

The Secrets of Human Memory

Studying for law exams or the Bar exam doesn't have to be torture. You don't have to memorize hundreds of disjointed rules and elements. This is not the smart way to use your memory.

What is memory? Well, it's many things. People who claim to have poor memories really mean they have poor "retrieval" skills. Retrieval means recalling, or recovering information once learned. One of the most important secrets of memory is that one's ability to retrieve (recall) information depends on how we deal with it in the first place!

The term "encoding" refers to getting information into memory and transforming it into a form that can be used. The secret to memory is that the way you encode (that is, put information into memory) determines your ability to retrieve it when you need it. By making your encoding more effective, you can greatly enhance your recall without using any more time.

There are numerous ways to make encoding more efficient. In a nutshell, we remember those things that we think about and that we relate to our broader structure of knowledge. For example, when students were divided into 2 groups and given different memorization strategies, they had markedly different rates of success. The rote approach (repeatedly reading and repeating information – the approach most students take) took almost twice as long and resulted in roughly half the retention as the active approach. You too can improve your memory by following an active approach:

1. Attend to the meaning of what you're studying.
2. Form images to help you remember.
3. Consciously encourage yourself to be alert and attend carefully.
4. Without notes, practice recalling what you studied in order to consolidate it.

Other effective techniques of encoding use [The Schematic Approach](#) advocated in Bar Secrets and imposing an organization on the material. It turns out that when you impose an organization, any organization is better than none at all.

[Click here for 5 suggestions for memory improvement](#) (in PDF form)