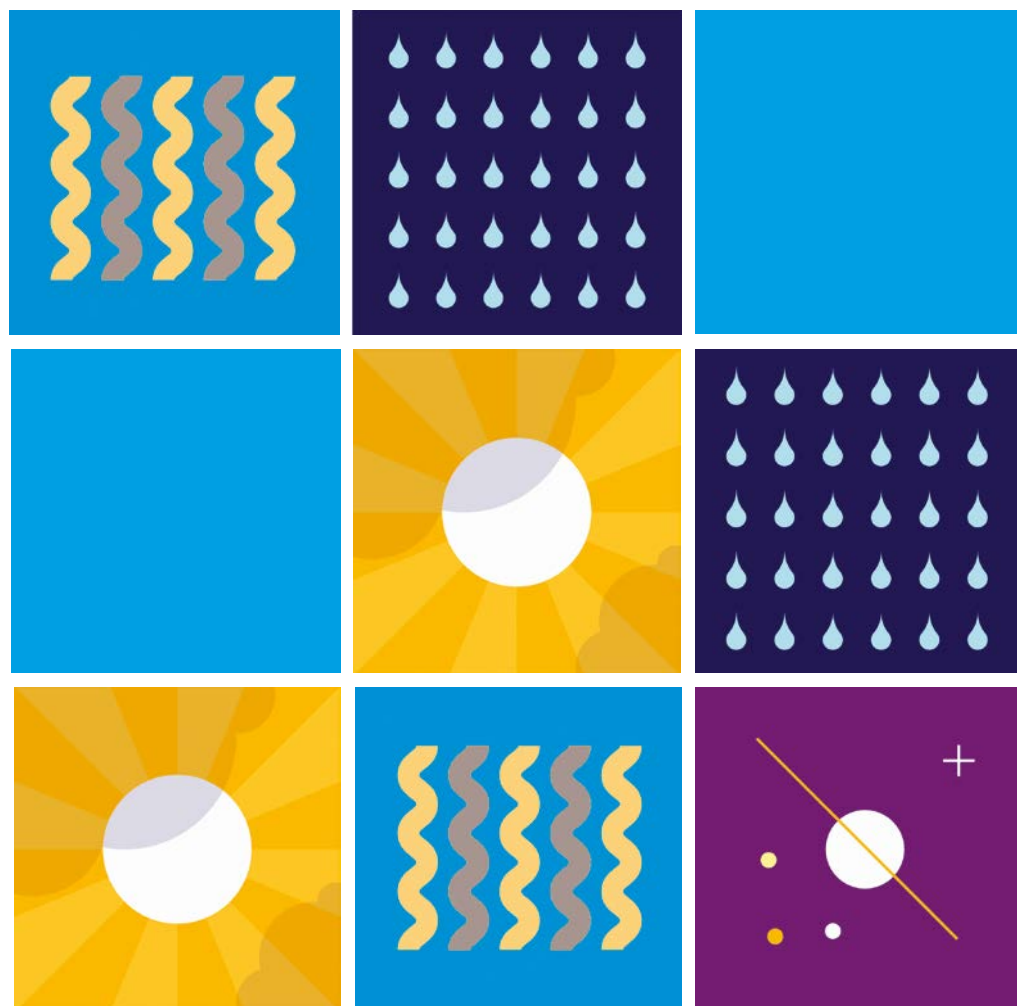


MAKE IT STICK

Exam success isn't just about understanding facts. It's about remembering them too, says Peter Bartram



You're in the exam room. The final question involves remembering four important points. You can recall three but no matter how hard you try, you can't remember the fourth. But your grade or even your pass may depend on you doing so. You have just five minutes left. Now you're panicking and you've forgotten the second point as well...

It is a scenario familiar to many ACA students, but it doesn't have to be like that. Scientists have devised all manner of brain exercises or mnemonics to help you digest the trickiest facts - and make them stick. Here are some of the most effective.

1. AVOID THE STUDENT ILLUSION

The "student illusion" is a common mistake. It refers to students who have read their notes time and time again until they think they know them. But instead they have created an illusion of memory, as many of the facts won't be deeply rooted in their mind.

The term was coined by Michael Eysenck, now an emeritus professor of psychology at Royal Holloway, University of London. He realised the best way to learn is not just to read something repeatedly until you're bored with it, but to engage with it. "The best way to

remember is to test yourself," agrees Dr Andrew Johnson, a memory expert and psychology lecturer at Bournemouth University. "If you learn something, have a break and then test yourself. Your chance of remembering it in the exam will be greatly enhanced."

