

Remember the Usual Suspects!

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Remember the Usual Suspects!

My first month on the job has brought a whirlwind of meet-and-greets. I've had to tackle lots of names and faces, and that's always an exciting challenge for me. When I locked eyes with one individual, I was jolted by a flurry of six-pointed stars and pulsating beams of light. Don't be alarmed; I'm neither epileptic nor delusional. When I meet people, I routinely see some pretty jarring things: flowers sprout from ears, barbells leap from a mustache, or fistfuls of nickels clatter out of someone's chin. The truth is, I force myself to experience these things — it cements more names in my memory.

As adults, we pride ourselves on our ability to think logically. Sometimes, though, letting our imaginations run wild can improve our memory retention. The secret behind memorizing names and faces is to make the link between the two as vivid and outlandish as possible.

These techniques — which date back to Ancient Greece — can also help you master radio codes, locations, agenda items, technical vocabulary, and procedural steps. In fact, a former student of mine in Boston used them to ace his Police Academy tests. So, whether you're a new recruit or veteran of the force, you can apply these methods to some aspect of your personal or professional life.

Faces

The most important thing you can do when you meet someone is to make eye contact. Without staring too intently, scan the face and figure out what it is that makes it memorable. It could be subtle or pronounced. A cleft chin? Bursting tufts of ear hair? Deep creases at the corners of the mouth?

Not everyone has a face as memorable as, say, Frankenstein's monster or that hot movie star you can't stop ogling. But you'll appreciate it when they do. Nearly everyone has traits that draw your eyes in because they are in some way distinctive. Noses can be bulbous, flat, pug-like, upturned, angular, rosaceous, or flared. Eyes can be hooded, luminous, sky-blue, sunken, wide-set, or take countless other forms. Take discreet note of—but don't gawk at—scars, moles, dimples, permanent face jewelry, or other impossible-to-miss features.

A word to the wise: just as a magician should never reveal his secrets, avoid telling people what you think their prominent facial feature is. Few of us relish being called (as I have) "apple cheeks," "Mr. Spock," or "Pinochio." One's cheeks, ears, or nose may be objectively distinctive, but it's what you personally assign weight to that matters. Many faces offer more than one interesting attribute, and not everyone homes in on the same one.

Names

Serious practitioners of memory techniques are familiar with something called the "baker/Baker paradox". If a person tells that you that he works as a baker, your brain lights up with all sorts of associations. You think about how warm he is from working around ovens. How his white clothes and chef's hat are dusted with a fine layer of flour. How delicious he smells. How tasty the confections are

that he bakes. But if a person tells you that his surname is Baker, none of this happens. The same word is merely a flat series of sounds.

So, when you meet people, the goal is to turn Bakers into bakers, Singers into singers, and Reagans into ray guns. Conjuring up a vivid image with your mind's eye is virtually the same to your brain as seeing it in real life. In a way, you're simulating psychosis — but, fortunately, you have the power to turn it on and off.

The Method

Given our limited space, we'll concentrate on first names with literal meanings. We rarely stop to think that many names correspond to things that are easy to visualize: Bill, Lance, Reed, Jack, Teddy, Rose, Robin, Patty, Olive, etc.

Take a brief moment to use your imagination and picture each of these items in your head. It takes just seconds and is a useful, mind-strengthening exercise. Teddy is, of course, a plush bear. A rose is a rose is a rose. Each name may have a single meaning or connote multiple things. Jack, for example, could be a tool for changing a flat tire, a playing card, a child's game with a rubber ball, or a young man clambering up a beanstalk.

Even when not spelled identically, many common names are pronounced the same as their concrete counterparts: Paige, Bea, Axel, Jeannie, and Noam, to name a few. In fact, you'll never confuse Tylers or Taylors again if you think about how they sound: "tilers" and "tailors" are very different professions.

When making introductions, be sure you actually catch the name; otherwise, you can't remember what you didn't learn in the first place. If for any reason you didn't understand the name, ask the person to repeat it or even spell it. Then say it back.

Go for a Test Drive

Your next task — and this is where flexing your imagination muscle comes in—is to link the name to the face in some over-the-top way. Exaggerate the size or number; add movement; and involve other senses when possible. The more cartoonish, the better.

Here are two people you might meet at a community function:



1. Take a good look at this kid. What would you consider her most distinctive facial characteristic? For most people, it's the broad field of freckles.

Now, her name is Ruby, the same as the red gemstone. Imagine that, instead of freckles, her face is studied with bright, sparkling rubies. See how they reflect the light and dazzle you with their deep, rich, blood-red color. What must it feel like to have hard glittering gemstones embedded in one's skin? These imaginary feelings take milliseconds to process. The payoff is that they make the memory take deeper root. Ruby....freckles. Freckles...Ruby.

What's great is that the method is bidirectional: the face tells you the name, and the name helps you reconstruct the face.

2. This next gentleman has a very busy face, but most of us fixate on the brambly eyebrows. Look at them carefully. His name is Frank, as in frankfurter. Can you see that bushy forest of hair composed instead of thousands of miniature hot dogs wriggling in the breeze? Watch them sway together in unison, like an arena full of sports fans making a human wave. While you're at it, inhale a whiff of frankfurters sizzling on a barbecue.

Ridiculous? Absolutely! And that's why it works.



Want to learn more? Check out Harry Lorayne and Jerry Lucas' seminal text, *The Memory Book*, first published in 1973 and my bible since the age of 14. It's a little corny and dated, but it remains the most accessible book on the subject. It will teach you how to extend the techniques to names that aren't so literal in English and in other languages, as well as numbers, complex terminology, and more.



By the way, these associations are like glue—once stuck, they dry clear. So the next time I see a certain commanding officer, the riot of six-pointed Stars of David and laser beams will have faded, and I'll be left with just the essential information—David Lazar.

I welcome your comments and questions. Email me at brent@sfsafe.org.

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