Learning on Steroids:

Getting Started with the Chain Method

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Getting Started with the Chain Method

The Chain Method is a technique I learned several years ago and it has a powerful, and very specific purpose:

To remember lists of arbitrary information.

That's it. Unlike many other techniques I'll describe, the link method is ultra-specific. It can be adapted to a few outside scenarios, but it's primary use is for remembering information that is arbitrary, and ordered.

Despite its name, this method is actually only slightly holistic. Because it isn't as holistic as other, general-purpose methods, such as metaphors and visceralization, it isn't the best technique for increasing your understanding.

However, it does employ linking, so it still stands above rote

memorization. Especially since its primary use is material that would otherwise need to be memorized by rote.

Side note: To avoid confusion with other holistic techniques, I'm calling this technique the "chain" method, but other practitioners use the term "link" method (as I do, in Learn More, Study Less).

How to Chain Lists of Information

As an example, let's say we have to chain together a list of grocery items:

1. Milk
2. Honey
3. Toilet Paper

4. Garbage Bags
5. Towels

I'm picking simple items to explain the technique clearly. However, I have used it successfully on more abstract ideas (which I'll explain afterwards).

In order to chain this list together you need to create a vivid mental image that connects one idea with the next in the sequence. Vividness and ridiculousness are important here, because boring, dull imagery will form a weak chain.

So, for the first link, we need to chain "milk" to "honey". You could do this by imagining a giant container of milk wrestling a beehive dripping in honey. Make the mental image vivid and clear, otherwise you'll forget.

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For the next link, we need to chain “honey” to “toilet paper”. Here you could imagine bees throwing toilet paper over their honey-dripped beehive to vandalize it. For “toilet paper” and “garbage bags” you could imagine a giant monster made out of garbage bags vomiting rolls of toilet paper.

Try your own link between garbage bags and towels. Vividness and memorability are more important than realism. Realism is probably a detracting factor because it is easier to forget.

The final step is to link the first item to a trigger. This is whatever is going to start the chain of ideas. For my groceries, it might be the grocery store doors. If I know what the grocery doors look like, I can imagine them being blown down by a flood of milk (the first item in the list).

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Once you've formed your chain you should be see the door, imagine the milk rushing through which allows you to think of the milk wrestling with honey, honey being covered in toilet paper and the garbage monster vomiting toilet paper.

This technique requires some practice to get familiar with it, so I suggest practicing on the following lists as examples:

Trigger: *Hardware Store*

1. Nails
2. Hammer
3. White Paint
4. Plastic Tarp
5. Screws

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Trigger: *Your Car*

1. Dry-Cleaning
2. Post Office
3. Convenience Store
4. Laundromat

Trigger: *Ten Commandments*

1. Idols
2. Blasphemy
3. Sabbath
4. Honor Parents
5. Kill
6. Adultery
7. Steal
8. Lying

9. Covet Neighbor's Spouse
10. Covet Neighbor's Possessions

The last list is a little more difficult to chain because many of the items are verbs, not nouns, so you need to be more creative with your chaining.

Chaining Abstract Ideas

I suggest for practicing that you get comfortable with chaining easy-to-visualize ideas before you get into abstractions, since these make the process more complicated.

To chain abstract ideas, you need to do one additional step. First you need to come up with a symbol for each of the abstract ideas. The symbol needs to be something easy to visualize, yet immediately reminds you of the abstraction.

It also needs to be a symbol for only that abstract idea. If you're trying to come up with symbols for chemical elements and you visualize a grey metal, it might remind you of Lithium. But then again, it could also remind you of dozens of other grey, metallic elements.

So let's say, for this list, we need to memorize the halogen elements, in order, on the periodic table:

1. Fluorine
2. Chlorine
3. Bromine
4. Iodine
5. Astatine

Again, the process of interlinking is the same as before, but we need to generate a clear symbol for each item in the list.

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Fluorine, is a key ingredient in many toothpastes. So for fluorine my symbol would be a tube of toothpaste. Chlorine is an ingredient used to treat swimming pools, so my symbol could be a swimming pool. Bromine is a brown gas, so I can visualize this clearly as just a brown gas.

Iodine is found in iodized salt, so I could use salt as an example. But the problem with this symbol is that it may trigger sodium or chlorine, the two principle elements in table salt. So instead, I'm going to focus on how iodine can be used as a disinfectant for cuts.

Astatine is the most difficult abstract idea on this list. With few uses and no clear visual properties, it would be difficult to create a symbol that would immediately remind me of astatine. The solution is to focus on the word "astatine" itself to create the

symbol. “Astatine” contains the words “A Stat” which I could symbolize as an average for a baseball player.

So now, my abstract list becomes symbols:

1. **Fluorine** -> *Toothpaste*
2. **Chlorine** -> *Swimming Pool*
3. **Bromine** -> *Brown Gas*
4. **Iodine** -> *Disinfectant*
5. **Astatine** -> *Baseball Statistic*

Then, all you need to do is repeat the same process above, except chaining the symbols together.

Giant swimming pools guarded by tubes of toothpaste and filled with brown gas. Brown gas sealing a cut and a baseball stats card being used as a bandage over a wound. Be creative.

If the symbol doesn't easily remind you of the original idea, you need to find something else.

Once again, if you can't think of any obvious symbol, try using the word itself to provide a hint. I don't recommend that approach unless it's absolutely necessary, because then you have 2 layers of abstraction (concept->word->symbol) and it increases the chance you'll forget.

Implementing the Chain Method

As the Chain Method is an ultra-specific rapid learning technique, I don't suggest learning it unless you're faced with many lists of information. That being said, I've found it to be very useful when learning lists that require a specific order, but there isn't an obvious reason for remembering that order.

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Implementation requires practice. I'd suggest going through 3 stages:

1. First stage, simply **practice with easy lists** (like your groceries, to-do lists, recipes, etc.). Wait until you get good at making the chains and recalling them before moving on.
2. Second stage, pick a few easy lists **in your coursework** and try chaining them.
3. Final stage, try **chaining larger** lists with more **abstract** ideas.

You could set this up as a 30-Day Trial, where each day you work on chaining a new list every day. The first week you could focus on the first stage, second week on the second stage and then explore harder chains in the later part of the trial.

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Also try to recall your past chains after you have made them. If you keep a journal, you can write down the chains as well as their triggers, and test yourself a day or week afterward.

The weakness of chaining is that I've found it doesn't last forever. Unless you are using a chain in your life, it will only last several weeks in your head before it is difficult to go through the sequences. This is why you may need to quickly refresh your chains before a test situation if you have a lot of lists to remember.

Good luck on implementing this technique and I'll see you on the other side!