

Using Flash Cards to Improve your Recall

Every discipline contains many terms and ideas that constitute a new language and way of thinking. The only way to learn this new language is by practising it repeatedly over time. You probably remember Flash Cards from primary or high school. They are still amazingly helpful here in your university studies and are an easy way to reinforce your memory. This study technique will help you become increasingly fluent in your new subject area by using the technique of Active Recall: given a question, you are able to recall the answer. Flash Cards also work through Spaced Repetition by increasing the review interval as terms are recalled correctly.

Start Making Flash Cards

Acquire a package of index cards (inexpensive and available at the bookstore). Each card will have one term or phrase on the blank side of the card. You can colour code cards so that ones that relate to each other will be the same colour. On the other side of the card, write down:

- Definition,
- Main points,
- Example (at least one),
- Diagrams or pictures that illustrate the concept.

As you read through new materials in your text or handouts, note highlighted terms, ideas, and theories that are the key concepts for this subject area. Each one will become a separate flash card.

Take a stack of blank index cards into class. When the instructor gives a new term or reinforces that a particular idea is very important make a new card immediately! You can fill the back of the card in later, but you get started when the information is fresh and helps you to reinforce new information as you hear it in class.

The physical act of making the cards will help move the information from short term to long term memory. Research indicates that writing is stronger than typing for doing this process.

Using Flash Cards

Initial Studying: Read the term, then turn it over and study the definition, example, and any pictures or diagrams that you have created. Do this within 48 hours of first making the card. Shuffle your cards so that they are not in the order that they were created.

Self-Testing: Pick a card from your deck, look at the term, and then describe what the terms means. Turn the card over and see if you are correct. If you are, put that card aside as 'known'. If you did not get it right, create a new pile for the cards that you 'do not know yet'.

Reinforcing: Take the cards that you did not get right the first time around and study them again. Check your text or notes for ways to expand the idea to help your memory. Add another example to the description, preferably one that you have had some personal experience with. Look for a new picture or diagram. The next day, do the self-test cycle until you have all of the cards for this week in the 'known' pile.

Playing: Concentration (a matching game) by making separate cards for the questions and the answers that you are having difficulty with, leaving the back sides blank. Place the cards face down and turn them over, one by one, to find matches.

Study Groups: Start by explaining terms to another person. This allows you to activate your verbal brain and reinforces the knowledge that you are recalling. Expand this to using a number of related terms in paragraphs as part of your explanation.

Competing: Form two teams, assign a scorekeeper to hold up cards, and keep track as team members call out the right answers.

Final Reviewing: Just before the next test or exam, pull out the relevant cards and practise using each term or idea in a sentence as if you were answering a question on an exam.