

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

Cramming May Help You Pass a Test. But Here's How to Study So You Remember What You Learn

Source: Albert Stumm, *Los Angeles Times*, October 6, 2026

If you're dreading a midterm — or just studying hard to keep up in any class — chances are your study habits involve taking notes as you're reading and then going back over them. Maybe you use a highlighter.

It turns out those old-fashioned study habits might work if you're cramming for a test, but they aren't very effective for long-term learning. There are better, more efficient ways to retain knowledge.

One involves taking more time to process the information before taking notes.

"We tend to think that what feels the easiest will be retained the easiest, and it's actually the opposite," said Pooja K. Agarwal, a cognitive psychologist and author of "Smart Teaching Stronger Learning: Practical Tips From 10 Cognitive Scientists."

Dispelling the myths behind many popular studying hacks

Social media is full of supposed study hacks that don't have much impact. Chewing gum or smelling essential oils to stimulate the brain while studying doesn't work, and neither does listening to music, Agarwal said.

"It might improve your mood," she said. "It will keep you awake, but research shows it doesn't actually improve your learning."

Highlighting or underlining and repeatedly reviewing notes feels engaging because those approaches keep you focused for a short period. But studies show they don't make a significant difference long-term either, said Robert Bjork, professor emeritus of cognitive psychology at UCLA, where he founded the Bjork Learning and Forgetting Lab with his wife, Elizabeth.

In fact, that kind of "mass practice can be very wasteful of time," Bjork said.

How to study more efficiently

Rather than doing what comes easy, students learn better if they create "desirable difficulties," Bjork said. In other words, small mental challenges strengthen neuronal connections, which makes it easier to retrieve the information later.

One of the best ways is "retrieval practice," which can take various forms but often takes only a minute or two, Agarwal said. Instead of taking notes while reading, she suggested reading a few pages, then stopping and writing down what you remember before continuing to read.

"Engaging in that mental struggle, that desirable difficulty, helps with long-term learning," Agarwal said. "It's one of the most powerful learning and teaching strategies based on plenty of research, both in the laboratory and in the classroom."

Henry L. "Roddy" Roediger is a cognitive psychology professor at Washington University in St. Louis and co-author of the influential "Make it Stick: The Science of Successful Learning." He said "retrieval practice" has been shown to help whether you're retrieving the information by writing it down, talking it out with a study partner or just thinking about it — with a caveat about that last option.

"You can't just glance at it and think, 'Oh, I know that,'" he said. "You really have to spell it out in your mind."

Pause a minute to think about your thinking

Before reviewing the information during another study session, take one minute to think about what you have learned so far. If you have time, write down everything you can remember, which Agarwal called a “brain dump.”

Then, analyze how well you learned the material, which is a form of metacognition, or thinking about your own thinking, Agarwal said.

Ask yourself, “What was most challenging about this when I was learning it the first time? On a scale of zero to 100, how well do I think I learned that?”

“It’s a way to sort of level up retrieval practice for an added boost,” Agarwal said. “The more you build connections, the richer your learning.”

Spacing out study sessions over time also helps with retention

Immediately rereading passages or notes only creates an illusion of learning, although it may help you pass a test.

“Research shows that cramming works,” Agarwal said. “The benefit of spacing it out when studying is, it improves your long-term learning.”

For example, a student who crams for three hours right before an exam on Friday might pass, but chances are they will forget everything quickly after that. If the same student studied one hour each on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, they’ll do well on the test and remember it better later, Agarwal said.

Taking time to forget is actually good for learning

“There’s so much discomfort and frustration around forgetting, but it’s important to keep in mind that forgetting is normal,” Agarwal said.

And don’t go pulling all-nighters. One aspect of better learning that isn’t a study strategy at all is a good night’s sleep, which helps consolidate memories you’ve created during the day, Roediger said.

“Students, both in high school and college, probably med school too, just don’t get enough sleep because they think it’s better to stay awake studying,” he said. “It’s not.”

Possible Response Questions

- What are your thoughts about these study suggestions? Explain.
- Did something in the article surprise you? Discuss.
- Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a “move” made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.