Mnemonics
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Abstract

Mnemonics are memory aids people use when trying to learn or remember something. It can be used to remember lists, steps, or facts. Learning needs organization to move from short-term memory to long-term memory and mnemonics are one way to provide that organization.
Mnemonics are memory aids people use when learning (American Heritage Dictionary, 2000), and can be used to assist people in learning steps for activities and remember numerous facts. Learning needs organization, in what we know, in the material we are learning and linking these two concepts so new information can be recalled from long-term memory (Baddely, 1990, pp. 175-176). Mnemonics are one way to provide that organization. Bucks County Community College (1999) offers the following examples of mnemonics for students to use to improve their memories.

- Acronym – a combination of letters used as a hint in remembering with each letter standing for a word.
- Acrostic – a sentence used as a hint in remembering with the first letter of each word used as a clue to what needs to be remembered.
- Rhyme-Keys – a list of “peg words” where each word represents a number and images are developed to link what needs to be remembered to the “peg word.”
- Loci Method – a series of locations in a room or locations passed on the way to work used to remember items in a list.
- Keyword Method – using an English word to remember a foreign word by seeing the image and linking the foreign word to the English word.
- Image-Name Technique – linking a physical characteristic to a person’s name in order to remember that person’s name.
- Chaining – developing a story where each stage of the story is a link to what your need to remember (Keeley, 1999).

Mnemonics have been used since ancient times by the Greeks and Romans who employed the Method of Loci to remember long speeches. This method required matching the items that needed to be remembered to a series of places or loci (Yates, 1966/1996, p. 18). It was the invention of the printing press making information easily accessible that caused the use of mnemonics for memory to drop (Tuttle & Haliniak, n.d.).
The use of mnemonic devices is appropriate for all age groups. However, the type of mnemonic device used for each age group is important. Younger children may have an easier time remembering rhymes; this can be seen in the songs used to teach the alphabet and counting rhymes for teaching numbers. As children get older, they have more choices in the mnemonic devices they can use. Acronyms and acrostics can be used to remember key words, chaining and rhyme-keys or peg words can be used to remember lists.

The Loci method can be used to remember items, the keyword method can be used to help remember foreign words, and image-name technique can be used to remember names (Keeley, 1999). These mnemonic devices can be used with all ages but they do require the person using them to have experiences that she can use to connect her memories to the new information she is trying to learn.

Mnemonics are meant to train learners to organize their memory so they can recall information they want to use later. They will also be aware of and able to use various mnemonic devices to assist in organizing their memories so they can remember word lists and items with relative ease. Training the memory helps with learning by allowing people to store information in their brains and associating it with prior knowledge (Stenger, 2005, p. 8).

Mnemonic devices work because they provide novelty in the images used with the connections made in the brain and provide a challenge that encourages learners to try to remember new information (Sprenger, 2003, p. 21-22). Mnemonic devices help people learn content that is not very meaningful to them by connecting the information to what is known (Sprenger, p. 5). Memory is important for learning and mnemonics help to move what has just been learned from the short-term memory to the long-term memory so it can be retrieved in the future (Stenger, p. 44.) However, there is the concern that people will not use them if they are too complicated. Mnemonics that require a lot of imagery may be too complex for people to continue using once they learn how because the cognitive processes required to implement this type of imagery are complex so it is difficult to use it spontaneously (Schacter, 2001, p. 34).

Examples of each type of mnemonics discussed in the paper are provided to assist you with developing your own.
Mnemonics

Acronym

This is an example that Cheryl Mallan uses to help her students remember what questions to ask in accounting when journalizing a transaction: (Slater, 2007)

A  What accounts are affected?
C  What is the account’s category?
I  Is that an increase or decrease to that account?
D  Is that a debit or credit?

Acrostic

This is used to remember the planets:

My  Mercury
Very  Venus
Educated  Earth
Mother  Mars
Just  Juniper
Served  Saturn
Us  Uranus
Nine  Neptune
Pizzas  Pluto

(Exploring the solar system, 2008)

Rhyme-Keys

This method uses “peg words” to remember items in a list e.g. one = butter = butter dripping from the sun’s rays; two = milk = milk overflowing from the shoe; etc.

