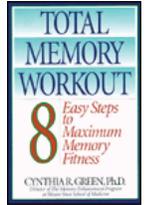




# Wake Up Your Memory: The A.M. Principle

Source: *TOTAL MEMORY WORKOUT: 8 Easy Steps to Maximum Memory Fitness*, by Cynthia R. Green, Ph.D., Founding Director of the Memory Enhancement Program at Mount Sinai School of Medicine



While there is no easy trick or secret to making the most of your memory, there are simple steps you can take to improve how well you acquire and store information so you can remember it better. The **A.M. Principle** is a rule that, if you follow it, it can help you immediately learn and remember more effectively. So let's wake up your memory!

## A Is for Attention

If you want to remember something, you have to pay attention to it. This may sound simple, but the most common reason healthy adults forget is because they fail to focus. Distractibility can account for memory lapses no matter what your age.

Attention is the most sensitive aspect of intellectual functioning. It is therefore quite vulnerable to being disrupted. In order to acquire information so we can later remember it, we must be mindful and focus on what we are trying to learn. In other words, the problem isn't that we forget, but that we want to remember from the outset.

Does this sound easy to you? It is. But think for a moment of all the things in your daily life that you really don't pay attention to. Consider the following questions about information we encounter everyday:

- **What color is at the bottom of the stoplight?**
- **What word appears over the image of George Washington on a quarter?**

- **What letters, if any, are missing from the telephone dial?**
- **How many light switches are in your house or apartment?**

\*The answers are green, Liberty, Q and Z, and only you know!

How did you do? Chances are you don't know the correct answers to some of these questions, even though these are things that you come across, sometimes frequently, over the course of a typical day.\* Why? Because we are not always mindful of things we do or see every day. But, you say, those are things I'm not trying to remember. Yes, this maybe true. But you're not really trying to remember where you put your keys down, either. Only by focusing our attention can we adequately acquire information and have it later when we need to remember it.

Here are two basic habits we can develop to improve attention and maximize memory fitness immediately:

- **Be aware.** If you are aware that you are hearing or seeing something you want to remember, you will be more likely to pay attention to it, to "get" it, and to "have" it later when you want to remember it. Increased awareness of the need to remember will increase your attention toward that information.



- Have you ever lost your car in a parking lot? Or forgotten whether you turned off the oven? Well, imagine if you had been more aware that you needed to be mindful of where you parked or whether you turned that knob. If only you had thought to yourself, “okay, I need to pay attention now so I will remember what I’m doing.” Being more aware in those situations would have encouraged you to pay closer attention and made it more likely that you would remember that information later.
- **Make the effort.** Next, you must try to focus your attention. Being aware that you need to pay attention without making the effort to do so is like sleeping with the unread textbook under your pillow the night before final exams. It isn’t enough to know you must be mindful of something you want to remember: You must then do it. So when you park your car at the mall and want to be able to find it a few hours later, simply make the effort to look around and pay attention to where you are. Most likely there are some signs or other landmarks to help you remember where you’ve parked.

We can promote our attention even further by identifying issues that may keep us from focusing clearly on things we want to remember. Many factors in daily life can lower memory potential by making you more distracted and therefore less able to acquire information sufficiently such as individuals who are especially busy (and who isn’t these days?) or who may be more preoccupied than usual

If you want to rev up your recall for something, you need to pay attention and make the effort to do so. You will definitely be better able to recall it later.

### **M Is for Meaning**

Material that is meaningful is memorable. The more meaningful something is to you, the more likely you are to pay attention to it and the easier it will be for you to learn. Giving meaning to information we want

to remember also helps us control how that information is stored in our memory banks, making it more likely that we will recall it later. We tend to remember things that interest us for this very reason.

Much of what we would like to remember either has meaning or can be given meaning. Often we don’t notice meaning that is inherent to something we wish to learn and recall. For example, a grocery list has an organization that, if used properly, can help us learn that list and give us a way to recall that information later. We can also impose meaning on information to make it more memorable. Techniques for making information easier to remember do not have to be complex or cumbersome.

- **How many days are in June?** Did you say thirty? That’s right, but how did you get there? If you recited yourself, “Thirty days hath September, April, June ...,” you just used a memory device to help you remember the correct answer.
- **What do the following letters stand for: ASAP?** Did you say “as soon as possible”? This is another example of a memory habit you already use. If you take a moment and think about all the acronyms you know and use, you’ll see just how much you employ this particular technique.

Here are some other examples of how we can boost our brainpower by making information more meaningful:

- **Organize it.** Information that is organized is easier to learn and remember. Imagine you had a number of files that you used often. Would it be easier to find a particular file if you alphabetical organized them or if they were all just thrown in the file cabinet no particular order? The answer is rather obvious. By imposing meaning—here, ordering the files according to an alphabetical scheme—you are able to more efficiently store and retrieve a particular file. Much of what we wish to remember either has an inherent organization or has an organizational scheme imposed on it.

- How we learn numbers is a good example of how we use organization to give information meaning. Try to learn the following sequence:

**7853420981**

- It will be easier to learn this number if you organize or “chunk” it into a few smaller groups of numbers. Since this number is ten digits long, you could chunk it like a phone number, a pattern that is meaningful to you as well:

**(785) 342-0981**

- Organizing this string of numbers this way gives it meaning that will make it easier to remember. Many of us already use organization to help us remember.
- **See it.** We can also help give meaning to things we wish to remember by visualizing or seeing them. Try picturing in your head each item as you read the list below:

**telephone  
bird  
bottle  
square**

- Now look away and recall as many words on the list as you can. How did you do? Chances are that picturing this list of words helped you remember them. Why? Because for certain information we need to remember, our visual memory may actually be stronger than our verbal recall.
- Seeing information is another way to give it meaning and make it more memorable. Think of all the things you need to recall that you can picture: Grocery items, phone numbers, e-mail addresses, and certain names are a few examples. You can use your visual advantage to make information more memorable in a quick and easy way.
- **Connect it.** We can also make something we are trying to learn and remember more meaningful by connecting it with something we already know. Relating what you want to learn to something that is already familiar helps give it more

meaning. Think of this as cross-referencing your brain. Examples include many spelling rules we learned in school. Can't remember how to spell the title of the person who runs your child's elementary school? Well, if you learned that “A principal is a prince of a pal,” you'll have no trouble. This memory technique is a way of recalling how to properly spell “principal” by connecting the word with the spelling of a word you definitely know-“pal.”

- Connecting information can also be a very powerful way to make it meaningful and memorable. Try the following: On a blank sheet of paper, draw an outline of Italy. Done? Great. Next, draw an outline of Peru. A little harder perhaps? Can you guess why that may be the case? Chances are that at one time someone taught you to connect the outline of Italy with the shape of a boot. Yet no one taught you a similar technique for recalling the shape of Peru. That connection was a powerful tool you can still use, although elementary school may have been the last time you did so.

Now that you are familiar with the A.M. Principle, you can begin practicing these basic techniques to apply attention and meaning to information you want to remember. You will instantly notice the difference you've woken up your memory.

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