He points to research by academics Henry Roediger and Jeffrey Karpicke, who performed an experiment in which a group of students were given study material. Later, half of the students studied the same material again while the other half were tested

on it. After another interval, both sets of students were given a final test. Astonishingly, the group that studied once and were tested recalled more than the group that studied the material twice.

2. DEVELOP YOUR POWERS OF CONCENTRATION

So your eyes are on your notes but your mind is miles away. Learning to concentrate more is an important way to improve memory. And there are some surprising ways of doing it.

In one study, 40 people were split into two groups and asked to listen to the same information read to them in a dull telephone message. The first group was asked to doodle in a colouring book while the second group just had to listen. Then both groups were asked to recall eight names that had been mentioned during the message. The doodlers recalled on average 7.5 of the names while the non-doodlers only remembered 5.8.

But Professor Jackie Andrade, director of the Centre for Research in Brain, Cognition and Behaviour at Plymouth University, who conducted the experiment, says: "Doodling may help students concentrate in lectures, but only when they are struggling to stay focused and avoid day-dreaming.

"If they can actively listen and make the material interesting by linking it with existing knowledge, then the best thing is to pay attention and not doodle."

3. LINK NEW LEARNING TO WHAT YOU KNOW

"Memory works most efficiently when you integrate new material with what you already know," says Andrade. "So when encountering a new piece of information for the first time you should try to understand how it fits in with your existing knowledge."

American researchers John Bransford and Marcia Johnson conducted an experiment where three groups listened to a vague, rambling description of a common activity. The first group was not told what the activity was before or after listening to the description. The second group was told up-front the description was about doing laundry. The third group was given the laundry clue, but only after they'd heard the description.

Afterwards, the second group proved much better at recalling description details than the first or third. Andrade

advises that active note taking - where you write the most important message rather than copying everything - is helpful.

4. MAKE YOUR ENVIRONMENT HELP YOU REMEMBER

Where do you normally revise for an exam? A library? Your bedroom? Starbucks? Memory experts believe the environment you choose can help you remember - what they call the context dependent memory effect.

"You don't just learn material in a vacuum," explains Johnson. "You associate the environment implicitly with the material you're trying to remember." The technique seems to work best if you restrict a location to learning about one particular topic.

Mark Channon, who has worked as a trainer and memory coach for more than 20 years, says that it helps to have a study ritual. "You might want to put on your favourite music and arrange your books in a certain way," he says. "It creates a climate in which you are receptive to learn."

Johnson also points out that context dependent memory can be affected by mood. People who learn material when they're intoxicated are more likely to remember it when they're in the same state. "I say to students: if you revise drunk, it's best to go to the exam drunk!"

5. MAKE YOUR TIME COUNT

Drawing up an effective revision timetable is something only people with too much time on their hands do, right? WRONG! It's people who draw up effective revision timetables that pass exams.

6. LEARN WHILE YOU SLEEP

It's an old adage that you should get a good night's sleep before an exam. But some cognitive psychologists believe sleep can be used to help you learn. So it's worth trying to learn something just before lights out.

Channon points out that because you're usually relaxed at bedtime, you have less anxiety and so your mind is more receptive. The first and last thing you learned tend to be the ones you remember best, says Andrade. "So put more effort into revising the less memorable material from the middle of the course." ■

To listen again to Mark Channon's ICAEW webinar about mind mapping and memorising revision notes, visit icaew.com/listenagain

SEVEN STEPS TO THE PERFECT REVISION TIMETABLE

Patrick Connolly, Kaplan Financial

1 Get a diary. Work out how many days you have between now and the exam, then list each day on an Excel spreadsheet and assign an activity to each.

2 Commit yourself. Work out your existing commitments, such as holiday, work and tuition. You'll soon realise you don't have as much revision time as you think.

3 Get in contact with your tutor. They are in the perfect position to recommend extra questions to attempt. Don't forget to have a go at past papers on ICAEW's website too.

4 Practise, practise, practise. Don't just make notes and re-read the manual; practising exam-standard questions is the most important thing.

5 Be realistic. Distribute practice questions over your revision calendar. Try one question after work for three weekdays and then five questions over the weekend.

6 Stick to the programme. There's no point drawing up a timetable and not doing it. If you miss a night's revision, make sure you catch up.

7 Have some fun. (But not too much fun). Watching TV or reading a book is a great way to switch off. Maybe leave a night of celebrating in the pub until after the exam.

For more information visit kaplanfinancial.co.uk/icaew

