

A Study Strategy for all Occasions: Test your Memory

by Winston Sieck - March 08, 2015

<https://thinkeracademy.com/test-your-memory-study-strategy/>

You have a test coming up.

You need to know the material. Soon.

But first, you need to know how to study for it.

One way to study is to read back over your notes and textbook.

Is that really the best study strategy?

An alternative approach would be to test your memory. That could mean literally [taking a practice quiz](#). It could also be less formal, like looking at the headings in your notes or chapter, and forcing yourself to recall the important facts in that section.

Want to know how to study? *Test your memory*.

Many scientific studies have shown that the “test your memory” study strategy works better than reviewing the material. Until recently, it's not been clear just how robust the benefit of this study strategy really is.

The short story is, for a wide range of subjects and test taking situations, "test your memory" is the answer to how to study. It's one of the [most effective study skills](#) you use, with lots of science to back it up.

In classic "test your memory" research, the facts to be learned are often lists of word pairs, like English word (horse) - Swahili word (farasi). The research subjects often follow a three step process:

1. **First exposure.** For example, just see a list of words like horse-farasi.
2. **Study strategy.**
 1. Some subjects do another round of review of the material (see horse-farasi again)
 2. Other subjects practice remembering (see horse – ?, and try to remember what Swahili word went with it.
3. **Final test.** Everyone gets pretty much the same test as the first one (horse - ?). How's your Swahili coming along, by the way?

Among cognitive psychologists, the benefits of this "test your memory" strategy are sometimes called the “testing effect.” This refers to the fact that you are testing yourself on the material.

The strategy is sometimes also called “retrieval practice.” The idea is that, just like Fido getting more

reliable and efficient at retrieving a stick with practice, you get better at retrieving the information from your memory. This idea is what's important.

Call it what you like. Test your memory is a [cognitive learning strategy](#) that gets results. That's why it's a key skill that students practice in our [study skills course](#).

OK, so you did well on the test – but, can you take your Swahili on the road?

Shana Carpenter of Iowa State University reviewed the cognitive psychology literature to see just how robust this strategy for how to study really is. Will the benefits of this approach for how to study transfer to new learning situations? She published her paper, "[Testing enhances the transfer of learning](#)," in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*.

From the title, you can probably guess what she found. Yep, the *test your memory* approach for how to study is robust. It helps even when the final test is different than the initial. That is, the learning transfers to new situations. She described research looking at transfer in three different ways.

First, what if we change up when and where the test is held?

Still works.

For example, junior high kids were taught about U.S. history facts, told to study according to one of the two strategies, and then given a final test.... *9 months later*. Even after that long delay, the kids who studied with the practice test outperformed the ones who were told to review the material.

Next, what if we alter the format of the test?

Again, this strategy for how to study still works.

In one applied educational experiment, elementary school kids had to learn some geography. They were shown some cities on a map. Then, some were given a map with blanks, and had to match the cities to the right location. Others were shown the original map again, and told to review. In a final test, kids were asked to name the city that lay along a route between two other cities. The elementary schoolers who were told to use the test-your-memory study strategy outperformed those who just reviewed. They were not thrown off by altering that final test.

Lastly, does test-your-memory help with new learning?

Yep, seems it actually can.

One example of this kind of study was about how to classify birds. Some research subjects were instructed to study by testing their memory. They would see a bird, say what type ("It's an oriole"), and get feedback – ("no, that's a finch"). Others reviewed the birds and their types.

Yes, those who studied by testing their memory learned better than those who reviewed. They were also better able to classify new birds they had never seen before.

Sure, it feels easier to just read back over your notes and textbook. Don't get sucked in.

Find ways to test your memory for the material instead.

The research is clear. It just works better.

It will help you to be smarter in the long run.

Do it.

Image credit: [Walt Stoneburner](#)

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