

The self explanation technique

Students using this 'self-explanation' technique scored 50% higher on a test than those that just read the material¹. **Here's what you do:**

Read a section, and then explain in your own words why it is true, why or how something happens, how something relates to what you already know, or what thought processes you are going through. This will connect the new information to your existing knowledge and make it easier to understand and remember.

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1. Practice retrieving information from your brain (rather than stuffing more in)

- Quiz yourself! Questions that make you recall information from memory, like fill-in-the-blanks, may feel harder to get right than multiple choice questions, but that practice remembering is exactly what will help solidify that learning. You can use flashcards, but answer out loud or write down your answer before flipping the card over – this will help you make sure you accurately gauge what you know and what you need to practice more.
- Whether reading, watching instructional videos, or doing practice problems, when you are done, try to recall as many of the ideas you've covered as you can, and then go back and review the materials. This way, you practice seeing what you know and can remember, as well as having a good sense of what you need to pay some more attention to.



2. Space your practice out

- Do the same, or a similar, practice activity multiple times with space between repetitions (this helps reinforce the information in your long-term memory).
- Consider ways to study for shorter periods, but more often. For example, try to find 20 minutes in the morning and 20 minutes in the evening every day this week. This will lead to better learning than just finding one longer block per week.
- The results may not be immediately obvious, but don't give up. Learners who space out their study sessions and cover fewer topics during those sessions generally learn better than those who don't practice regularly or cram.



3. Make it make sense

- We remember information best when we connect it with what we already know, and think about it deeply. Consider ways to move beyond what has been explicitly presented and to generate some ideas that are new to you. If you catch yourself going "Oh!," you are probably on the right track!
- Partner with classmates (even virtual ones), and take turns trying to teach each other about particular topics you are covering. Both of you are likely to learn from the experience!
- There are lots of questions you can ask yourself about ideas and procedures you are learning, like "How does this relate to earlier material?" "How would I explain this to someone else?" or "What else could this information help me to understand or be able to do?"

¹Medical Education 2013; 47: 674– 682 doi: 10.1111/medu.12141