**RESEARCH PROJECT OUTCOME**

**Research Project Question**

*What processes are undertaken in the brain when memory is utilised, and to what extent can mnemonic techniques be best applied when learning, in order to achieve higher levels of memory retention?*

**Introduction**

The extensive research conducted in the folio primarily focussed on specific aspects of *memory* involving: how it works, the process undertaken by the *brain* when it is accessed and the best *mnemonic* *techniques* that can be effectively applied to *learning* for enhanced levels of *memory* *retention*. Throughout the duration of the research, a number of key findings were discovered from the formation of questions realised during critical and creative thinking processes, and these influenced the direction of the research. These key findings included the complex ways in which *memory* works, how information is processed into the *memory* in the *brain* and how *mnemonic* *techniques* affect the *brain* and why they are effective. In addition, the most effective *mnemonic* *techniques* which can be best utilised and applied to *learning* in order to achieve higher levels of *memory* *retention* were considered.

**What does *memory* involve and how does it work?**

*Memory* is a vital aspect of humanity as it is one of the key components of cognition[[1]](#footnote-2) and involves the ability to encode, store and recall information[[2]](#footnote-3),[[3]](#footnote-4),[[4]](#footnote-5) over time.[[5]](#footnote-6) *Mnemonic* processes take place in various, specific regions of the *brain*[[6]](#footnote-7), with a large portion of these processes occurring in the cerebrum[[7]](#footnote-8), one of the most important parts of the *brain* for *learning*[[8]](#footnote-9), and the hippocampus.[[9]](#footnote-10)

*Memory* is crucial for life as it makes up the framework by which one makes sense of everything and takes appropriate action.[[10]](#footnote-11) Whilst several different models of *memory* have been proposed, the Stage Model of *memory* is often used to explain the basic structure and function of *memory*.[[11]](#footnote-12) Initially suggested in 1968 by Richard Atkinson and Richard Shiffrin, this theory proposes there to be three key stages of *memory*: sensory, short-term, and long-term memory.[[12]](#footnote-13),[[13]](#footnote-14),[[14]](#footnote-15) Sensory memory describes the earliest stage of *memory* and involves the encoding of external, sensory information which is stored very briefly in the short-term memory.[[15]](#footnote-16),[[16]](#footnote-17) This process generally takes no longer than half a second for visual information and 3-4 seconds for auditory information, though only essential information obtained passes into the next stage: the short-term memory.[[17]](#footnote-18) Short-term memory involves the information someone is currently aware of or thinking about in their working (active) *memory*.[[18]](#footnote-19),[[19]](#footnote-20),[[20]](#footnote-21) Whilst, these short-term memories are generally quite brief and soon forgotten, attendance to these memories allows for them to be properly encoded into the long-term memory.[[21]](#footnote-22),[[22]](#footnote-23) The long-term memory is the third stage and refers to the continual storage of information over time. The majority of this information remains largely outside conscious thought or awareness until retrieved into the working *memory* when needed.[[23]](#footnote-24),[[24]](#footnote-25)

In summary, *memory* is one of the core components of human cognition.[[25]](#footnote-26) *Mnemonic* process are vital, used to acquire, store, retain and later retrieve information[[26]](#footnote-27) [[27]](#footnote-28),[[28]](#footnote-29) which may pass through the three key stages of *memory*, either: sensory memory, short-term memory or long-term memory, depending on the importance and relevance of the respective information. [[29]](#footnote-30),[[30]](#footnote-31)

**How is information processed in the *brain* when *memory* is accessed?**

The *brain* is made up of a dense network of billions of interconnected neurons[[31]](#footnote-32) and synapses[[32]](#footnote-33) which act together to transmit information, form and retrieve memories[[33]](#footnote-34), learn, recognise patterns and make decisions.[[34]](#footnote-35) These neural networks are essential for *memory* and its three key processes[[35]](#footnote-36) involving: the ability to encode, store and recall information.[[36]](#footnote-37),[[37]](#footnote-38),[[38]](#footnote-39)

