get your

out of college

mastering the hidden rules of the game

Clark McKowen

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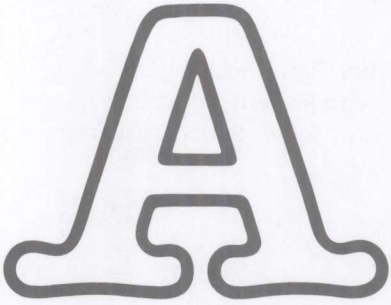

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employers will think of you that way, too. You may even come to accept it yourself. "Oh, I was always a C student."

This arrangement is considered reasonable and normal by the rule-makers and even by most of the players. The school game calls for the failure of 95 per cent of the players. Those testing in the top five per cent are considered to have succeeded. The rest to some degree have not. In some instances schools themselves may actually *cause* poor student performance.[3] And, of course, the rank you fall in is totally artificial. It is no predictor of how well you will do in real life. There is no necessity for the game to be set up this way. It is not a law of life.

Not only do many schools build in excessive failure, they do not even expect that much will be learned or retained, even by A students. Most teachers know that nine-tenths of what is taught will not be retained beyond the final exam. You can verify this fact by examining the residue in your own mind. Schools accept these depressing results as part of the game. Most teachers are happy if they can occasionally reach three or four students in a class.

It may come as a surprise, then, that it is quite possible for 95 per cent of an average group of college students to achieve success. Numerous studies confirm this. Benjamin Bloom and his colleagues at the University of Chicago, for example, designed a game in which 95 per cent (the top five per cent and the next 90 per cent) achieved the goals specified.[4] Bloom did it not by watering down the expectations but by changing the learning atmosphere. These experiments expect long-term retention not of a mere one-tenth of what is learned but eight-tenths or better.

Ninety-five per cent master and retain eight-tenths of what is taught.

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[3]K. Patricia Cross, *Beyond the Open Door* Jossey-Bass, 1971.

[4]"Learning for Mastery," UCLA-CSEJP, Evaluation Comment, 1, no. 2, 1968.

Imagine a game in which almost all students of French can count on mastering it, students of auto mechanics can become masters of their craft, students of geometry can fully expect to achieve mastery. When you think of it, that is not at all unreasonable. As John Carroll points out, recent evidence shows that it is not even necessary to have talent in a field to master it.[5] You don't even have to like it.[6] If you are mentally and physically okay—not great, just okay—you can master anything you feel like trying: painting, music, gymnastics, whatever.

Why haven't schools rushed to adopt these practices? It may be that mastery and achievement are simply not the purposes of schooling. For many, sorting and ranking are. "How could we tell a B student from a D? What would business, industry, or grad schools do if we sent out nothing but A students?" And you may be thinking that, too. If you are so accustomed to ranking that you wouldn't want to be part of a school in which 95 per cent get top grades, don't worry. These massive institutions are not about to change over. Meanwhile, you can easily get those A grades that only five per cent are allowed to have. All you have to do is discover the actual goals and learn how to play the real game. It will be far easier than you might imagine.

This book will show you the hidden rules of the game and show you how to play to win. Were you ever taught how to remember, how to take a test, how to cut through the padding in a text, how to keep the knots out of your stomach? If you are one who already knows how the game works, this book may show you how to play it better.

What you need to learn is how to learn.

School *is* a wonderful place to get an education. What follows may gain you the time and peace of mind to start.

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[5]John B. Carroll, "A Model of School Learning," *Teachers College Record*, 64, 1963.
[6]John B. Carroll, "Problems of Measurement Related to the Concept of Learning for Mastery," *Educational Horizons*, 48, no. 3, 1970.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

To get the main points of this page, read the bold print.

This book is intended to increase your alternatives. These extra choices will give you an edge in a game with hidden rules and goals. Take what you want. Don't turn it into a textbook. You have enough drudgery to contend with already. Enjoy yourself. As you go along, you will realize how capable you already are and how to make your strength pay off.

Step One

The dumbest thing you could do and something grade getters never do is just to start in reading. So don't do that. **Stop a minute.** Ask

What do I need from this book right now?

