

Using Visual-Spatial Strengths to Memorize New Material

Alexandra Golon

I talk to a lot of teachers about how they can best reach the visual-spatial learners in their classes. After all, there are probably more students in your classroom who favor this learning style than your teacher realizes. Many of them tell me that they try to use helpful, visual tricks so their students can master material that must be memorized. But, there are things you can do to help yourself, as well. Here are some examples.

Take the information you must memorize and create a silly story with it. I once met an incredibly dynamic teacher and conference presenter named Jon Pearson (www.createlearning.com) who taught the 13 colonies by having his audience memorize a ridiculous story—in pictures that participants created in their minds—of a Jersey cow named Georgia, atop the Empire State Building. Can you “see” New Jersey, Georgia and New York here? The tale went on to include all 13 original American colonies and after each line we were instructed to create an image in our mind’s eye while we repeated the line back to him:

There’s a cow named **Georgia** (Georgia)
It’s a **Jersey** cow (New Jersey)
She’s sitting on top of the **Empire State** Building (New York)
She’s singing a couple of Christmas **carols** (North and South Carolina)
Under her arm is a **Virginia ham** (Virginia and New Hampshire)
The cow is wearing a pair of yellow **underwear** (Rhymes with Delaware)
In its hoof is a **pencil** (Pennsylvania)
The cow is making a **Connect**-the-dots drawing (Connecticut)
Of **Marilyn** Monroe (Maryland)
Walking down a **road** (Rhode Island)
Going to **mass** (Massachusetts)



When Jon was done, every member of the audience could accurately recall the ridiculous image each had mentally created of a cow on top of the Empire State Building, and, so, they remembered all 13 colonies. The best part is that you don't have to be an artist to accomplish this. If you want the images drawn, not just imagined, stick figures work just fine. As long as the story is silly and funny and you use color, exaggerated sizes and humor to remember the new material, it will become a lasting image in your mind. You can use this trick to remember so many different types of material, from historical data to science principles and so much more.

Why do you suppose beginning piano students are taught the notes of the scale as Every Good Boy Does Fine? Because it works to stick in the student's mind. Why did we learn the letters of the alphabet to the tune of *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*? Because catchy tunes serve as an anchor and they make new information permanent and retrievable.

Have you seen the trick for memorizing the Great Lakes?

H	Huron
O	Ontario
M	Michigan
E	Erie
S	Superior

The first letter of each of the lakes spells out the word, “homes” when you read them vertically, going down. Using acronyms and mnemonic devices (like the one below) is a helpful way to memorize a wide variety of material, especially if you can make the acronym stand for something silly. Sam recently had to memorize this information for his science class:

Domain
Kingdom
Phylum
Class
Order
Family
Genus
Species

So he created these “headlines” to remember the order:

Darwin Kracks Porpoise Code Orders Families to Group Specialist
Dudes Kick the bucket in Pennsylvania while Clubs Offer Free Grape Soup

They’re meaningless and ridiculous, which makes them memorable! Try this technique the next time you have a string of material you have to memorize.

A dear friend of mine wrote me with this:

I took an exhausting/exhilarating 16-hour reflexology certification course this past weekend. I was told that memorizing the official 47-word definition of reflexology – exactly, word for word, was worth 15 points on the Certification exam. First I thought, I can never do this. Then, I decided I would make a song out of it!! I put it to a familiar tune! THAT came from YOU!! (Personal communication, E. Meckstroth, October, 2004.)

Take a familiar song, especially nursery rhymes like *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*, or *Three Blind Mice*, or even *Happy Birthday* and put the information you are trying to memorize into it. Because the right hemisphere enjoys music, humor and rhythm, you’ll have a better chance of remembering information, especially large amounts, if you do something clever with it, like putting it to music. Try it—you may be surprised at the results.

Another trick you can use to remember information that has related pieces is to create a game of the material. This works great for memorizing capitals to states, countries to continents, specific animals to a species, or any other information that includes two groups of data related to each other. Matching games like “concentration” don’t take long to create, are fun to play and can help you remember what information goes with what. Just take some blank white index cards for recording your information.

You can create each note card with words or drawings, whatever works best for you. Let's suppose you are trying to memorize the state's capitals. Make a card for every state, using an outline of the shape of the state with the name of that state included somewhere on or above the outline of it. Then, make a card for every capital. You can make up silly stories if that helps remember the names of the capitals. (Springfield, IL could include a drawing of a field of springs, for example.)

You can also use color to help you remember which capitals go with which states. Just include color in your drawing or put a dot of color somewhere and use the same color on the card that matches. This will be a good way to confirm your selections as you play the game, too.

Once you have created all of your cards, lay them face down and play the traditional game of concentration where you match capital to state. (You'll probably want to start with just five or seven states and their capitals and gradually increase the number.) Get a friend, sibling or parent to play with you and test your ability.

No matter what the material is that you must be memorize, call upon the strengths of your right hemisphere by using color, humor, music, rhyme, etc., to learn that material and be able to recall it later.