Why we forget and how to improve memory

Memory is learning that persists--or learning is memory that has persisted. Intelligence rests on memory. Memory is a skill that can be improved up the limits of our potential.

On Why We Forget

- **Negative self-concept:** we think of ourselves a one who forgets things.

- **We have not learned the material well:** If something is to be retained, it must be correctly, clearly and forcibly impressed on the mind. We must give it the necessary attention and interest. Self-questioning and spaced or periodic reviews are essential.

- **Psychological reasons:** defensive forgetting. Generally, unpleasant things are remembered better than pleasant things (especially by pessimists) and both pleasant and unpleasant things are remembered better than materials we are indifferent to. Freudian theory holds that unpleasant things are often barred from consciousness. This is often referred to as active forgetting.

- **Disuse:** Memories fade away rapidly when not reviewed or used. The curve of forgetting is like a playground slide; we forget most immediately after we learn--in the first 24 hours; then it proceeds slowly. Motor learning seems to be better retained than verbal learning because a motor act as to be completely done to be done at all and so requires a higher degree of organization and competency which involves over learning.

- But "forgotten" material can be relearned in less time than is required for the original learning, even after many years' disuse. Even material that we do not relearn has undoubtedly been transformed into attitudes and values that form the foundations of our judgment. Education pays in spite of all the details that are forgotten.

Forgetting through disuse is normal and unavoidable. The mind is a marvelous instrument, but not a perfect instrument.

- **Interference:** Forgetting was formerly thought to be mainly the result of disuse, but now it is believed that disuse may be a less important factor than interference due to emotional problems, anxieties, presence of strangers (typing), intense concentration on something else and intellectual interference.
Intellectual interference or mental overcrowding can be minimized if we reflect on our reading and experiences, understand them, clarify them, associate, synthesize and organize them so they will not interfere with each other. Above all, we must avoid pushing, cramming and overcrowding our learning hours with unorganized material.

Forgetting caused by later learning is called retroactive inhibition. There is more interference between two similar subjects than between two unlike subjects. (Follow study of history with chemistry rather than English history or literature.)

**How to remember**

- **Attention:** Attend to the material intensely and wholly. Nothing else should enter your mind. Later, but not now.

- **Interest:** Ask questions to stimulate interest. Take part or sides in the problems issues and subjects you are reading about.

- **Intention:** Intend to remember as if your life depends on it.

- **Believe:** Trust and believe in your ability to remember. It will strengthen as you lay burdens on it and because you trust it.

- **Start right:** Concentrate on accurate input, not speed, at the beginning.

- **Select:** Concentrate on the most significant things, the essential and the important. You can't nor are expected to get 100%, so give your most intense attention to what is new, difficult and must remember.

- **Associate:** The more associations you can elicit for an idea, the more meaning I will have; the more meaningful the learning, the better one is able to remember it. People with good memories usually think over their experiences--real and vicarious--and systematically relate or associate them with previous learning.

- **Background:** Build background. The more background you have on a subject, the more interest you will have and the better you can form associations and discern relationships between the new and the old.

- **Organization:** A good memory is like a well-organized and well-maintained filing system. When a new fact presents itself and you decide to keep it, you will associate (file) it with its natural or logical
group. Bunch or associate ideas, facts or details consistent with the organization of the chapter.

- **Recitation**: Quiz or self-test yourself after every paragraph or natural break. Recite in your own words. Recitation not only serves memory but tests and promotes understanding.

- **Notes**: Take brief notes in your own words and arrange them in some meaningful order. Review them immediately after concluding the chapter.

- **Review**: Best time to review is immediately after initial learning has taken place. We forget most in the first 24-48 hours.

- **Spaced review**: Periodically review so that forgetting has less of a chance to take place. If the intervals between reviews are too widely spaced, more forgetting will occur.

- **Over learn**: When you are sure you know it, then one more time or two. If you can recall it instantly, you have over learned it. The more important and difficult the learning, the more you should over learn it and reinforce it with frequent reviews.

- **Study, then sleep**: Freshly learned material is better remembered by most people after a period of sleep or mental activity than after a period of daytime activity when interference takes place.