For all you know, it might not even be what you want or you may need just a fact or two for now. So **stop**.

Leaf through and see what sort of book this is. Find out if it will give you the kind of information you want.

The table of contents will give you the main topics, but it can't give you the feel of the material, so,

browse.

It will save you time in the long run.

Then, if you can use them,

Return here for some more tips on how to get the most from this book with the least wasted time.

To sum up this first step, browse to find out if this book is for you and if you can use it right now. (You must have had some reason for picking it up.) Maybe you will find what you need for the moment. In that case you might want to put the book back on your shelf until you need it again. If you want to understand the whole thing, go on to the suggestions given in Step Two.

But don't spend one minute more than you really need.

You have enough busywork as it is.

Step Two

If you followed our directions this far, you already have seen how the book is organized. There are two main ways to use it.

IMMEDIATE INFORMATION

For specific, immediate needs, find your topic in the table of contents. If you don't see it, try the index. Turn to the section or page indicated. Ideas and tips are in **boldface** or preceded by a ; sometimes both.

Go to the heading you want and read the bold print.

If necessary, read surrounding information to fill in gaps in your understanding.

MASTERY AND ABSORPTION

Read each chapter as thoroughly as your purpose requires. That does not mean that you have to read every word in it, only what you need. But for thorough understanding, first grasp the pattern and context in which your needed information is located. Read the synopsis and examine the outline at the beginning of each chapter. Then browse through, getting an impression of the chapter in general. Read the summary.

Next, each chapter starts with a few paragraphs giving the point of view from which the material can best be understood. Read that.

From this point on, whatever your purpose is, let it guide your reading. Master the entire chapter, or skip to just the part you want.

Sooner or later, when you are ready, read through the chapter from beginning to end at a fairly rapid rate. That will round out your grasp of main ideas and will help you to see their relationship to each other. This overview will strengthen your memory traces and will make it easier for you to absorb the ideas permanently.

Finally, if you want thorough understanding, apply the last two steps of the BFAR study-reading method which appears in Chapter Three, page 103.

CONTENTS

1

Memorizing

IN THIS CHAPTER

SYNOPSIS

The best way to get good grades is to train your memory. This chapter begins with three general rules (pay attention, paraphrase, connect) and gives an example of how to commit them to memory. Then follow thirteen specific techniques, arranged from simple to more complex but more efficient. These, you can put to immediate use. Good memory comes from filing things well in the first place.

Next is a method for compressing the thirteen techniques into five meaningful groups. A recall 'quiz' helps reinforce your memory of the techniques. Some additional reinforcing aids are suggested.

Then come eleven retrieval strategies with strong emphasis on persistence and on trying alternatives. A trouble-shooting section shows how to overcome three basic interferences: panic, wrong filing strategies, and wrong recall tactics.

The summary connects memory training with ordinary thinking and problem solving, pointing out that the two processes are essentially the same.

MEMORY, THE MOST NEEDED SKILL

What is the main requirement in playing the school game? Intelligence? Talent? Hard work? Honesty? None of these is as important, if needed at all, as being able to remember things. Review your own schooling (you will have to use memory skill to do it) and you will find just about every course you have taken required retrieval of information as a main task, quite often the only one, needed in passing the course. Schools profess to value thinking but rarely do they teach or test for it. They test for facts, and recall of facts calls for memory strategies.

But course objectives and teachers' plans almost never provide for memory training. This most needed skill is ignored. It is as though memory training would make it too easy for students to win. The deck is stacked.

Meanwhile, dutiful students spend most of their time trying to remember and usually doing a rotten job of it. Grade getters stumble on a few techniques, and that usually gets them through. But most students don't.

Ironically, *the least effective memory method is* the one most commonly used: *passive repetition*, going over and over a list of unconnected facts. If you learn nothing else from this chapter, don't do that any more. It doesn't work. It is monotonous, wasteful, and useless. The results are disappointing and depressing. Just about anything else you try will probably work better.

What is effective? A little further on are specific tips ready for immediate use, but first here are three things you must do to get the stuff stored in your memory banks where you can find it later on. This is not a pep talk. It has been proven experimentally over and over. You have to use these three rules or you will forget. It is your time and your game. This is your first chance to change the odds.

