

How To Retain What You Learn

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You attend a seminar, read a book, talk to an expert, or conduct some research in order to expand your knowledge. You learn something new about a topic you wanted to know more about. Yet after a week or two, what often happens? You forget much of what you learned.

Studies show that if you do nothing further with your newly acquired knowledge, you only retain a fraction of what you read, saw, or heard, even after just a few hours. The more time that passes, the more your retention slides. While your need to learn was strong enough that you invested your time and money into the knowledge acquisition, the end result was a much reduced return on your investment.

The good news is that knowledge retention rates can be significantly improved with just a little extra effort. If you apply your new knowledge, especially within the first few hours of acquisition, your retention dramatically increases. You move your newly formed knowledge from your short-term memory to your long-term memory resulting in retention levels as high as ninety-percent of what you initially learned.

Here are eight principles to employ in increasing your memory retention and the return on your learning investment:

1. **Invest** - While investing more time, money, or effort into your learning doesn't always have a commensurate impact on the value you receive, it has an impact on your mindset. The more you invest in or sacrifice for something, the more you value it. Free advice usually seems to be worth about what you paid for it. Paying for advice on the other hand makes it more valuable. Start out with a retention mindset by making an investment of your time, money, and effort into your knowledge acquisition. If you think you can't afford to invest, consider what past Harvard University President Derek Bok said, "If you think education is expensive, try ignorance."
2. **Take notes** - The process of writing or typing what you hear, see, or read reinforces it in your mind. It helps make an imprint in your memory. I keep a notepad with me at all times and make notes while reading, listening to books on audio, in meetings, and when attending seminars. I then transfer my notes to my computer for future reference. The process of taking notes and keying them into my computer is a double reinforcement. Create a habit of taking notes, particularly of the key points you want to retain.
3. **Synthesize your notes into a framework** – Associating your learning with some type of structure helps take the load off your short term memory. It creates order and relatedness that facilitates memorization and recall. Distill your learning into a model, diagram, flowchart, cluster, picture, rhyme, acrostic or acronym. For example, the acronym INFROAPT might help you recall these eight principles – ninvest, notes, frameworks, reflect, others, application, practice, and teach. Analogies and metaphors are also powerful in creating association. Display your frameworks on your desk or put them in your notebook where you will frequently see and reinforce them.
4. **Reflect** – Contemplate on what you learn. Ask "why is this important" and "what does it really mean". Seek to interpret and gain deeper understanding. Grasp a greater meaning by thinking about the implications your learning has on your individual circumstances. Reflect on your reactions and feelings to your new found knowledge. It's not the information or the experience that most matters, but how you interpret it. Diagnose, interpret, reflect, and internalize your learning.
5. **Discuss with others** – Talk about what you learned with others. Discussion and debate refines your knowledge. It creates clarity and understanding. Talk with others who listen well and will probe into your points. Value people who challenge you when they don't understand or when they disagree. Form a book club to facilitate group reading and idea sharing.
6. **Apply your learning** – Applying what you learn moves it from the conceptual to the practical. It creates experience and provides context. Be application ready by planning post-learning activities that enable you to immediately put your learning into application. If for example you plan to attend a week long leadership program,



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plan in advance to have the time and opportunity to put your learning into practice the following week when you return.

7. **Practice** – Expand your application beyond just those situations where you are putting your knowledge into productive use. Look for opportunities to practice. Seek out special assignments that allow you to work on your emerging skills. Refine your skills in noncritical environments that are safe to make mistakes. Make repeated practice part of your routine until your new skill is part of your unconscious competence.
8. **Teach** - Teaching is the best way to building and retaining knowledge. Studies show that while you may only retain 10 percent of what you read or hear, you retain 90 percent of what you teach. Teaching and training involves investment, note taking, organizing, discussing, reflecting, sharing, applying, and practicing. It utilizes all the elements of improving retention. It is impossible to teach something well without deepening your own learning and retention. If classroom style teaching isn't an option for you, teach through writing articles. Or distribute your teaching through video. Find people that could benefit from your coaching or mentoring. If you really want to enhance your learning - teach, coach, or train others.

Learning comes through knowledge acquisition, reinforcement, and application. Continuously acquire, reinforce, and apply your learning. It will keep you current, make you wise, and increase the value you offer your organization.

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