

# 50 TRICKS TO STUDY BETTER, FASTER AND WITH LESS STRESS



Studying isn't one task, it's many. You may need to memorize facts or just understand the basics. You might need a broad conceptual base, or just skills. To add even more variety, each person has different learning styles and preferences.

No one tool is the right one. But with fifty here, you're bound to find something that might help.

*\*\* Note: I realize this article is fairly long, so you may study into pieces\*\**

## 1) Visualization

The idea here is that you want to put abstract information into a picture. If you are struggling to understand a concept, visualization is a good technique to start with.

## 2) Rote Memorization

I'm not a huge fan of this method, but sometimes brute force is required. Rote memorization involves pounding information into your brain by repeating it continually. Works best when the information is arbitrary and fact-based, so applications won't go beyond simple memory.

## 3) Interlinking

Take two ideas and ask yourself how they relate. They can be ideas within a specific field (short roads) or between two completely different fields (freeways). By doing this you create a roadmap for traveling between information in your brain. I suggest reading my article on holistic learning if you want to find out more.

#### **4) Metaphor**

Take a more complex idea and compare it to a simpler one. When learning computer programming, I found it helpful to look at a function like a pencil sharpener. A parameter was a dull pencil, inside processes sharpened and returned a sharp pencil. Some metaphors have limited applications while others can be used for deep understanding.

#### **5) Diagram**

Draw it out. I appreciate using diagrams for sorting large pieces of information. When I used to write computer programs fairly heavily, my desktop would have pieces of paper with hastily scratched diagrams. I consider creating a diagram to be the upgraded version of visualization.

#### **6) Fluid Notes**

Most people take notes in a linear fashion, writing one statement after the next. Fluid notes may look less organized, but involves you drawing connections between ideas and writing in all directions across the page. Remember the point of note taking is to encourage learning, not just record what was said.

#### **7) Acronyms**

A bit more efficient than rote memorization is to use mnemonics. Acronyms simplifying memorized information are a great way to do this. When I used to lifeguard, I had memorized all sorts of acronyms for various procedures such as RED or ABC. Make up your own acronyms to store arbitrary info.

#### **8) Link Method**

This is an advanced memory technique. I've found it works surprisingly well, but it takes longer to set up and requires practice if you want to do it quickly. The basic idea is that you link two ideas together by forming a bizarre picture that involves both of them.

If I wanted to memorize a grocery list that had apples, milk and beans, my goal would be to create two images that linked apples to milk and milk to beans. The first could be a picture of a giant apple milking a cow. The second could be a milk container that poured baked beans.

#### **9) Peg Method**

A variation of the link method, this one helps you memorize numbers. Instead of linking two pictures together, you use a system of phonetics to remember all the digits. From that you create short words and sentences to encode numbers. This article isn't enough to fully explain

the technique, but a Google search should give more depth if you're interested.

### **10) Retracing**

Another technique that works well with holistic learning is retracing. Basically this involves you starting with one concept in your class. From that you find a relationship between that idea and another idea. You continue doing this path until you get back where you started or reach a dead end.

### **11) Zoom and Check**

Skim through any material you have to learn. Your goal isn't to learn the information but to notice what you don't already know. If more than one or two ideas pop out in a chapter, you should probably stop and go back.

### **12) Self-Test**

Give yourself a test. Testing is a good way to see if you know what you are doing, so try it out.

### **13) Anthropomorphize**

Sounds complicated but isn't. Anthropomorphizing is the process of taking non-human things and giving them human characteristics. Describing a rock as being lonely would be an example. You can use this tool by giving abstract ideas human qualities so they become easier to remember.

A great example was given by my psychology professor. He showed how signals are conducted along a neuron by describing it as people running down the hallway of a hotel, as doors opened and closed.

### **14) Visceralization**

Similar to visualization except you use all your senses. This one is harder to explain, but you can create a feeling, sound or sense that corresponds with an idea. I remembered how to do basic matrix determinants by linking the feeling of my hand moving through a box.

