

Active Recall (aka Retrieval Practice)



What is it and why do I care?

Simply put, active recall is the act of trying to remember information without having it in front of you – no notes, no prompts, no hints. We tend to think of learning as getting information INTO our heads. It turns out, the real learning occurs when we try to pull it back OUT again. The more effort associated with the retrieval, the better the long-term retention – even if what you retrieve is incomplete or wrong.

Some guidelines...

It's never too early to start

You may feel you don't know the subject well enough, but the practice of trying to recall information highlights the holes in your understanding and helps direct your study. When you're new to a subject, work to recall the big picture. As your understanding deepens, go for the details.

Do it often

Each subsequent attempt at active recall makes the process easier – you start out bushwacking a path and end up with a well-worn trail. Plus, each time you attempt to reason through the answer you build connections between the various bits of information you're learning and you begin to better apply the information in a variety of settings.

Check your understanding

Following your efforts at active recall, be sure to check your understanding. Take time clarify and elaborate on anything you didn't quite understand or remember fully.

Ways to practice active recall...

- Taking practice tests and doing questions
- [Concept](#) & [mind](#) mapping
- Explaining it to someone
- Mixing up the topics you study ([interleaving](#))
- Presenting what you know (out loud)
- Having someone quiz you
- Using [flashcards](#)
- Practicing as you play (how are you likely to [encounter](#) this)

Common missteps...

- Cutting corners by not making yourself draw, write, or speak what you're recalling
- Waiting too long between learning and recalling – namely engaging with the material once and then cramming for exams
- Not taking the time to correct errors or fill in gaps of knowledge identified during active recall
- Viewing struggle as a sign of not being smart enough versus realizing your struggles and mistakes are cementing your learning

It doesn't matter how quickly you pick it up. What counts is how long it stays with you.

Video Resources

<https://youtu.be/lyvlgRf7u3Y>

<https://youtu.be/YHZBbt-CDZ0>