



## **Professional Development**

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### **How to Become a More Effective Learner**

I'm always interested in finding new ways to learn better and faster. As a graduate student, who is also a full-time science writer, the amount of time I have to spend learning new things is limited. It's important to get the most educational value out of my time as possible. However, retention, recall and transfer are also critical. I need to be able to accurately remember the information I learn, recall it at a later time and apply it effectively in a variety of situations.

#### **1. Memory Improvement Basics**

I've written before about some of the [best ways to improve memory](#). Basic tips such as improving focus, avoiding cram sessions, and structuring your study time are a good place to start, but there are even more lessons from [psychology](#) that can dramatically improve your learning efficiency.

#### **2. Keep Learning (and Practicing) New Things**

One sure-fire way to become a more effective learner is to simply keep learning. A 2004 *Nature* article reported that people who learned how to juggle increased the amount of gray matter in their occipital lobes, the area of the brain associated with visual memory. When these individuals stopped practicing their new skills, this gray matter vanished.

So if you're learning new management principles, it is important to keep practicing those principles in order to maintain the gains you have achieved. This "use-it-or-lose-it" phenomenon involves a brain process known as "pruning." Certain pathways in the brain are maintained, while other are eliminated. If you want the new information you just learned to stay put, keep practicing and rehearsing it.

#### **3. Learn in Multiple Ways**

Focus on learning in more than one way. Instead of just listening to a podcast, which involves auditory learning, find a way to rehearse the information both verbally and visually. This might involve describing what you learned to a colleague, taking notes or drawing a mind map. By learning in more than one way, you're further cementing the knowledge in your mind. According to Judy Willis, "The more regions of the brain that store data about a subject, the more interconnection there is. This redundancy means learners will have more opportunities to pull up related bits of data from multiple storage areas in response to a single cue. This cross-referencing of data means you have learned, rather than just memorized."

#### **4. Teach What You've Learned to Another Person**

Educators have long noted that one of the best ways to learn something is to teach it to someone else. Share the learning or skill with a colleague, spouse or a friend. Not only will the recipient be enlightened, but you will reinforce the learning for you too. Start by translating concepts or tasks into your own words or actions. This process alone helps solidify new knowledge in your brain. Next, find some way to share what you've learned. Some ideas include writing a blog post, creating a podcast or participating in a group discussion.

#### **5. Utilize Previous Learning to Promote New Learning**

Another great way to become a more effective learner is to use relational learning, which involves relating new information to things that you already know. For example, if you are learning about planning and organizing, you might associate what you learn with prior knowledge you have gained about prioritizing, time management, delegating, or empowerment.

#### **6. Gain Practical Experience**

For many of us, learning typically involves reading textbooks, attending lectures or doing research in the library or on the Web. While seeing information and then writing it down is important, actually putting new knowledge and skills into practice can be one of the best ways to improve learning. If you are trying to acquire a new skill or ability, focus on gaining practical experience. If it is a skill, like recognition or feedback, perform the skill on a regular basis. Look for opportunities to practice in and outside of the workplace. Surround yourself with immersive experiences.

#### **7. Look Up Answers Rather Than Struggle to Remember**

Of course, learning isn't a perfect process. Sometimes, we forget the details of things that we have already learned. If you find yourself struggling to recall some tidbit of information, research suggests that you are better off simply looking up the correct answer. [One study](#) found that the longer you spend trying to remember the answer, the more likely you will be to forget the answer again in the future. Why? Because these attempts to recall previously learned information actually results in learning the "error state" instead of the correct response.

#### **8. Understand How You Learn Best**

Another great strategy for improving your learning efficiency is to recognize your learning habits and styles. There are a number of different theories about learning styles, which can help you gain a better understanding of how you learn best. Gardner's theory of [multiple intelligences](#) describes eight different types of intelligence that can help reveal your individual strengths. Looking at Carl Jung's [learning style dimensions](#) can also help you identify which learning strategies might work best for you.

#### **9. Use Testing to Boost Learning**

While it may seem that spending more time studying is one of the best ways to maximize learning, research has demonstrated that taking tests actually helps you better remember what you've learned. The research revealed that students who studied and were then tested had better long-term recall of the materials, even on information that was not covered by the test. Students who had extra time to study but were not tested had significantly lower recall of the material.

## 10. Stop Multitasking

For many years, it was thought that people who multitask, or perform more than one activity at once, had an edge over those who did not. However, research now suggests that multitasking can actually make learning less effective. In the study, participants lost significant amounts of time as they switched between multiple tasks and lost even more time as the tasks became increasingly complex. By switching from one activity to another, you will learn more slowly, become less efficient and make more errors. How can you avoid the dangers of multitasking? Start by focusing your attention on the task at hand and continue working for a predetermined amount of time.

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