

Boosting Your Memory: Mission Possible

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By Brenda Miles, Ph.D., C.Psych.

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In the movie, **Mission Impossible 4**, Tom Cruise returns as secret agent, Ethan Hunt, who has accepted another dangerous mission to save the world from certain disaster. In one scene, Ethan must climb along the outside of an incredibly tall skyscraper, 130 floors above ground. He has no ropes – but he has special gloves that stick to the glass as he climbs. When a light on the gloves is **blue**, it means the gloves are working – the fingertips will stick to the glass windows. When the light on the gloves is **red**, the gloves aren't working and he'll become "unstuck." When Ethan takes the gloves from his partner, he looks confused, so his partner gives him a trick to remember the rule before he starts climbing: **blue means glue; red means dead!**

Psychologists know that strategies help to make information "stick" in our memory. **Rhyming**, like the glove example, is only one of those strategies. When you **actively work** with information you are trying to learn, you're more likely to remember it. **Creating rhymes, re-stating information in ways you understand, making visual pictures**, are all methods of giving your mind an active work-out so that information sticks.

Today's **Memory Mission**, should you choose to accept it, is to learn a strategy called the **method of loci**. The brain remembers visual images very well – so let's put that fact to the test! **You are going to learn a list of items by remembering them in specific locations**. If you're a student, you're going to need someone's help. Your mission is outlined further below. If you're a teacher, here's your mission to get things started.

FOR TEACHERS

Create a list of 30 items. Concrete items, like **elephant** or **light bulb**, are easier to remember than verbs, adjectives, or adverbs, like *running*, *loud*, and *quickly*, so stick with nouns to start.

Read the list to your students, with a couple of seconds between each word. **Only say the words once**. Now, ask your students to write down as many of the 30 items that they can remember. Students will

probably remember the first few items on the list, and a few of the last ones, but they'll likely forget a whole bunch of items in the middle. This is predictable; without specific strategies, the brain forgets the stuff in between.



Next, create **pegs** or **hooks** in the classroom that will help your students remember the items on your list. Go around the classroom – in a principled manner – and pick out some items. For example, the **classroom door** could be **peg one**. **Peg two** might be the **poster** right by the door, **peg three** might be the **teacher's desk** which is right beside the poster by the door, and so on, moving around the room, pointing out objects along the walls, and then maybe to some desks in the middle of the room. As you move around the class, pick out 30 static hooks; you'll need them to remember the 30 items on the list. Review the hooks with your students to make sure they remember all of them.

Now, say the list again – but this time stop after each word and **explain how to place the items on each hook in the room**. If your list begins with **elephant**, then tell your students to make a funny or strange visual image in their minds, combining the elephant with **peg one**, the **classroom door**. For example, they could imagine a huge elephant trying to squeeze his body through the doorway – or even crashing the door right down! Have them look at the door and imagine that image. Next, if the second word on your list is **light bulb**, imagine a picture of a huge, glowing light bulb on **peg two**, the **poster**. If the third item is **pizza**, imagine a pizza on **peg three**, the **teacher's desk**. Don't imagine a little pizza on the desk – imagine a gigantic pizza covering the whole desk with cheese running down the sides. Strange or impossible images are harder to forget! Go through the

whole list, working with your students to place all 30 items on your 30 classroom hooks.

Now, say the list again – as you did the first time – with a second or two between words – but don't re-view the pegs. Instead, just say the words. Encourage your students to look around the room as you dictate each word, and imagine each item being tacked to each peg. Once you have finished saying all 30 items, ask your students to write down as many words as they can remember. In this recall stage, again encourage your students to look around the room – at each peg – starting at **peg one** and moving to **peg 30** (in order), to help them conjure up the appropriate mental images (at this point, they should remember the pegs without you reviewing them). With this method, **your students should remember many more words than they did initially.**

Test your students the next day – this time without saying the list of items again. How many items do they remember now, simply by looking at the pegs? Remarkably, they'll probably remember most of them!

Your students can continue using these classroom pegs to remember information that you are teaching. For example, if an explorer included some crucial items on a journey, or made a number of stops along the way (e.g., stopped first in France, then Italy, then Australia) remind students to use the classroom pegs to help them remember these facts (e.g., the **Eiffel Tower** in the **doorway**, a wad of **Italian spaghetti with meatballs** smeared across the **classroom poster**, a **kangaroo** jumping on the **teacher's desk** to remember the explorer's itinerary).

Encourage your students to create **memory palaces** in their homes (described below) or in the school (e.g., creating hooks in the hallway, office, gym) so they can remember more information. Technically, you don't need to be in a pegged room to remember items. The ultimate goal is to walk through rooms **in your imagination** – and pick things off from the pegs **in your mind's eye** – so that you can remember complex information anywhere, anytime.

FOR STUDENTS: TRY THIS AT HOME!

First, ask your teacher to go through the activity described above **in your classroom**. You need to see the method of loci in action in order to understand it.

Next, once you have practised the technique in your classroom, go home and create a **memory palace** –

that's what the memory experts call it – using your house or apartment.

To do this, you'll need to walk through your house and decide on certain pegs as you wander from room to room. For example, **peg one** might be the **driveway**. **Peg two** might be the **front door**. **Peg three** might be the **closet** right beside the front door, and so on.

Go through your house in an orderly fashion. If the kitchen is right near the front door, walk in there and create more pegs, then move to your bedroom, and then to the next closest room, like the bathroom, or another bedroom.

If it helps you, **write down the pegs you are going to try to remember** as you walk from room to room.

Make sure the pegs you use **don't move** and are **always going to be there**. So, use the **window** and **bed** in your bedroom as pegs, but don't use the pile of dirty clothes on the floor because they might not be there tomorrow!

Create as many pegs as you want – 30, 40, 80! – but you'll need to remember them so you can use them later. Walk through your home again and see if you can remember all of the pegs you have chosen. Once you have them in your mind (or on your list of paper), sit on your bed and try to walk through your house – from the driveway through the hallway to each of your rooms – **all in your mind** – to see if you can remember the pegs **without** looking at them. This may take a lot of practice – but if you can remember all of the pegs **in your head** – then you're ready for the last part of your mission.

Ask a friend, a teacher, or your parents to make up a list of items that match the number of pegs you created – let's say 30. As you listen to the words they read, **imagine placing them on the pegs in your house**, starting with **peg one**.

When you have heard the whole list, and have to remember the words, walk through your house – starting at the driveway and then going from room to room – **completely in your mind**. Take the items off the pegs in your imagination and write them down on a piece of paper. You'll be amazed at how many things you'll remember! Use the pegs to remember grocery lists, chores you need to complete, or facts at school. Well done!

Mission Accomplished!

For further information and suggestions contact the psychology staff at your school or Dr. D. Lean, Chief Psychologist.

