Have you ever sat down to study for a test only to find yourself reading the same paragraph over, and over?

Or have you ever read a chapter in a text book only to realize after you were done that you didn't understand the information any better?

When we try to learn something new, we can approach the material in different ways. Some of our approaches are fairly shallow, like reading and re-reading. They don’t do much to help us understand or remember information long-term.

Other study strategies give a lot of support to our learning. They help us get past rote regurgitation, and fully assimilate new information. They nudge us to engage in deep processing.

What is Deep Processing?

Deep processing is a way of learning in which you try to make the information meaningful to yourself. For example, you might try to figure out how a lesson on animal biology fits into what you already know about your dog (or cat).

Other examples of deep processing include: organizing your notes around common themes, generating questions for review, creating a concept map of ideas studied, and paying attention to key distinctions.

On the other hand, surface-level strategies are about memorizing information as presented, with little thought of your own.

For example, you might write your class notes using the exact words from your teacher’s slides. And then memorize a few key terms by repeating them over and over. When you use surface-level strategies like these, the information will quickly fade from memory.

Deep Processing Strategies You Can Try

Here are four ways to process information deeply (and learn it forever):

- Elaborate on the information
- Make distinctions
- Apply it to your life
- Explore it further

Elaborate the information
The idea behind the elaboration technique is to make meaningful associations between the concepts you’ve studied.

When you are given new information, begin by asking yourself how this relates to what you already know. This creates pathways where the new information can "live" in your brain.

For example, if you are learning how to write a persuasive essay, you may want to recall what you already know about writing a narrative essay. Or, you might think back to the advice your dad gave you about how to sell more t-shirts for your fundraiser.

**Make distinctions**

The point here is to try to make a clear contrast between other concepts and the concepts you are studying.

You put the information side-by-side and ask yourself what the key differences are?

When reading a Shakespeare sonnet, for example, you compare and contrast this type of poetry with a lyric, haiku or free-verse.

**Apply it**

Yep, you guessed it – here, you try using the information in real life. For instance, if you are studying human anatomy, try to name the bones you use when you brush your teeth or ride a bike.

You can make even a small start with application, just by asking yourself how you could use the concept in your life.

For example, suppose you are studying percentages in math class. You might think about how you can use them to understand the interest you’d earn by putting your money in a personal savings account.

**Explore it**

Finally, you can go beyond what’s presented in class and explore the information on your own. This can help you make the most of each of the strategies above.

For example, if you are studying the American Revolution, you may want to read about what life was like for the typical person in the late 18th century. Doing so could help make it easier to relate to, and elaborate on the events described in your dry textbook.

**Who Uses Deep Processing?**

Does anyone really study this way, except when teachers make them? What does it take to dive deep into the process of learning and study?
Susan Bobbitt Nolen of Arizona State University addressed these questions in a study of middle school students. Her paper, called, “Reasons for Studying: Motivational Orientations and Study Strategies," was published in the journal, *Cognition & Instruction*.

She found that a number of students used deep processing strategies, without being told to. Also, using the strategies wasn’t related to natural ability. Instead, two key factors were related to their use:

- Setting a **goal to really understand** the material and learn something new.
- Knowing some deep processing strategies that help you learn and remember.

That is, students who embraced an interest in learning, and had tools to go deep in their understanding used study strategies all on their own.

**Build Your Skills and Spark Your Interest**

Like any new skills, the successful implementation of study strategies takes conscientious effort and practice over time. But, you can do it.

Once you are equipped with deep processing strategies, you’ll start to find that you tend to use them almost subconsciously when faced with new information or a new task.

When you fully adopt these skills, you will be shocked at how readily you can learn. And how much more fun learning becomes.

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