*Memory* encoding is the first step in the formation of a new *memory* and involves the conversion of the information into a usable form in the *brain*.[[39]](#footnote-40),[[40]](#footnote-41) This process involves the intake of new information in either visual (images), acoustic (sounds) or semantic (meaning) form[[41]](#footnote-42),[[42]](#footnote-43), by sensory neurons.[[43]](#footnote-44),[[44]](#footnote-45) This allows for the information to be converted into a construct which is then able to be stored within the *brain* and recalled later from the short-term memory.[[45]](#footnote-46),[[46]](#footnote-47) There are three main types of encoding: visual, acoustic and semantic.[[47]](#footnote-48) Visual encoding is the process of encoding images and visual sensory information to be temporarily stored within the iconic *memory* before being encoded into long-term storage.[[48]](#footnote-49) Acoustic encoding is the processing and encoding of sounds, words and other auditory input for storage within the echoic *memory* and later retrieval. [[49]](#footnote-50),[[50]](#footnote-51) Semantic encoding is the encoding of the meaning of something such as a word, picture or phrase, as opposed to the sound or image of it[[51]](#footnote-52) and these memories are stored in the hippocampus.[[52]](#footnote-53) This process relates to *memory* consolidation[[53]](#footnote-54), which is an additional process which involves the stabilisation of newly encoded information obtained after the initial acquisition, through repetition, practice and the use of *mnemonic* *techniques*.[[54]](#footnote-55) Neurologically, this process of consolidation utilises a phenomenon known as long-term potentiation, which allows synapses to increase in strength as increasing numbers of signals are transmitted between neurons. Long-term potentiation occurs when the same group of neurons fire together so often that they become permanently sensitised to each other.[[55]](#footnote-56) As new experiences accumulate, this results in the *brain* creating more and more connections and pathways and may ‘re-wire’ itself by re-routing connections and re-arranging its organisation.[[56]](#footnote-57)

The next key process: storage, involves the generally passive process of retaining information in the *brain*, whether in the sensory memory, the short-term memory or the more permanent long-term memory.[[57]](#footnote-58) Before a new *memory* can be stored, it is first compared with existing memories in the structural core of the *brain*.[[58]](#footnote-59) Since the early neurological work of Karl Lashley and Wilder Penfield during the 1950s and 1960s, it has become evident that long-term memories are not stored in just one part of the *brain*, but are widely **distributed** throughout the **cortex**.[[59]](#footnote-60) Research shows that, the more clusters of neurons that are primed to fire together in the same pattern are used, the better the information they code for will be retained in the long-term memory.[[60]](#footnote-61)

The final, key *mnemonic* process is known as retrieval or recall and refers to the subsequent re-accessing of events or information from the past which have been previously encoded and stored in the *brain*.[[61]](#footnote-62) During retrieval, stored memories are retrieved by a process where the *brain* ‘replays’ a pattern of neural activity that was originally generated in response to a particular event, echoing the *brain*’s perception of the real event.[[62]](#footnote-63) This recollection isn’t quite identical to the original, but rather is mixed with an awareness of one’s current situation. [[63]](#footnote-64) As a result of this, and because of the way they are encoded and stored, memories are not closed off, but new information and suggestions may be incorporated into old memories over time.[[64]](#footnote-65),[[65]](#footnote-66) As memories are stored in different regions of the *brain*, [retrieval requires re-visiting the nerve pathways the *brain*](https://human-memory.net/memory-the-brain/) formed when encoding the *memory*, and the strength of those pathways determines how quickly the *memory* can be recalled.[[66]](#footnote-67),[[67]](#footnote-68) Recall effectively returns a *memory* from [long-term storage](https://human-memory.net/long-term-memory/) to [short-term](https://human-memory.net/short-term-working-memory/) or working *memory*[[68]](#footnote-69), where it can be accessed, in a kind of mirror image of the encoding process. It is then re-stored back in long-term memory, thus re-consolidating and strengthening the neural network and, therefore, the *memory* it codes for.[[69]](#footnote-70)

While these *mnemonic* processes are very effective, with the combined *memory* storage capacity of the human *brain* being around an impressive 2.5 petabytes (1,000,000 gigabytes)[[70]](#footnote-71), this is not a flawless process.[[71]](#footnote-72),[[72]](#footnote-73) As a result of this, sometimes information can be forgotten, misremembered or encoded wrong, and this is known as degradation.[[73]](#footnote-74),[[74]](#footnote-75) *Memory* problems can range from minor annoyances, to major diseases such as Alzheimer’s or dementia that negatively affect the *brain*’s neural network and thus, decrease one’s quality of life and ability to function.[[75]](#footnote-76)

**How do *mnemonic* *techniques* affect *brain* processes and why are they effective in enhancing *memory* *retention*?**