1.  sun
2.  shoe
3.  tree
4.  door
5.  hive
6.  sticks
7. heaven
8. gate
9. line
10. hen

(C. Mallan, personal lesson plans, September, 2008)

Loci Method

This method uses locations in a room or certain places you pass on the way to work that are so familiar you can link the words you need to remember to the locations. Starting at the front of the classroom with locations:

Teacher’s Desk
Podium
Clock
Board
Calendar
Door
Pencil Sharpener
Window
Map
Air vent

(C. Mallan, personal lesson plans, September, 2008)

Keyword Method

This method uses an English word that sounds like the foreign one and causes one to form an image relating the foreign word and the English word. An example taken from Meg Keeley is the word “cabina” that means phone booth. Invent an image of a cab trying to fit in a phone booth. When you see the word “cabina,” you should be able to recall this image and retrieve the meaning “phone booth” (Keeley, 1999).
Image-Name Technique

This method is to connect a physical characteristic of the person and the name of the person. Meg Keeley, uses the example Shirley Temple as Shirley rhymes with curly and her hair is curly around the temples – Temple (Keeley, 1999).

Chaining

This method is creating a story around the idea you want to remember. Meg Keeley’s example for this is Napoleon, ear, door, Germany story. Napoleon had his ear to the door to listen to the Germans in his beer cellar (Keeley, 1999).

In moving information from short-term memory to long-term memory, using mnemonics can be helpful. Sometimes the sillier the picture you create in your head, the easier it will be to recall the information. The HOMES method of remembering the Great Lakes is one that always comes to mind – Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, and Superior. And who can forget the way to remember the mathematic order, Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally – parentheses, exponent, multiply, divide, add, and subtract. The knuckle method for remembering the days in the month and in 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue are other examples that are commonly used.

Chances are, people are using mnemonics and did not even know it or did not have a name for the method they were using. Now we have a name for this ancient, creative way to remember.
References


http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/mnemonic

This is an online resource that is very convenient for finding quick definitions.


This book explains in detail how memory works and what can be done to improve it.

*Exploring the solar system.* Retrieved October 27, 2008, from

http://www.montana.edu/wwwmor/education/NASAtrunks/planets.html

This site is connected to the Museum of the Rockies and offers lessons, for a fee, for schools to use.


This is part of the Bucks County Community College site and lists different kinds of mnemonic devices and what is the appropriate use for each one.


Describes the types of problems people have when trying to remember things and what can be done so people can more easily recall what they need to remember.


A college accounting book that explains the basics of accounting.

Discusses the importance of recognizing different learning styles in the classroom and what can be done to help students remember what they need to know.


Written by the German memory champion, it explains why memory is important and how to use mnemonic devices.


This website provides a brief history of mnemonic devices, examples of the most common kind and links to sites that use them.


Almost all the information on mnemonics refers to this book. It discusses the history of mnemonic devices and why memory used to be considered an art form.
A total of 86 people at a water theme park in Spring, Texas had to be decontaminated after they were exposed to toxic chemicals. The park has been closed, and an investigation has been launched to find the cause of the incident. Thirty-one people were taken to hospital after they were exposed to what officials believe was a mixture of bleach and sulfuric acid in Six Flags Hurricane Harbor Splashtown in Spring on Saturday. Local media reported that a lifeguard overseeing a kiddie pool was first to feel unwell, and it was not long before dozens of other visitors, including children, felt symptoms such as skin and inhalation irritation consistent with chemical poisoning. Among those rushed to hospital was a three-year-old toddler, who is believed to be in stable condition. The University of Texas at Brownsville (abbreviated as UTB and formerly known as the University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College [UTB/TSC]) was an educational institution located in Brownsville, Texas. The university was on the land once occupied by Fort Brown. It was a member of the University of Texas System. The institution was formed from a 1991 partnership between the two-year Texas Southmost College and University of Texas-Pan American at Brownsville. The partnership ended in... University officials said Jonathon William Torres Cazares died on Sept. 30 while traveling to visit family. He is believed to be one of two people killed after the bus he was riding in was hijacked, according to a U.S. official who declined to be named because he was not authorized to speak to the media. "We are all greatly saddened by the loss of what we consider one of our family," said Juliet V. Garcia, president of the University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College. The U.S. Consulate General in Matamoros released a statement Friday, signed by spokesman Brian Quigley, expressing its condolences.