

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 find 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 ten 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 guarantee 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. 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 strengthens the imprint made in your memory. I take notes while reading, listening to audiobooks, participating in meetings, and attending seminars. I then transfer my notes to my computer for future reference. This process provides double reinforcement in my mind as well as a written record for future reference. Create a habit of taking notes, particularly of the key points you want to remember.
- 3. Focus:** Give full attention to your learning. Your attention is a finite resource. The more of it you give to other areas, the less is available for your learning. Minimize your distractions and fully engage in your learning experience. Make learning easy to focus on by making it as fun, entertaining, and engaging as possible.
- 4. 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 mental order and relatedness that facilitates memorization and recall. It creates a coordinate system that you anchor key points to. Distill your learning into a model, diagram, flowchart, cluster, picture, rhyme, acrostic, or acronym. Display your frameworks on your desk, or put them in your reference material, where you will frequently see and reinforce them.
- 5. Reflect:** Contemplate on what you learn. Ask, "Why is this important?", "What does it really mean?", or "How does this compare to what I knew before?" Seek to interpret and gain deeper understanding. Grasp a greater meaning by thinking about the implications your learning has on your



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individual circumstances. It's not the information or the experience that matters most, but how you interpret it. Diagnose, interpret, reflect, and internalize your learning.

6. Discuss with Others: Talk about what you learned with others. Discussion and debate refines your knowledge. It confirms how much you really know and what you need to go back to review. It creates clarity and better understanding. Talk with others who listen well and will probe into your points. Form a book club to facilitate group reading and idea sharing.

7. Test Yourself: Research on education finds that testing enhances learning twice as much as studying does. Testing engages your cognitive processing capabilities as well as your memory capabilities. Take advantage of any tests or assessments that are available. If none are available, create your own. Rate the advantages of your content compared to the disadvantages or how your new perspectives compare to other's perspectives.

8. 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 preplanning post-learning activities that enable you to immediately put your learning into application as soon as your reading, coaching, or seminar is finished. If for example you plan to attend a leadership program, plan in advance to have the time and opportunity to put your learning into practice the day when you return.

9. Practice: Expand your application beyond just those situations where you are putting your knowledge into productive use. Look for opportunities to practice. Like an athlete who constantly practices, refine your understanding and skills in environments in which it is safe to make mistakes. Make repeated practice part of your routine until your new skill is part of your unconscious competence.

10. Teach: Teaching is the best way to build and retain knowledge. Studies find that while you may only retain 10 percent of what you read or hear, you retain 90 percent of what you teach. Teaching 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, distribute your teaching through video, or become a coach. To really 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.

Mike Hawkins is the award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others*, author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on leading as a coach, and president of Alpine Link Corporation, a boutique consulting firm specializing in helping individuals and organizations reach their peak potential.

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