Learning on Steroids:

Image Association for Vocabulary

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Image Association for Vocabulary

Many subjects don't have a lot of terminology to remember. If you're studying computer science, for instance, you may need to know what the terms "polymorphism" or "binary search trees" mean, but what's really difficult is understanding the underlying concepts.

The words are just the tops of icebergs, floating on a surface of much more difficult ideas.

This isn't the case for every subject. And eventually you'll encounter information where the iceberg is completely above the surface. Here are a few examples of topics which have a large vocabulary, but less depth within them:

1. **Anatomy** - The bane of pre-med students everywhere
2. **Languages** - Perhaps the most vocabulary-intensive subject

3. **Law** - Latin principles, codes and document names
4. **Taxonomy** - Homo Memorizationus

How do you remember all those vocabulary terms?

Image Association for Terminology and Vocabulary

My favorite method for storing vocabulary words is image association. Benny Lewis suggests it as one of his preferred methods in the *Fluent In 3 Months* audio trainings given with this program.

I recently ran a trial to see how image association held up against a few other techniques, and it was by far the fastest and most effective.

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My trial was to use image association on 50 new French words every day, half translated from English to French, half from French to English. I did image association for one week and had a control group for the other week.

With the control group of 350 vocabulary words, my memory success rate was roughly 35%. That meant I could successfully recall only a bit above a third of all the words I had tried to commit to memory.

Using image association, however, I was able to successfully recall over 80% of a new batch of 350 words. Given this, the increase in time was negligible, as I was forming associations at about 10-15 seconds per word.

Now, my trial was a bit of an exaggeration. Most classes you won't be expected to remember 350 new terms in a week. Even

the most intensive vocabulary class might only have 350 terms in a month or a semester.

Then again, for many of you, an 80% pass rate isn't too glamorous. That might only earn you a B in your course, so you may strive for 95-99% accuracy with the words.

I want to insist that the technique still works. If you're memorizing less words and need higher accuracy, you simply need to devote a bit more time to making connections and self-testing. So instead of 10-15 seconds, you may give yourself 2-3 minutes per word.

Even if your class forces you to remember 300 new words, giving a healthy 2.5 minutes per term, means just over 12 hours to remember the entire set. If you were to do that as a 30-day trial, that would mean less than 30 minutes a day to get a strong memory for every single word.

How to Use the Tactic

The basic idea isn't too different from the chain method. Here, in every term, you have two components:

1. The **unfamiliar term**
2. The **concrete term**/concept you need to link it to

With languages this is fairly easy. In learning French, I can see that the verb "*chavirer*" is translated to English as "to capsize". My goal, therefore is to create a two-way bridge that connects these ideas. One, if I see the word "*chavirer*" I will connect it with "to capsize" and also the reverse, going from English back to French.

What about an anatomy class? Here the difficulty is the second part. There isn't a plain English term for all the Latin

gobbledygook you need to remember. If there were, they probably wouldn't need to use Latin in the first place.

When this happens you need to ensure the concrete term is instantly associated with the concept. One way you can do this is to invent a plain English version of your term that may be more wordy, but still perfectly describes your target.

Take the bone "calcaneus" which is the bone of the heel. Here your concrete term could be simply "the bottom heel bone". Now you have a starting point and a destination you can shift between when trying to remember the words.

The next step is to create a mental picture for the familiar term. So for my "the bottom heel bone" I could clearly visualize the bottom part of my heel, or if I were familiar enough, even

remember how it looks in anatomy diagrams. For “to capsize” I could play a little animation in my head of a canoe flipping over.

The same rules of visceralization apply here. If you want to add sounds, animations, touch and other sensations, you’ll probably remember it better. Vividness counts. The difficulty here is that you probably don’t want to spend a lot of time per word, so you may stick with simpler visceralizations that get the job done but only take 20-30 seconds to conjure.

Creating a Mental Image for the Unfamiliar Word

Now the tricky part–you need to create a mental image representation of the unfamiliar word. This can be a tricky task for two reasons:

1. You don't have any existing imagery associated with the word (otherwise it wouldn't be unfamiliar)
2. Any image you do have is likely going to be the same as the concrete word (what's the point of linking two flipping canoes together?)

Here the loophole to get out of this problem is to work on what the word *sounds like*, and not what it actually means.

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To understand this, try saying a normal English word repeatedly about 40-50 times. Such as “water”. After awhile, you stop noticing the meaning of the word and start paying attention to how it sounds “waaaahhhh duuuuurr”.

For new words that don’t have a strong association this is easier to do. You don’t need to say “*chavirer*” (shaaav eeeraaaay) a dozen times to get the sound of the word independent from its meaning.

So when forming the image, focus on the appearance (in text) or pronunciation of the word to see what it reminds you of, regardless of what it actually means. For “*chavirer*” I could look at the appearance of the word, which for some reason reminds me of “chivalry”. Or I could focus on the pronunciation of the word, which for me sounds like “shave a ray”.

Now I just need to form a mental image that corresponds to these bizarre “sounds like” or “looks like” versions of the word. Chivalrous could be a knight in shining metallic armor. Shave a ray could be a furry stingray getting shaved by a barber.

Forming the Connection

Now, as was with the chain method, all you need to do is link the two images inside your mind. So, assuming I go with my textual version of the word, I could imagine a canoe flipping over with a knight in shining armor falling overboard. Or, if I went with the auditory association, I could imagine the flipping boat turning into a razor which shaves the back of a giant stingray.

As with the chain method, vividness and weirdness helps. The more unusual your association is, the more memorable it will be and the more likely you'll be able to use this self-created pathway when remembering a word.