### **15) Leverage Previous Understandings**

What do you already know that could be useful? Make use of the information you already have. Many times the specifics between subjects are different, but founding principles are similar. Look for connections.

### **16) Gap Avoidance**

I've made use of this technique to pass tests I didn't study for. Although I always recommend actually learning information first, this can be a booster to help in a crisis. The basic idea of gap avoidance is that you become aware of what you don't know and collect everything that you do.

I once won an inter-province chemistry test where one question was to write an essay on soap. I know very little about soap, so my first step was to collect anything I knew that could be remotely related to soap. Next I made note of what I did not know, so I could consciously avoid displaying my ignorance when writing the essay.

I'd like to point out that this technique isn't magical. If you don't know something, you'll still probably fail. But it can help if you are missing pieces of information and can't go back to study.

### **17) Brainstorming**

Get a couple people in a room and think it out. I find one or two other people to be ideal, although some experts recommend up to six.

### **18) Mindstorming**

Consider this individual brainstorming. Write down all the ideas, thoughts and information you can think of. A brain dump to get it all out on paper.

### **19) Relationship Diagrams**

Diagrams that focus on the relationship between information are a great tool. Instead of just displaying information, show how it links together. Combined with fluid note taking, this is a great way to piece all the information together.

### **20) Give it a Hand**

Use your fingers and thumbs as a memory tool. Link different words or names to specific fingers and memorize which go where. There are limits to this application, but it can be useful if a good acronym doesn't come immediately.

### **21) Imaginary Room Method**

A reader sent me this one and it builds on the link technique. Imagine a room you are familiar with. Now visualize all the major objects in this room. The next step is to individually link specific information or details to each object in your room.

Another variation on this technique uses your body instead of a room. I suppose it depends on whether you are more visual or visceral in your learning style.

### **22) Make it Interesting**

Sounds obvious, doesn't it? You'll remember information you find more satisfying to know. Find ways you can use the information beyond just getting a grade and it will become more real to you.

### **23) Teach It**

Find someone and explain it to them. Nothing forces you to learn better than teaching.

### **24) The Kindergarten Rule**

Similar to teaching, the kindergarten rule proclaims that you should be able to explain your subject to a six year old. While this isn't going to work for your advanced level Mathematics, Physics or Chemistry or biology courses, the idea is that you should dumb down the information so it becomes obvious.

### **25) Story**

Another memorizing technique, this one links information together by placing it in a sequence of a story. You could list all the bones in your hand by creating a story in which you meet each of them in sequence.

### **26) Chunking**

Learn for fifteen minutes at a time. Take frequent breaks and let your mind absorb what was learned. I never do creative or learning work for more than an hour or two without a change in pace.

### **27) Watch the Recorder**

Are you learning or just reading sentences off the page? Be conscious of when your mind has slipped but your eyes are still gazing down. When the recorder stops, go back and restart.

### **28) Learn it Once**

What would you do if you could only look through your textbook once? The learn-it-once philosophy basically states that studying is a waste of time. You should learn things immediately as they come to you rather than delegating them to future study sessions. It may be slower, but it forces you to learn instead of just skim.

### **29) Define Quality Information**

What information is important? Define your goals for learning and the expectations of any examiners. By doing this you can figure out what information is critical to memorize and what can be skimmed.

### **30) Cram**

I hate cramming, but it seems popular enough for me to include it anyways. Put on another pot of coffee and expect little sleep.

### **31) Immersion**

This involves learning way more than you need to. The equivalent of diving into the deep end of a pool full of sharks it can be one of the fastest ways to learn (if you don't get eaten alive). I

know many people who have used this method when trying to learn new languages. Basically you become obsessed with the subject and hope that if only a small fraction of it sticks, that will still be more than you could have learned by any other method.

### **32) Learn as You Need It**

Opposite to the immersion method is the learn-as-you-go method. This works great when the learning is for a field where mastery isn't important. I used this approach when learning the technical matters of blogging.

