

7 Memory Techniques for a Digital Age

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Brent Sverdloff says technology can dull our perception and recall—but it doesn't have to. Try his memory techniques for improving your awareness.



Is paying attention becoming a thing of the past? We relinquish it at our own peril.

Think about it.

Kitchen sensors can notify us when the milk in our refrigerator has reached its sell-by date and needs replacing. But is it worth sacrificing our sensory awareness?

If we no longer read the expiration date, sniff or taste the product, or shake it to hear or feel lumps that may have formed, our powers of observation are diminished.

In a [thought-provoking article](#) in the *Wall Street Journal*, reporter Carolyn Purnell reminded us that for six centuries, the Paris market Les Halles operated in almost total darkness. Before the advent of electricity, discerning shoppers relied heavily on their sense of touch, smell, and taste to ensure quality. Sight alone was insufficient.

Giving up a whiff of sour milk may seem inconsequential, but the loss becomes compounded every time we use a car-hailing app instead of flagging down a cab (which requires looking, listening, walking a short distance, and being aware of other nearby ride-seekers); order online something that we could easily buy in person (and get some exercise, enjoy a serendipitous encounter with a friend or neighbor, and use more of our senses to compare items); or accept as the new standard the self-driving car, which discourages us from noticing our surroundings altogether.

“[W]e have to find a way to live with seductive technology and make it work to our purposes,” writes Sherry Turkle in her insightful book *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. “This is hard and will take work... We don’t need to reject or disparage technology. We need to put it in its place...[and] teach the importance of empathy and attention to what is real.”

Although I usually wear a watch, I have become adept at telling time in my town by observing external signs. Attentive to the sounds of church bells and train whistles, the smell of roasting coffee beans, the sight of lights and movement in retail spaces with different operating hours, I can reasonably approximate the hour without glancing at my wrist. I feel more connected to my environment, think more creatively, and remember more about my day.

Being engaged means firing up our imagination and strengthening our memory. In David Sax’s book *The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why They Matter*, he explains that “[t]he real world isn’t black or white. It is not even gray. Reality is multicolored, infinitely textured, and emotionally layered. It smells funky and tastes weird, and revels in human imperfection. The best ideas emerge from that complexity, which remains beyond the capability of digital technology to fully appreciate.”

Put Your Creative Thinking Hat On

Creative thinking is an essential part of training one’s memory. The memorization methods that date back to antiquity require us to conjure up the extraordinary to help recall the ordinary. Evolutionary biologist turned neuroscientist Gerald Edelman said, “in higher organisms, every act of perception is, to some degree, an act of creation, and every act of memory is, to some degree, an act of imagination.”

Our powers of observation and recall are already colored by our life experiences; it’s a short step to further deploying creativity in the service of memory.

So what’s stopping us?

Well, one thing is over-reliance on digital technology. Widespread dependence is common, but that doesn’t make it normal.

“Today, we are checking our social media constantly, which disrupts work and everyday life,” said [Adam Alter in a New York Times interview](#). “That’s time you’re not spending on face-to-face interactions with people....You never have to remember anything because everything is right in front of you. You don’t have to develop the ability to memorize or come up with new ideas.”

But don’t despair. Here are seven steps you can take right now to heighten your awareness and remember more.

7 Memory Techniques to Boost Your Awareness & Recall

1. **Monotask.** In his book *CrazyBusy: Overstretched, Overbooked, and About to Snap!*, Edward Hallowell reminds us that multitasking is akin to “playing tennis with three balls.”
2. **Get lost.** Experiment with new routes to familiar places. Use environmental clues to guide you. (Check out John Huth’s breathtaking work *The Lost Art of Finding Our Way* to understand how early navigators made do with their wits, a trained eye, and simple instruments.)

3. **Read in hard copy.** Cool as it is to have the content of books, newspapers, magazines, and personal notes all funnel through a small glass screen, what's lost are the different senses we use to engage with the original format: the weight, scent, and finish of the paper; the sound of it rustling; and the movements required to turn the pages help us remember the source—and how authoritative it was.
4. **Practice your penmanship.** Write down appointments, to-do lists, and notes in longhand. Just as reading in hard copy stimulates muscle memory, writing freehand beats typing on a keypad for retention and recall. Many actors memorize their lines by rewriting them out by hand.
5. **Forgo speed dial on occasion.** Key in a phone number manually and look for patterns that may help you remember it.
6. **Make it personal.** Pay tribute to the late Stanford Professor Clifford Nass, who said, "We've got to make face-to-face time sacred, and we have to bring back the saying we used to hear all the time, and now never hear, 'Look at me when I talk to you.'" Meet up in person with people for a walk, beverage, conversation, or game of Scrabble. And ditch the ear buds.
7. **Take back control.** Addressing a gathering of architects, Winston Churchill reminded the attendees that "we shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us." The same may be said of technology—be sure that it serves you and not the other way around.

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