose of taking notes is to clarify what you are learning and support your memory and the learning process. Making notes helps you to gain an overview of your what you are studying. Taking relevant notes at lectures or from a book will be an invaluable help when revising for exams.

- Take notes from what the lecturer is saying, not just from texts you are shown in presentations. Only write down what is important. Use exclamation marks to highlight something as important and question marks to show that you did not quite understand something.
- Go ahead and ask the lecturer if something is not clear to you. You are probably not the only one who would like the point in question to be explained again.
- After a lecture, organise the information you have just received. Before taking down notes, think about what you already know about the subject being taught. If you do not understand something, read as far back into your notes as you need until you understand again.

You can also use this technique when studying from a book.

Ways to take notes or fill in the gaps they leave including the following:

Summary

Writing a summary or outlining the central argument of the text in your own words helps you to mentally organise information.

- Write about the subject as briefly as possible without looking at the book or your notes and imagine that you are writing it for someone who is not familiar with the subject. You may benefit from using a concept map.
- Consider your personal experiences or opinions relating to the subject and write them down.

Concept map

- A concept map may help you to organise information as it illustrates the relationship between things. The purpose of a concept map is to bring together everything you have learnt by arranging the main ideas into themes.

2. Study with others

Take the plunge and discuss the subject with other students. Working through questions and ideas together is both pleasant and useful from the perspective of learning.

Examples of group study exercises:

- Come up with questions about the subject and ask the group for answers. Each person in the group comes up with questions and gets answers from the rest of the group.
- Read the text you have been assigned together with your study buddy. Once you have finished, put your book and papers away. One person gives a summary in his/her own words and the other person fills in the gaps. Continue reading the text and taking turns at intervals to summarise and fill in the gaps.
- Teach what you have learnt to someone not familiar with the subject area. Teaching something to someone else helps you to see not only how much you already know but also what your limitations and problem areas are.

3. Keep a learning journal

The purpose of a learning journal is to help you organise your thoughts and observe your own progress. It deepens and enriches the learning process and works as a tool for evaluating your learning.

- Use the journal to write down your own insights, perceptions and questions as well as things you need to find out or problems you need to solve. Write regularly. A journal will be especially useful for seminar and thesis work, where you will have to organise information that you have collected yourself.

4. Getting acquainted with books and other study materials.

Applying your own reading technique can help you get the most out of books and other reading materials.

1. Skim through the text: have a look at the introduction, the table of contents, the headings and the summary. The table of contents and headings will help you get an idea of the scope of what you have to learn. The summary gives a short overview of the contents of the book.
2. Browse the book or other reading material and make notes of the questions that spring to mind. Doing this will show you what you think the text is telling you.
3. Then read the book slowly and thoroughly. Examine the graphs and figures. Underline keywords and central points as it will help you review and summarise.
4. Think about how you can apply the information you are learning from the book/other material and also how you can use it in relation to what you have learnt previously.
5. Make notes: organise what you have read e.g. into themes, or write down the main ideas or make a concept map showing the relationships between different aspects of what you are learning.
6. Re-focus on the core content of the text. Close the book after finishing a chapter or other type of section and try to remember what you have read. Try memorising vocabulary and other lists by using acronyms, e.g. Scan, Absorb, Reflect, Review = SARR
7. Review and reflect on your reading by repeating the last step (6) and fill in the gaps in your notes.
8. Discuss the topic explored in the book with someone else if possible.

You can learn the contents of a book or other study material by heart e.g. like this:

1. Divide the contents of the book into five main areas. Give these main areas labels or titles.
2. Divide each main area into five sub-areas, again labelling them with keywords.
3. Sub-divide these areas into five more areas. Continue dividing the material into smaller and smaller units until you reach the level of details.

5. Develop your memory using memory techniques

There are a variety of memory techniques that can make remembering and learning easier.

1. Try associating the things you have to remember with landmarks on a familiar route. E.g. glucose is on the book shelf, insulin is on the window sill, adrenalin is in the kitchen cupboard etc.
2. Create and use existing acronyms, e.g. MMSB (Madrid, Malaga, Seville, Barcelona).
3. Remembering a number sequence is easier if you split the sequence up into shorter sequences each of which has an interesting or meaningful association. E.g. 23485507: 23 was the age when I moved away from home, 48 is my neighbour's door number, 55 is my dad's birth year, 07 is my sister's birth month. Or try setting the numbers to a familiar song or jingle.
4. Repeat what you need to learn out loud. This will strengthen your memory.

6. Identify your learning style

Think back to a satisfying and pleasant work or study experience where you performed well. Think about how you went about working, the type of work process that led to this successful learning outcome. Consider the following:

1. Where were you? Was it warm or cool? Was it brightly or dimly lit? Were you listening to music? What kind of music? Were there other sounds in the background?
2. What time of day were you working/studying? Morning, afternoon or evening?
3. Were you moving around as you worked? Or were you sitting still? Were you eating or drinking anything? If so, what? How much? Did you take breaks? How often? How long were the breaks? What did you do in the breaks?
4. Were you studying/working alone, with another person or in a group? Who were you working with? Were you given any guidance or advice? What kind of guidance were you given? What kind of advice were you given? Did this guidance or advice help you? How?
5. What frame of mind were you in and what was your central focus before, during and after the study/work session? Were you excited? What kept you going?

TAKE CARE OF YOUR BRAIN

1. Get enough sleep.

A good night's sleep supports the functions of the brain and memory. The things you have learnt will not be retained in the memory without sufficient sleep. Insufficient sleep also weakens your concentration and increases restlessness.

Get a good night's sleep before your exam instead of reviewing one last time late into the night. Also remember that there is a limit to how long your brain can properly function without a break.

2. Protect your brain

Support your brain with a healthy life style. Physical blows to the head, smoking, alcohol, drugs and medication can cause damage to the brain.

3. Nourish your brain

Eat and drink enough, but not too much. Eating small, frequent meals will keep your blood sugar levels even which is conducive to effective studying.

Keeping your body well hydrated is essential to concentration and learning, so remember to drink enough water.

Including 'good fats' in your diet keeps the tiny blood vessels in the brain in good shape. Healthy, unsaturated fatty acids boost concentration, memory and the ability to learn new things. They keep the membranes of the brain cells fluid, which optimises brain function. In contrast, a diet that does not contain enough fat may weaken brain function. Fats containing unsaturated fatty acids are soft or fluid in their structure.

4. Support your brain by exercising

Exercise has a positive effect on learning. Exercise improves concentration, has a relaxing effect and reduces stress. Being physically active improves the oxygen supply to the brain and its resistance to stress. So get some exercise every day!

Weak circulation in the brain, on the other hand, weakens the memory and concentration, increasing tiredness and exhaustion.

'The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice' (Proverbs 12:15).

'A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher' (Luke 6:40).