### **33) Pop Quiz**

I always try to learn things with quick tricks. E.g. for multiplication, Chinese use stick methods to teach children “*Quick!* What's  $8 \times 12$ ?”. This method might require a better understanding or a complex computer program, but it can force you to remember information in any situation.

### **34) Give it Form**

Don't let an idea sit as an abstraction in your head. Give it a shape, form, color and meaning. Use your hands to describe it as a potter would sculpt a bowl on a potter's wheel.

### **35) Sleep on It**

Sleep has been shown to impact memory. Take time to rest yourself and get enough sleep so that you can remember what you have learned.

### **36) Complete Focus**

Occasionally I'll see people “studying” while listening to music or watching television. Although they may have a gift in multitasking I wasn't born with, I think it is more likely that they are fooling themselves. Turn off all the distractions and focus completely or don't focus at all.

### **37) Ask Why**

Ever sat next to one of those annoying kids that asked “Why?” to everything you said? Maybe it's time you became that annoying kid and started asking why to more of the information you are supposed to learn. When information forms a logical pattern it becomes far easier to remember.

### **38) Find Your Peak Mental Hours**

Everyone has different creative peaks. Mine tend to be early afternoon and late morning. When I try to work late in the evening I'm restless. When I try to work early in the morning my mind is usually too fuzzy to think. Find your peak mental hours so studying works for you.

### **39) Exercise**

Cal Newport, mentioned these next two on his blog. This first is exercising. Healthy body, healthy mind. I've found the stereotype of the dumb jock to be fairly inaccurate. Usually the people who keep fit are able to stay sharper mentally.

### **40) Burn Off Stress**

Party, mediate, socialize, whatever you need to do to relax. Being in a depressed state won't help your studies, so have fun and find a balance. Then again, hangovers aren't the best way to write an exam so know where to draw the line.

### **41) Create**

Learning and creating are, in essence, the same activity. Don't let learning become a passive activity where you try to absorb information. Instead create information. Form your own relationships, descriptions and examples.

### **42) Get a Tutor**

Get personalized instructions that match up with your learning style. **Don't force a square peg into a circular hole if you don't have to.**

### **43) Know Thy Weaknesses**

Did you get a bad mark on that last test. Why? Was it just a lack of preparation? Did you not remember the information, or did you have trouble applying it? Figure out your weaknesses so you can develop tools (or use these) to work around them.

### **44) Post It's**

Place Post It's all over your room with information from subjects. Mix them up every few days so that you will notice them as you walk around.

### **45) Organize**

I must admit that organization has always been a struggle for me. I'm far more inclined towards total environmental chaos and lost files than robotic storage. But I have found that working on my organizational skills allows me more mental room to learn. Ordered environment, ordered mind.

### **46) Create a Learning Ritual**

I can't think of article ideas if I'm not sitting in my chair. If I try going for a walk or sitting somewhere else, my mind doesn't focus. I've developed a ritual for writing posts that makes it difficult to do anything else. The advantage is that when I go through this ritual, I can think of ideas fairly quickly. Creating a learning ritual where you study or read in the same place can



create a similar advantage.

#### **47) Performance Flow**

I'm incredibly relaxed when I'm about to write tests. I'm rarely nervous, but I have a degree of tension that keeps me focused. If you get too nervous during performance situations, try breathing and meditation exercises to slow yourself down.

#### **48) Eat Light**

Digestion uses a large amount of energy in your body. By eating light before studying or a test you can ensure you don't feel groggy.

#### **49) Write it Down**

Writing is one of the best ways to learn. I use it for problem solving, brainstorming and working out ideas. Thinking is a rather inefficient process where distractions easily push you onto a tangent. By writing things down you can record your position and think more clearly.

#### **50) Grades are Just Letters**

My final suggestion is to stop thinking about classes in terms of grades and degrees. Think of school as just one facet of the larger self-education in your life. Find reasons to learn information for its own sake, instead of just to pass the class. While this may sound obvious, I believe it is the most important tip on this list and the one few people actually use. Study to learn, not just to pass.