*Mnemonic* *techniques* are devices which can be utilised to help improve one’s ability to recall information.[[76]](#footnote-77),[[77]](#footnote-78) *Mnemonic* *techniques* generally associate information with images, sounds, words or patterns in order to help the *brain* better encode information learned and allow the information to be recalled more easily in the future.[[78]](#footnote-79),[[79]](#footnote-80) The *brain* can be likened to a muscle, in that, the more you exercise it, the stronger it gets.[[80]](#footnote-81) This simplified analogy provides an insight into how *mnemonic* *techniques* help with *learning* and *memory*. Studies conducted on the top participants of the annual World *Memory* Championships have shown the extraordinary *memory* skills displayed by the contestants are a result of deliberate training in *mnemonic* strategies, rather than because of exceptional *brain* anatomy or general cognitive superiority.[[81]](#footnote-82) This is supported by studies showing that the formation of *learning* and *memory* are made by the strengthening and weakening of connections between neurons.[[82]](#footnote-83) In addition, researchers at the *University of California Irvine’s Centre for the Neurobiology of Learning and Memory*, found that when two neurons interact frequently, they form a bond that allows them to transit and recall more easily.[[83]](#footnote-84) This is greatly helped by *mnemonic* *techniques* which strengthen neural networks leading to the formation of more complete and accurate memories.[[84]](#footnote-85) Numerous detailed research studies have shown *mnemonic*s to be the most effective way to improve *memory* *retention*[[85]](#footnote-86),[[86]](#footnote-87), as they improve information consolidation and allow the *brain* to better form complex neural pathways during *learning*. These pathways respond to certain ‘triggers’ (*mnemonic* devices) that ensure the neural processes involved work efficiently.[[87]](#footnote-88) One of these extensive studies, conducted by the *Australian International Academic Centre*, show that students who utilized effective *mnemonic* *techniques* during English vocabulary revision have increased their marks by up to 77%.[[88]](#footnote-89) Evidence also suggest that *mnemonic*s are also more effective than rote *learning* and rehearsal as they allows for better encoding and, therefore, better long-term retrieval.[[89]](#footnote-90)

**Which *mnemonic* *techniques* can be most effectively applied to *learning* in order to achieve higher levels of *memory* *retention*?**

Whilst most *mnemonic* *techniques* have been proven to be effective[[90]](#footnote-91), detailed research shows that the following three *techniques* are exceptionally effective when applied to *learning* in order to achieve enhanced *memory* *retention*:

* *Method of Loci[[91]](#footnote-92),[[92]](#footnote-93),[[93]](#footnote-94)*

The method of loci (Latin for “places”), also known as the ‘*memory* palace’, is an ancient *technique* which involves the association of information with various objects in a particular environment in order to enhance recall.

* *Practice Testing[[94]](#footnote-95),[[95]](#footnote-96),[[96]](#footnote-97)*

Practice testing is a proven method for effectively revising information. Repeated, detailed testing of *learning* material, without the use of notes, allows for stronger neural connections and results in better long-term retrieval.

* *Elaborative Method[[97]](#footnote-98),[[98]](#footnote-99),[[99]](#footnote-100)*

The elaborative method involves the association of additional information with *learning* material. The connection of ideas, experiences, memories and daily actions with the *learning* material allows for stronger memories and easier recall.

Also, while not a *mnemonic* *technique* in itself, sleep is also extremely important for *learning* and *memory* *retention*.[[100]](#footnote-101) As it allows for better consolidation and organisation of *memory*, research has shown adequate sleep helps increase *learning* efficacy and allows for better *memory* *retention*.[[101]](#footnote-102)

**Conclusion**

This research pertaining to various aspects of *memory*, the *brain* and the application of *mnemonic* *techniques* to *learning* in order to achieve enhanced levels of *memory* *retention* was formed through both extensive and comprehensive analysis of various types of valid, reliable sources. In conclusion, *memory* is a core component of human cognition comprising of various complex processes which allow for the encoding, storage and retrieval of information in the *brain*. *Mnemonic* *techniques* are also very important and effective during *learning*, and positively affect the *brain* by allowing for easier recall and improved overall *memory* *retention* over time. Some of the most effective *mnemonic* *techniques* validified by numerous, reliable research studies include: the loci method, practice testing and the elaboration method, while sleep is also essential for *learning* and consolidation. These mnemonic techniquescan be effectively applied throughout *learning*, thus allowing for enhanced levels of meaningful *memory* *retention*.

**Word Count:** 1999

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