Mnemonics

Memory
Many people believe that your memory worsens over time. However, this is not entirely true. Your memory is like a muscle. If it receives constant exercise and the appropriate nourishment it will not undergo mental atrophy. It may not be as quick or as flexible, but it will remain robust and dependable throughout life. So, the more it is used, the better it gets.

Naturally, people wonder why it seems there is a sharp decline in their ability to remember after leaving full time education, but the answer is rather simple: they tend to use their memory less. Information outside of academia tends to be less structured and there are more isolated facts that are not presented in a clear conceptual manner. Hence, it is also more difficult to remember. One other aspect of professional life is that we are trained to be reliable and predictable, with less emphasis on spontaneous and imaginative behavior. Memory, however, works by making imaginative links between pieces of information and fitting them into mental frameworks.

Association, Imagination and Location
Since the time of the Ancient Greeks, people have explored how memory can be enhanced and some very useful techniques have been developed that might surprise you as to how old they truly are. Whichever the technique, however, they are all based on association, imagination and location. Association is when you link the thing to be remembered to a method of remembering it. Usually this association is visual. Imagination is what you use to create the associations. Location is the setting in which you contextualize the associative image. All of this will become clearer as we explore some of the most popular and time tested techniques.

Link Method
The Link Method is based on the fact that we tend to remember out of the ordinary things, rather than what we expect to see. If you were driving down the road and an old woman crosses the street in front of you while you are stopped at the light, you will probably forget the entire episode. However, if it is not an old woman, but a giraffe, you will undoubtedly remember the entire event, playing it back in your mind as you tell your friends and family about it. There are two things to note: 1) that it is the unusual that we remember and 2) that the visual nature of the episode makes it that much easier to remember.

The Link Method, then, is based on these two principles. So, in order to remember a list of unrelated items we must associate them in an extraordinary, illogical way using visual images to create the link between them. Naturally, the association is based on our creativity, as opposed to some conceptual link between the items. Now, if we had to link a spoon and a tree together, we could imagine that the spoon is huge, as big as a shovel, and it is actually trying to dig up the tree, while the tree is alive and trying to stop the spoon by whaling its branches around to swat the spoon. This process is then repeated with each item on the list. Here are a few guidelines to help you.

1. Try and make the things in your image huge and out of proportion, and visualize them as though they were right in front of you.
2. Action makes things more memorable, so animate the figures in your images and have them sing, dance, fight, swim, etc.
3. Exaggerate the number of items in your image.
4. Substitute the functions of the two items. If a dish and TV set are included in your list then imagine that you are watching a gigantic dish showing TV programs and you are eating from a TV set while having dinner.

Give it a whirl
So, you're just not convinced that it really works. Then, give it a try. Here is a list of twenty words that you have to memorize in five minutes and then write them down on a piece of paper.

book
scissors
plane
tomato
spoon
radio
glasses
broccoli
pants
cup
salt shaker
lamp
bagel
door
handle
watch

mug
snifter

But before you start here is an example of how you could remember the first five. Imagine a giant book in the middle of the forest. The book is a book of enchantments and an evil sorcerer tries to kill the book by transforming himself into a pair of scissors and hurtling himself through the heart of the book, but in the meantime a plane full of Icelandic tourists try to fly though the scissors but it crashes into a patch of giant tomatoes and gets stuck in a giant tomato. The only way out is for them to eat through the tomato using their spoons.

Now, you try. Remember, you only have five minutes!

Method of Loci
This method is also called the memory palace and was first introduced in ancient Greek and Roman treatises and uses visualization, like the link method, to organize and recall information. The fundamental difference between the memory palace and the link method is that the memory palace use a spatial layout such as a house, a city etc. to make the associations. In short, you map vivid images of the things to be remembered to specific points in the journey you make through a well known spatial layout. Naturally, the spacial layout is something that is extremely familiar to you and that you don't have to remember. In essence, it is like taking a mental journey through a physical space and as you pass through the route you have chosen you associate a vivid image of the thing to remember with a specific location so that when you have to remember the things on your list, you simply walk through your "palace" and the images are available to you as you progress.

This mnemonic technique, in one form or another, is incredibly effective and is even used in the memory competitions which began being held in the early 1990s. In fact, in the 2006 World Memory Champion, Clemens Mayer used a 300-point-long journey through his house to memorize 1040 random digits in a half hour. Now that is incredible. The fascination with this technique has spawned references in literature throughout the ages and in movies as well. Although many are unaware of it, in Thomas Harris' Hannibal, the sequel to the Silence of the Lambs, Hannibal Lecter uses a memory palace as well.

Now, let's see how this mnemonic technique would work with a simple grocery list that includes: onions, peppers, toilet paper, spinach and frozen fish. The physical place you use depends entirely upon you. It can be your house, your

school, your city, but the most important thing is that you are already extremely familiar with all of the locations that you are going to use. So, for the sake of this example, we'll use your house. Imagine that as you walk up to the front door you see that someone has wrapped your entire house in toilet paper! When you open the door, you see a gigantic onion with a chef's hat roasting peppers in the fireplace in your living room. When you walk into the kitchen the tile on the floor is covered in a layer of green spinach and the frozen fish are swimming though it like kelp. The more illogical and absurd the association is the better.

Remembering Names

Remembering names is somewhat different than remembering a list of items. However, the associative principle still applies. There are a few tricks that can help you remember as many as a 100 names in as little as two hours. Most people don't believe you when you tell them that it's not a question of having an exceptional memory, but, rather, a technique. However, that is exactly what it is. One of the first things to do is to make associations between the name and the person. How do you do this? One type of association is tactile - shake the person's hand and repeat their name as you do. Use their name as often as possible in meaningful communication. Instead of saying, "Would you like some coffee?" say "Carol, would you like some coffee?" The more you use their name the easier it is to remember. Last but not least, associate their name with a distinctive feature they possess: incredibly green eyes, a distinctive mole or even a crooked nose works great. I can tell you it works, because I've done it literally hundreds of times with groups ranging from 30 to 100 people.