

Test Taking Strategies

Everybody takes tests at some point in their lives: tests in school, tests to get a driver's license, sometimes even tests to be able to do certain jobs. Everyone learns differently, so the ways to approach these tests may be different for each person and for each kind of test.

Some test-taking tips are good ideas for just about everybody.

- Get a good night's sleep the night before the test.
- Eat a good breakfast that includes some protein, like eggs or yogurt, and something with fiber to help you stay feeling full, like multi-grain toast or an apple.
- Study a little bit at a time. Don't wait until the last minute.

There are some test-taking and memory strategies that some students figure out that work for them. Can these tricks work for other students too?

Test-Taking Trick #1: Chewing Gum

"I chew a piece of grape bubble gum every time I have a math test. I chew it in class on other days too, when the teacher lets me," says 10th grader Jake Woolsey. "I do better on tests when I chew it."

Can gum really make a difference? Research suggests that it actually can help some people remember, for two reasons.

Chewing gum can increase the amount of oxygen the gum chewer brings into his or her

system. This can make the gum chewer feel more awake so that they are better able to pay attention to the test and to get their memory working well. Chewing the gum also keeps the jaw loose, so the gum chewer doesn't tense up. Staying relaxed also helps the person focus on the test so that he or she can do their best. There is some research that says the act of chewing can even improve a person's mood.

The second reason gum may help has to do with smell. Smell is closely tied to memory. Certain smells can bring back vivid memories. For example, the smell of a certain perfume may remind you of your grandmother. The smell of sugar cookies may remind you of that time your mom baked during a storm last winter.

The smell of Jake's gum may be helping him remember how to do the math on his test. If he chews the same gum in class and again during the test, the common smell may help him remember what he learned in class.

Some scents do a better job of aiding memory than others. Green apple is thought to be one of the best scents for helping memory. Try eating an apple while you study for a test, and then again right before the test starts.



Test-Taking Trick #2: Memorizing a List

“I had to memorize the first twenty elements in the periodic table for a chemistry class,” said high school sophomore Amber Ramirez. “There were so many names to remember, like carbon and phosphorus and magnesium. I couldn’t figure out how to learn them all. My mom helped me think up a little phrase for each one to help me remember. Like, number 18 is argon, because when you turn 18, you move out, and you ‘are gone!’ Get it!”

Memory tricks that use words or parts of words are called mnemonic devices. One commonly used mnemonic is using the name “Roy G. Biv” to remember the colors of the rainbow in the correct order: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. Another common mnemonic is using the word HOMES to remember the United States’ Great Lakes: Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, and Superior.

Memory tricks like mnemonics work because they are unique. The brain is more likely to remember something that is interesting and different than something more common. For example, do you know how many white cars you saw on your way to school today? White cars are very common, so it is not usually worth remembering when you see one. But if you saw a double-decker bus painted bright green and purple with a parachute coming out of the back, you’d probably notice and remember, because that’s not likely to be something you see every day. It’s unique and different, so it’s memorable.

Another memory trick that works in the same way is to use music. You may have learned your ABC’s at a young age by singing them to the tune of “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.” Adding music helps your brain latch onto the words or

information, making it easier to remember later on.

“When I was little,” explains Melissa Silas, “I had a hard time remembering my address and home number. My grandma made up a little song with them, and then it was really easy to remember. We don’t even live there anymore, but I can still tell you the address and phone number because I remember the song.”

Children’s television shows like Sesame Street often use music to teach. Counting, the days of the week, colors, multiplication facts, the states in the USA – all of these things can be put to music to make them easier to learn and remember.

If you have to memorize a list of names or some facts for a test, look for ways to make the information stand out and be different. Create a mnemonic that uses the words or letters in a new way or try singing the information to yourself. Make the information seem unique or interesting and it will be easier to remember.