Mrs Dolby's Memory Magic

Karen Dolby

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Mrs Dolby's MEMORY MAGIC

A Compendium of Tools, Tips and Exercises to Help You Remember Everything

Karen Dolby



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INTRODUCTION

'Study without desire spoils the memory, and it retains nothing that it takes in.'

Leonardo Da Vinci

How often have you heard the complaints 'I've got a terrible memory,' 'My brain's like a sieve,' or 'I simply forget everything'? At some point in our busy lives, most of us wish we had a better memory. But it's not that you have a bad memory, it's simply that you are not using it efficiently.

From the moment we are born, and perhaps even before that, our brain takes in information which it processes, encodes and then stores away. When people complain they have a bad memory what they are really saying is that they have trouble retrieving their memories – all the facts and information are safely locked in the brain, the problem is access. It's easy to upgrade the memory on a computer – just find a compatible system. What most people don't realise is that it's just as simple to do the same for your brain. All it takes is a little know-how and training.

Winston Churchill famously made a point of never memorising his speeches verbatim after one disastrous occasion

when his mind went completely blank. What he did instead was to memorise what he wanted to say, the key points, along with a few suitably elegant, clever or stirring phrases. Daniel Tammet, who won worldwide acclaim for his memoir of life with autistic savant syndrome, believes that the differences between savant and non-savant minds are exaggerated and that his astonishing feats of memory are the result of complex associative ways of thinking which we can all aspire to.

Many of the greatest actors, linguists and speech-makers don't have naturally brilliant memories: what they do have at their fingertips is a range of memory systems and mnemonic tools to help them. You simply need to find the techniques and tricks that work for you.

Mnemonics help your memory function more efficiently by using a number of different devices including rhymes, sentences, diagrams, acronyms and rules to easily retrieve names, dates, lists, facts and figures. The word comes from the Greek *mneme* meaning memory and *mnemon* meaning mindful, and Mnemosyne was the ancient Greek goddess of memory, mother of the Muses.

Mnemonics work because they force your mind to really pay attention to what you're learning. So often we instantly forget someone's name when first introduced simply because we didn't listen properly, our mind already thinking of our next comment. Mnemonics also help to organise the information, which again makes it easier to retrieve later. Research shows that mental capacity to remember can be vastly increased by simply breaking numbers or letters into groups. This

breakdown is usually called chunking and works particularly well if the chunks can be made memorable. The ideal length for chunking letters and numbers is three, which explains the way in which most telephone numbers are broken up.

Many mnemonics are so much a part of everyday use we often don't realise we are using a memory device. For instance 'Spring forward, fall back' reminds us the clocks go forward one hour in spring and back in autumn, or the rhyme we all learn in school to remember the number of days in each month:

30 days hath September,
April, June and November,
All the rest have 31,
Except February alone,
Which has 28 days clear,
And 29 in each leap year.

It's interesting that most people have no difficulty reciting this absolutely correctly as other 31-day months could easily be substituted for the four 30-day months and the rhyme would still work.

In this book I will be reminding you of all the mnemonics you've ever learned and possibly forgotten, along with plenty of new ones. There are also clear explanations of the different memory systems used by memory masters. I have tried to be as comprehensive and wide-ranging as possible but the topics covered are a subjective list. They are all areas that I remember from childhood and others that have interested me

since. Sometimes several mnemonics are suggested for the same thing. This is because different ideas appeal to different people and for a mnemonic to work well it has to mean something: whether it is funny or just appeals, there needs to be a connection, it has to spark an image and emotional response in order to be memorable.

One of the most important things I have learned while researching this book is that for most people there is no such thing as a good or bad memory. Putting aside all the clever memory systems and thousands of punchy mnemonics, the key is really effort and interest. People with so-called 'good' memories usually work at it, they practise and take time to learn and improve. But while there are no instant short cuts, this does mean that a better memory is a real possibility for everyone.

