Remembering through structures

In chapter 21 of *How to Write Better Essays* we look at the effectiveness of organising those things we have to remember into clear structures. By doing this we find that the task of recalling a long list of things is made easier, because you only have to remember the two or three categories into which they are organised. Rather than, say, twenty different items, you only have to remember, say, three categories, and within these categories the individual items are easier to remember, because they are all of the same type.

In the following exercises see how much easier it is to recall quite a long list of things once you have organised it in this way.

Exercise

Books

In this exercise I have listed 20 book titles. Go through them committing them to memory and then, after 30 minutes, try to recall them. Once you’ve done that, organise them into a structure, commit the structure to memory and then, after 30 minutes, see how many you can recall.

1984 – George Orwell

Contemporary Bioethics

Oxford English Dictionary

Sons and Lovers – D. H. Lawrence

History of the Industrial Revolution

Encyclopaedia of Plants and Flowers

Modern Crime Stories

Roget’s Thesaurus

History of the Second World War

Modern Detective Stories

Tudor History

Modern Moral Philosophy

Modern Physics

Great Expectations – Charles Dickens

The Complete French Dictionary

Brave New World – Aldous Huxley

The Cases of Sherlock Holmes

Chambers English Dictionary

Encyclopaedia of Science

The Complete Agatha Christie

Answer:

Compare your structure with mine below. The chances are that it will be fairly similar, but, if it isn’t, commit mine to memory and, in the same way, see how many books you can recall.

1. Reference

Chambers English Dictionary

Oxford English Dictionary

The Complete French Dictionary

Encyclopaedia of Science

Encyclopaedia of Plants and Flowers

Roget’s Thesaurus

2. Non-fiction

History of the Second World War

Tudor History

History of the Industrial Revolution

Modern Moral Philosophy

Contemporary Bioethics

Modern Physics

3. Fiction

Sons and Lovers – D. H. Lawrence

Great Expectations – Charles Dickens

Brave New World – Aldous Huxley

1984 – George Orwell

The Cases of Sherlock Holmes

Modern Crime Stories

The Complete Agatha Christie

Modern Detective Stories

The third category is longer that the other two with eight items. Earlier in chapter 21 I pointed out that numerous psychological experiments have shown that, on average, the longest sequence of things a normal person can recall is about seven. In view of this, you could have broken the titles in the third category into two subsections – ‘literary fiction’ and ‘crime’.

Exercise

Famous creative people

As in the previous exercise I have listed 20 things – in this case famous creative people. First, try memorising them as a list and then try recalling them. Once you’ve done this, compare how well you do by organising them into a structure and recalling them.

Johannes Brahms

Jane Austen

Claude Monet

Joseph Haydn

Emily Brontë

Igor Stravinsky

Paul Cézanne

D. H. Lawrence

Edgar Degas

Paul Gaugin

Ludwig van Beethoven

Pablo Picasso

Charles Dickens

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

James Joyce

Johann Sebastian Bach

Virginia Woolf

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Salvador Dali

George Eliot

Answer:

As you did in the first exercise, compare your structure with mine below. Although it’s likely to be similar, if it isn’t, commit mine to memory and see how many people you can recall.

1. Composers

Johann Sebastian Bach

Johannes Brahms

Ludwig van Beethoven

Joseph Haydn

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Igor Stravinsky

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

2. Painters

Paul Cézanne

Salvador Dali

Edgar Degas

Paul Gaugin

Claude Monet

Pablo Picasso

3. Writers

Charles Dickens

D. H. Lawrence

James Joyce

Jane Austen

Emily Brontë

George Eliot

Virginia Woolf

Exercise

Famous sports people

As you did in the previous exercises, commit the following list of sports people to memory and then see how many you can recall. After this, organise the list into a structure and commit this to memory to see if you can remember more now that the list has been structured.

Roger Federer

Yohan Blake

Paul Pogba

Serena Williams

Cristiano Ronaldo

Maria Sharapova

Sergio Agüero

Justin Gatlin

Rafael Nadal

Allyson Felix

Andy Murray

Jessica Ennis-Hill

Neymar

Usain Bolt

Lionel Messi

Dafne Schippers

Gareth Bale

Novak Djokovic

Mo Farah

Eden Hazard

Answer:

Now compare your answer with mine below. If it is significantly different, commit it to memory and see how well you can recall it.

1. Tennis players

Roger Federer

Novak Djokovic

Rafael Nadal

Serena Williams

Andy Murray

Maria Sharapova

2. Athletes

Usain Bolt

Mo Farah

Dafne Schippers

Allyson Felix

Justin Gatlin

Jessica Ennis-Hill

Yohan Blake

3. Footballers

Lionel Messi

Cristiano Ronaldo

Neymar

Gareth Bale

Paul Pogba

Sergio Agüero

Eden Hazard