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What Are Mnemonics? (I Can't Remember!)

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The ability to hear, understand, and remember information is a critical part of learning. Some people use mnemonics (pronounced "nih-man-ics") to help them remember important things. Mnemonics (sometimes called "mnemonic devices") are learning tools or techniques that help a person learn and recall information. Mnemonics make remembering information easier by associating the information with something else that is meaningful to the person trying to remember it.

Types of Mnemonics

There are many different types of mnemonics. Mnemonics can be auditory (i.e., they are presented in words or sounds that can be heard), visual (i.e., they are depicted in images that can be seen), or kinesthetic (i.e., they are provided in a format that can be touched). Here are some often-used mnemonics:



- **Acronyms** - Acronym mnemonics use the first letter of each word in a list to make one word. For example, the Great Lakes in North American are Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, and Superior. You can remember the five lakes using the word "HOMES" (which is made from the first letter of each of the Great Lakes).
- **Phrase or Expression Mnemonics** - With this type of mnemonic, use the first letter of each word in a list to form a new phrase or expression. For example, to remember the names and order of the planets (Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune), you might think of the sentence, "My Very Educated Mother Just Served Us Noodles."
- **Music or Songs** - Songs can be simple and sung to familiar tunes or they can be more elaborate. For example, some people have developed songs to help them remember all 118 elements of the Periodic Table or all of the United States Presidents in order.

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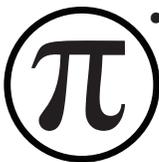
• **Spelling Mnemonics** – Spelling mnemonics can help you remember how to spell difficult words or which spelling to use for homophones (words that sound the same but have different meanings and spellings). For example, “rhythm helps your two hips move” can help a student remember how to spell “rhythm,” and remembering that “a principal is your pal” will help you remember when to use “principal” (the person) instead of “principle” (the belief).



• **Poems** – Rhyming poems, or poems that can be recited in a singsong manner, are usually easier to remember. For example, in order to remember when to use “ei” or “ie” in spelling, many students learned this poem... i before e, except after c, or when sounded as “a,” as in “neighbor” and “weigh.”



• **Kinesthetic Mnemonics** – Kinesthetic mnemonics rely on movement or touch to help us remember information. For example, to remember which months have 31 days in them, you can touch the knuckles and spaces between the knuckles of your fist while reciting the months in order... January (31), February, March (31), April, May (31), June, July (31)... then start over... August (31), September, October (31), November, December (31).



• **Number Sequences** – You can use phrases and sentences to remember sequences of numbers. In this type of mnemonic, the number of letters in each word of the phrase or sentence corresponds to a number in the sequence. For example, to remember the first seven numbers after the decimal in the mathematical constant, pi, think of the sentence, “May I have a large container of coffee?” (The number of letters in each word are 3.1415926.)

Not all mnemonics work for all people. The mnemonic that works best for you will depend on your experiences, your personality, and a host of other factors. Mnemonics should make it easier to remember information – not harder. If a mnemonic takes more effort to remember than the information it is supposed to help you remember, then don’t use it. For more information about the related topic of Auditory Memory, see Handy Handout #331, “Helpful Strategies for Auditory Memory.”



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