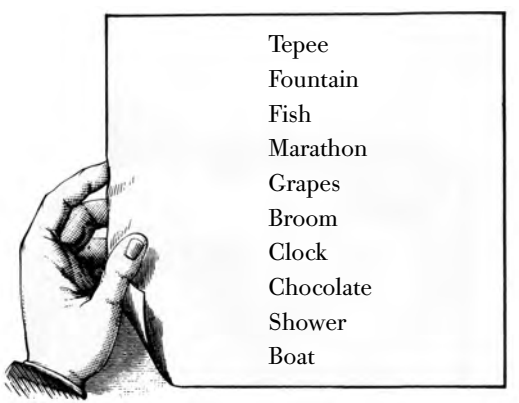
And there are definite benefits. There's a growing body of evidence suggesting that mental training in a subject that interests you improves not only memory but cognitive functioning. To quote the director of the Memory Clinic at Johns Hopkins, Barry Gordon, 'If you want to improve your mental functioning, pick something you are interested in and work at it.'

'Nothing fixes a thing so intensely in the memory as the wish to forget it.'

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

THE LINK AND STORY METHOD – REMEMBERING A SIMPLE LIST

The Link method is probably one of the most basic mnemonic techniques. It is easy to understand and worth mastering before moving on to some of the other memory techniques. At its most simple it works by linking words together using images but before I explain it fully take a moment to test yourself. Study the following list of random words – really take the time to try to remember them, then turn the book over and write down the words in order.



How far did you get? And if asked to write the same list backwards or in ten minutes' time how many words would you remember then? But if you assign each word an image and then link it to the next you will find with a little practice you can do much better.

The key to mastering this technique is to make each image as vivid and unusual as possible. Each should interact or link with the next, it won't work simply to imagine one standing beside the next. For instance, the fountain should actually be erupting from the top of the tepee, which instead of fabric could be carved from stone with strange carvings on the sides.

The important thing is that the image should mean something to you. It could be personal or just something that amuses or even disgusts you. Laughter is always helpful for keeping something in mind and likewise repellent ideas are hard to forget.

So bearing all this in mind, the pictures for the list could go something like this:

A carved stone Tepee erupts into a Fountain that is flowing with giant Fish with gnashing teeth. When they hit the ground the Fish grow legs and run a Marathon, snapping at the heels of the other runners. The other runners appear to be Grapes, purple, bloated and overripe, oozing pus-like juice. A giant cartoon Broom appears from the sky and sweeps the Grapes away. The Broom has a long handle and swings rhythmically to and fro as it is the pendulum of a huge sun Clock. The Clock darkens as it is made of Chocolate melting in the heat, the numbers and hands lengthening and distorting as it begins to drip. The Chocolate drips are now gushing from a Shower, which is attached to a bathtub Boat bobbing up and down; inside a rower bails frantically as chocolate cascades from the Shower filling his bath Boat.

Read this carefully, picturing each cameo as you go, then turn the book over and try writing out the list again. Let each image lead you effortlessly on to the next. It's surprising how much easier it is to remember everything.

This was only a very short list, but try this technique next time you go shopping. By linking each item on your list with an entertaining image, you'll find yourself becoming ever more ingenious and you can develop the Link method further by weaving a story around your pictures. Be creative and let your imagination run wild and don't be afraid to add sound effects or vibrant colours if these work well for you.

The Link method is not only useful for remembering lists, you can also use it to remind yourself to do something. For instance if you promised to ring a friend before supper, imagine their face on the cooker smiling up at you, mouthing the words 'Call me', or picture them as the wooden spoon you use to stir your soup.

Even speeches can be learned by representing each of the points you need to make by clear images, vividly linked together. Once you are practised in the technique, you will be able to do away with notes altogether and appear far more relaxed and confident. In the same way you can learn poems or your part in a play or apply the method to help with revision for exams recalling events, theories or case studies.

