**Forget flashcards: The latest research reveals some surprising new techniques**

Some skills you don’t need past graduation: geometry, cursive, the ability to dissect a frog. But memorization is not one of them. Far beyond your final spelling bee, your memory either saves you from—or delivers you to—public humiliation. Just think about the last time you forgot the name of a very important person.

Memory is important in adulthood because it also enables all kinds of life-enriching learning, from remembering several seasons’ worth of football statistics (a very big deal to very loyal fans) to learning a new language.

But keeping it sharp requires practice. Just ask Ed Cooke, who can memorize the order of a shuffled deck of cards in 45 seconds. A fierce competitor in memory tournaments, Cooke was crowned a Grand Master of Memory in his early twenties. (As of last year, there were only 151 Grand Masters of Memory in the world.)

Cooke wanted to figure out the very best way to learn as fast as possible, so he cofounded *[Memrise](https://www.memrise.com/)*, an online language learning program devoted to that mission. “Science actually hasn’t really asked the question, ‘What’s the fastest way to learn?’” Cooke says. “It’s discovered hundreds of things that help learning, but it hasn’t discovered the perfect recipe.”

Today, *Memrise* launched an online experiment, called [Memprize](http://www.memprize.com/), pitting five very promising learning methods against one another. Earlier, *Memrise* put out a call for scientists to design the best memorization program. Out of 20 rigorously tested entries, the five being unveiled were the winners—and now, anyone willing to devote a couple hours to experimenting with speedy learning can help determine the winner of Memprize. After entering the experiment at the website, people will play with one of the memorization programs to learn 80 words in an obscure foreign language, like Lithuanian, in an hour. They’ll be tested a week later to determine how much they retained. A winning technique will then be crowned.

“Over time, we might be able to discover and share methodologies of learning that are twice as good as the things that exist,” Cooke says.

From the top 5 methods facing off, Cooke told us some of their top strategies for learning words fast.

1. **Take a guess.**One of the best ways to remember a new word, it turns out, is to guess its meaning before you even know it. You’ll likely be wrong, of course. “But just the act of guessing can mean that when you’re then told the answer, you remember the answer much better than if you don’t guess at all,” Cooke says. It works for names, too, he says. Guess someone’s name when you meet for the first time, and when you learn the real name, you’ll remember it better.
2. **Repeat, repeat, repeat.**It’s well established that repetition is key to memory. But one innovation, called mega-drilling, has proven especially powerful. According to this technique, “you’ve got to actively recall the memory 30 times,” Cooke says. So when you meet someone new, you might want to repeat her name 30 times.
3. **Create a mnemonic**. Use whatever a new word sounds like or makes you think of, and you’ll remember it more. “It helps connect the word to the knowledge you already have in your mind, and the quality of memory which gets formed is much higher,” Cooke says.
4. **Think spatially**. “Humans have an incredible memory for space,” Cooke says. One effective strategy for memorizing words is to picture a room, then attach the word and its meaning to a place in the room.
5. **Relax already**. One of the techniques makes you take a weird little break in the middle of memorization. For a minute, you’re told to watch a video of a waterfall. “You’re wasting lots of time,” Cooke says. “But in the process of staring at this video of a waterfall, it calms you down and relaxes your brain and creates space, in a way, for new memories to form afterwards. Taking time out to rest your brain can actually speed you up in the long run.”

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