How to Form Links Quickly

I've just described, in several pages, what I do in 10-15 seconds when given an actual case of a word to memorize and it's translation. Obviously if you followed each example with the pace I'm using to explain it, this technique would be painfully slow.

However, once you get some practice and into the flow of making these connections, you too can do them relatively quickly.

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Step-by-step, just:

1. Pick your *unfamiliar word* and it's *concrete* counterpart
2. Create a mental image of the concrete term
3. Figure out what the unfamiliar term sounds or looks like.
4. Create a mental image of the "sounds like" version of the unfamiliar term.
5. Link the two together in a bizarre picture.

I'll give some quick examples of this process from the actual trial I ran several weeks ago testing this method against various others:

1. *ailes* -> wings
2. wings (easy enough)
3. *ailes* reminds me of "easels" in English

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4. easels (again, easy enough)
5. I imagine a picture of a painter's easel flying around with angelic wings.

1. *congés* -> holidays
2. I imagined a trip at a tropical resort
3. *congés* reminds me of a congo line
4. congo line
5. I imagine being on holiday wearing a Hawaiian t-shirt joining a congo line

1. *gâtées* -> decayed
2. I imagine something rotting
3. g*âtées* reminds me of a cake (or *gâteau*, in French)
4. cake
5. I imagine a cake rotting with flies hovering around it

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1. *menton* -> chin
2 chin
3. *menton* reminds me of a mentor
4. An old man lecturing to kids
5. I imagine an old man stroking a humongous Jay Leno-esque chin

1. *serrures* -> locks
2. A combination lock
3. *serrures* reminds me of serrated
4. A serrated edge of a knife
5. I imagine a lock whose entire right side is a serrated knife edge

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Once you get in the flow, going through all 5 steps can be done relatively quickly. Sometimes you can skip steps, as thinking about the word “serrated” automatically conjures an image so I don’t need to specifically declare my image for that.

Sometimes you need to be more deliberate. Remembering “*ému* -> affected” was more difficult not because I needed an association for “*ému*” but because “affected” is more difficult to reliably convert into a mental picture. Eventually I settled on an emu crying, but even that wasn’t an ideal solution.

What if My Unfamiliar Word Doesn't Remind Me of Anything?

This isn't actually as bad a problem as it appears, for one major reason: If your word isn't immediately conjuring any sounds-like or looks-like associations, then it won't immediately conjure those up when you see it again.

So if you go with something it only remotely sounds like, chances are you'll pick up on that same weak connection when you see the image.

For example, if I need to remember the word "calcaneus" I may not come up with anything immediately. In fact, I may find nothing that immediately comes to mind when I see this word.

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After significant pondering, let's say I come up with "can" as the word, however weakly, most fits my sense of this term. The advantage is now, when seeing the word again, I'll be more likely to reach the same conclusion (that "can" is the most obvious choice) and I can make use of my mental link (a man with cans for heel-ends).

The weakness is in going from your familiar to the unfamiliar term when the association isn't strong. So if you needed to go from a diagram of a heel bone to "calcaneus" a stronger association (maybe "calcium") would be more likely to yield the correct answer.

What if I Can't Visualize a Term?

Again, not as bad a problem as it first sounds. Because some words are hard to visualize, you'll encounter the same difficulty each time you see them.

For example my remembering the word "affected". That's an abstract term referring to a state of events. Or, if you were learning basic vocabulary in a foreign language words like "before", "previously" and "each other" are extremely difficult to create mental images since they don't correspond to anything in the real world.

However with these words, you'll always encounter the same difficulty. So if you have come up with a mental image/association

once, you'll likely pick that same one again. "Affected" may not be the same as a disgruntled emu, but if that was my first intuition when making the connection, I'll probably go there again when trying to recall it.

The challenge with hard-to-visualize words is that your connection should be more or less unambiguous. If your word means "to steal" then you shouldn't also associate it with "to take", "to share" or "to grab". Even though stealing, taking, sharing or grabbing could correspond to similar mental images.

Try to create the best unambiguous mental image, or one that doesn't allow for alternative explanations.

Perfect Connections Versus Whatever Works

The length at which I'm describing how to make a single connection will be overkill for most people. Yes, these steps count, but when you're actually practicing it, you'll aim for going for what works rather than a perfect mental image. Don't worry if you connections only make sense to you, they only need to.

For example, my connection for "loutre -> otter" was an otter wearing a shirt that says "I'm with Stupid" with those arrows pointing to someone else. Will you understand that connection? Probably not. Are there better links for those two words? Definitely. But I'd rather spend 30 seconds to make a "good enough" connection than 30 minutes to make a perfect one.

Self-Testing and Making Sure They Stick

Image association doesn't work without self-testing. Giving 15-20 seconds per word, meant that in about 50% of cases my connection didn't hold up. Afterwards I would forget the word completely and the connection didn't help.

That's why it's important to occasionally do 5-10 minute quick flashcard-style reviews of your vocabulary terms using the connections. You'll be able to quickly reinforce the connections that work and retool the ones that didn't.

Self-testing isn't the same as rote memorization by virtue of scale. Doing an occasional brush-up with the terms isn't the same as staring at them dozens of times. In the week I was running with

image association, I quickly skimmed my list and tried a few connections each day, maybe adding a grand total of 20 minutes of review for 350 words in total.

Implementing Image Association for Vocabulary Words

A great way to try out this technique is a 7-day experiment. Try doing 10 words per day for an entire week and see how well you remember them after the week is done. If you find the technique useful, you can then expand to a 30-Day Trial with more words.

Good luck with this tactic and I'll see you on the other side!