WHERE MEMORIES ARE STORED IN THE BRAIN

The hippocampus is one of the main parts of the brain involved in the forming, sorting and storing of memories. Not only does the hippocampus store memories but it also connects them with other related memories giving meaning and context.

The hippocampus is located in the medial temporal lobe of the brain. Early scientists likened the shape to a ram's horn or seahorse and the sixteenth-century anatomist Julius Caesar Arazi gave the structure its Greek name meaning 'sea horse'. Together with the adjacent amygdala, the hippocampus forms the central axis of the limbic system, the emotion system of the brain, in charge of the transfer of information into memory.

LANGUAGE

'Memory feeds imagination.'
Amy Tan



The first mnemonics I ever learned are all connected with learning to read and write, and I suspect I am not unusual in this. In fact so ingrained in my memory are these simple rhymes, chants and catchphrases that I don't even remember being taught them. They simply spring to mind automatically, particularly for spellings.

SPELLING BEE

One of the many peculiarities of the English language is the rules on spelling which always apply, except when they don't. There are several rhyming phrases taught to schoolchildren from time immemorial to help them recall certain of these rules.

Perhaps the most common is:

'I' before 'E' except after 'C'.

Although sadly this rule does not always apply, which has led to:

'I' before 'E' except after 'C'
Though 'weird' is just 'weird'.

(And so incidentally are Budweiser, feisty, forfeit, heifer,

height, heirloom, kaleidoscope, leisure, seismic, seize and weir, to list but a few.)

The other main exceptions to the rule are words where 'EI' is pronounced as 'A', for instance, abseil, reign and feign, which have prompted this version:

'I' before 'E' except after 'C'
Or when sounded like 'A' as in neighbour and weigh.

CATCHPHRASES/WORDPLAY

Clever or rhythmic phrases can also help with spelling:

To spell **cemetery** with three e's, remember:
She cried, 'E . . . e . . . e!' as she ran past the cemetery.

Friend or freind?
You always need friends to the end.

Argument or arguement?
Argue lost an 'e' in an argument.

To recall the number of 'Cs' in **necessary** and **success**:
Only one 'C' is necessary but you need two 'Cs' for success.

There are various chants that work for **Mississippi**:

- *Say to yourself, 'M-I-S, S-I-S, S-I-P, P-I' . Try it out loud; there is a natural rhythm which begins to make sense the more you say it.*
- *Or you may prefer 'Mrs M, Mrs I, Mrs S S I, Mrs S S I, Mrs P P I.'*

In a similar vein, Roald Dahl spelt out **difficulty** in *Matilda*:

'Mrs D, Mrs I, Mrs F F I, Mrs C, Mrs U, Mrs L T Y.'

To spell **separate**, use this story:

There was once a farmer named Sep and when his wife saw a rat she yelled, 'Sep, a rat! E!!!'

There are two options for **together**:

We went to get her.

Or you may prefer:

Remember if you get her you'll be together.

Ascertain

When you ascertain a fact, always be As Certain as you possibly can.

Bookkeeper

Triple compound: oo kk ee.

Potassium

Remember one tea but two sugars.

Slaughter (which always makes me smile)

Slaughter is simply Laughter with an S at the beginning.

Innocent

IN No CENTury is murder an innocent crime.

SPELLING ACRONYMS

Take the initial letter of each word in a memorable sentence to correctly spell words which people often find tricky.

Mnemonics

Mnemonics Now Erase Man's Oldest Nemesis: Insufficient Cerebral Storage.

Necessary

Never Eat Crisps, Eat Salad Sandwiches And Remain Young.

Rhythm

Rhythm Has Your Two Hips Moving.

Because

Big Elephants Can Always Understand Small Elephants.

Arithmetic

A Rat In The House Might Eat The Ice Cream.

Wednesday

WE Do Not Eat Soup DAY, or more simply and certainly the way I always think of the word, just sound out Wed-nes-day.

Geography

General Eisenhower's Old Grandfather Rode A Pig Home Yesterday.

Ocean

Only Cats' Eyes Are Narrow.