

# 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 something, or the more you 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 seem more valuable. Start out with a retention mindset by making the appropriate level of investment of your time, money, and effort into your knowledge acquisition.
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 CD, in meetings, and when attending seminars. I then transfer my notes to my computer for quick future reference. The process of taking notes and then keying them is like a double reinforcement. Take notes of the key points you want to retain.
3. **Synthesize your notes into a framework** – Consolidating your learning into some type of structure helps take the load off your short term memory. It creates order and association that facilitates memorization and recall. Distil 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 – Invest, notes, frameworks, reflect, others, application, practice, and teach. Analogies and metaphors are also powerful in creating association. Display your frameworks where you will frequently see them.
4. **Reflect** – Contemplate what you have learned. Ask “why” it's important. Ask “what does it really mean”. Seek to interpret and understand. Grasp a deeper meaning and its unique implications. 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.
5. **Discuss with others** – Talk about what you learned with others. Discussion and debate reinforces learning. It creates clarity and understanding. Talk with others that listen well, who will probe into your points, and will challenge you when they don't understand or when they disagree.
6. **Apply your learning** – Applying what you learn moves it from the conceptual to the practical. It creates experience. It provides context. Be application ready and plan post-learning activities that enable you to immediately put your learning into application.



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7. **Practice** – Expand your application beyond just those situations where you are putting your knowledge into productive use. Look for opportunities to practice. Find ways to refine your skills in 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** - Teach what you learn to someone else. Teaching and training involves investment, writing (or typing), 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. Teaching is the best solution to building and retaining knowledge. If you really want to enhance your learning - teach, coach, or train others.

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