

Remember, remember

*I was asked by the **Open University** to write an advice piece for its *Sesame* magazine on how students could remember facts and figures for exams. Sometimes the best ideas to draw readers into a piece can come straight out of left field...*

I FOUND George III taking a shower in my house the other day. I knew it was him because he still had his clothes on.

Edward VII, meanwhile, was hammering on the toilet door, waiting for Victoria to get off the throne. Then George VI asked me where my washing machine was – and I recognised him, too, because he struggled to say “utility room”.

To say it was surreal is a right Royal understatement. But say what you like about my state of mind, at least I can reel off, in order, all the English monarchs since 1066. And when you’ve got a memory as poor as mine, you need all the help you can get.

But I’ll let you into a secret. To learn things, to retain facts, you don’t actually need a good memory at all. All you actually need do is bring the facts and figures alive, turning them into something you will remember. And, say psychologists, the more bizarre your fantasy, the more chance you have of retaining the information.

When I encountered all these Royals in my house – in my imagination, actually, but Edward and Wallis giggling behind a locked spare bedroom door seemed uncomfortably real to me – I made sure I met them all on a route I would normally take through my living space. That is, I saw William of Normandy gathering conkers in my front garden, then encountered all of his descendants in order of succession until, at the other end of the house, I went onto the back lawn to admonish our present Queen for letting her corgis desecrate my dahlias.



But that's all very well, you cry – you're remembering larger than life personalities, but I'm trying to study dry figures. Fear not, the secret is the same – you simply turn the acts into images or statements you won't forget. Remember, because Richard of York gave battle in vain (presumably after I'd ushered him out of my larder), we can recall the order of the rainbow colours. How many of us, when working out dates, mutter to ourselves that 30 days hath September, April, June an November?

There are hundreds of these – 'every good boy deserves favour' indicates notes on the musical treble stave and 'never eat shredded wheat' refers to points on the compass. At school we giggled at the thought of tights coming down (well it was the 1970s), but we all remember to this day the difference between stalactites and stalagmites.

The glory of these memory aids is that you can make up your own, and still they stick. In my English class at school, I decided most Viennese eat marmalade and jam sandwiches under newspapers, a statement whose veracity is, to say the least, dubious – but it has ever since reminded me of the order of the planets.

There are many other ways to retain and recall information. Simply writing out the vital facts from your textbook as bullet points will help you to remember. Many scientists believe whispering it to yourselves has as much impact on your ability to remember it as reading it twice.

You can also build up a solid, weighty memory base by varying your approach to learning – for instance, try drawing charts or diagrams to prove to yourself you've understood the concept of what you've been learning.

The variety will also help your brain stay fresh – and it is also important to reinforce your memory by revising what you've learned as soon as you can.

Most people know you get better exam results by revising over a period of time than you do by cramming. If you've tried to learn everything in a rushed, last-minute effort your brain does not have the time to process the information because you haven't been training it to do so. And yes, Mr Kite who taught me O-level physics, you may now say "I told you so".

Finally, of course, it helps to be interested in your subject. This is why, to my wife's understandable exasperation, I can recall every FA Cup final goalscorer since 1970 and every Olympic host city since 1890s – but am at a loss to recall what she asked me to do half an hour ago.

"Why do you need to recall these useless bits of information?" she regularly asks me, with increasing weariness.

"It don't know," I say – and it's true. Because between you and me, I can't remember.

Red = Richard

Orange = Of

Yellow = York

Green = Gave

Blue = Battle

Indigo = In

Violet = Vain