GENERAL RULES FOR MEMORIZING

Pay attention. Your mind must be active. If it isn't, stop. You are wasting your time. Later in this chapter we will show you a method you can use to force yourself to pay attention.

Put it in your own words. "What exactly am I trying to remember? What is it like that I already know?" If you can say it another way, you have gone far toward memorizing it. If it makes sense to you, it is more likely to stick.

Connect. Fit whatever you can together into some framework or pattern. Then keep expanding the picture. Tie all that in with things you already know. That is, **organize**. Make room for your new pattern in some other pattern already inside you

If you can't remember material you are working on, chances are you have left out one or more of the three requirements. So it is a good idea to memorize them. Let's work on that.

A Model

Here is a sample of a procedure for remembering. Naturally, it doesn't take up nearly as much space or time to think through the process as it does to transcribe it here.

Let's see: What are the three requirements? **Attending**, **rephrasing**, and **connecting**. [Notice, I've re-

phrased the rules slightly. That will assist my memory a bit. That's Rule 2.] **Attending, rephrasing,** and **connecting.** *I want to bunch them together. One good word is better than three. For me, the word* **connect** *really involves all three, so that will work.* [You should find some word of your own—like **arc**. The search will help fix the idea in mind. That's Rule 1.]

Connect *works for me because to connect I have to attend* **actively** *to the task* [Rule 1], *and, further, I automatically have to select a word I think will do the job* [Rule 2]. *So I have all three.* [Notice I am also **compressing** the task into the briefest form possible—easier to haul around in my mental filing system. And **connect** has enough *connections* to make it fairly easy to retrieve.] **Connect.**

That's one connection. I think I will search around for some more. The more **links** [different word for *connect*, Rule 1] *the more chance I have of finding the three rules when I scan my memory bank later on. I notice that these three elements are also necessary for* **reading, taking tests, listening, note taking,** *and* **thinking** *in general. In other words they are basic to most thinking activities, most of the things one is required to do in school. These are* **problem-solving** *skills.* [And, as you read this book, you will see that attending to meaning (Rule 1), putting the task into your own words (Rule 2), and combining the new material with your own inner patterns (Rule 3), will be reinforced in each chapter. They will be new settings and new topics, but your behavior will be essentially the same. You have one simple principle to remember instead of dozens and dozens.]

Now I have transformed the General Rules for Memorizing *into a* **web** *of meaning I myself created and understand. The word* **web** *should call up the ideas of* **connecting, rephrasing,** *and* **paying attention.**

Notice one more thing about my process in remembering these rules: I *do* repeat the elements I want to remember. However, I don't just chant the data over and over. Instead, infor-

mation is repeated to keep it looping in front of me while I am processing it and fixing it in my filing system. Mere repetition alone has no chance at all of sticking, but **meaningful practice at the right time does help.** It acts as a holding pattern while I am finding links to retain it permanently. But, remember, repetition is always a short-term measure.

> **Keep in mind that memory is interconnections, and it is a system. The key is organization, connecting a new item to other items in the structure. All memory devices are based on this concept.**

MEMORY: MNEMONICS

There are lots of possible memory devices. If you have some of your own that are better, by all means use them. But do use some device. If you get something into your memory somehow but can't find it again, it is as if it is not there at all. Memory is another way of saying **system**. Tagging and cross-referencing for easy recovery make all the difference. A library full of books without a filing system is hopeless; everything depends on it. The methods of memory experts reveal that **memory is not so much a talent as it is a way of organizing data so they can be found quickly.** Even memory experts will forget all sorts of things, like people's names, if they neglect to file them properly. They, too, use name tags at their conferences. Grade getters don't have better memories, nor do geniuses—at least not enough to matter. But those who get the grades do have more effective filing systems. If you put a bit of information in there somewhere and can't find it when you want it, obviously you need a better method. If you have a bin for each new bit of data, you will become so top heavy and your system so messy, you won't be able to retrieve anything. You may be familiar with the problem.

However, if you understand what you have just read, you already have all the memory skills you could possibly need to