

Assignment: Write an informal, “New Journalism” –style report on a topic of interest to college readers.

**A New Brain**  
by John Tolan

“Fovea Capitis, Fovea Capitis, Fovea Capitis.” I repeated these words over and over, sometimes with my eyes closed, trying to brand them into my memory. I chanted the words. I even sang them in an operatic voice. I paced back and forth, reciting them in cadence with each step.

Earlier that day I had mentioned to Duncan, a friend of mine, that I was taking a class in physical anthropology, and that I had a test coming up, a test I was quite concerned about. I took out the text and showed him all the parts of the bones I was trying to memorize. I mentioned the “fovea Capitis,” that little hole in the femur, and he glanced at it without much interest.

Duncan and I work for an airline and we were flying together all month. The next day he asked me if I had gotten much studying done. “Quite a bit,” I said. “Let me see. On the femur, you have the lateral and medial condyles; you also have the patellar articular surface and uh, a thing.” I drew a blank.

“Could it be the Fovea Capitis?” Duncan asked.

“Yes,” I remarked, surprised. “Did you know this from another class you’ve taken?”

“No, remember, you showed it to me yesterday.”

“What’s this? I must have gone over that term a hundred times, and you heard it once and remembered it. How did you do that?”

Duncan's expression told me that he was about to reveal a great secret, but first he wanted to bask a moment in his intellectual triumph. “All right,” he said, “but are you willing to change your brain?”

Willing to change my brain? No, not really, I thought, but to satisfy Duncan, sure, why not? “Yes, Duncan, I am willing to change my brain. Do you have another handy?”

“You know what I mean. You don’t actually change your brain, but you change the way you learn, especially learning new words and most especially words on a list.” He then proceeded to share his great secret. “When I heard the term, my mind broke it down into individual words, different words I am more familiar with. This is a habit I developed five years ago, when I first started college, and it has stayed with me. For the term Fovea Capitis, I took my career, as a first officer of an airline, and that became FO. We travel; that was the VIA. And we fly with a captain, that I related to Capitis, and thus, Fovia Capitis. The spelling isn’t always correct, but it’s all you need to remind you of your word. If I didn’t use memory aids, I don’t think I would have done nearly as well in college.”

I mentioned that I had heard of such aids before and had even used them without realizing it. “Duncan, do you know what this memory tool you’re using is called?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah, they’re called mnemonics, and some teachers don’t like ’em. They think we’re not learning or something, but I think they’re wrong. Just look at how smart I am.”

I think Duncan was making a joke, but then again, maybe not. I decided to look into mnemonics, and even though it sounds like it would be a good name for a sixties soul group, there could be something to it. Who knows—it might help me on that test I have coming up.

The memory aid books and Internet pages I researched each seemed to have a different definition for mnemonics. Some authors leave it out of the text yet teach the techniques as if they were the inventors.

Webster defines mnemonics as, “Pertaining to, aiding or intended to aid the memory.” That definition is of course correct; however, the term typically refers to rather unusual, artificial aids.

The word “mnemonic” is derived from Mnemoysne, the name of the ancient Greek goddess of memory. That fact I found interesting. I realize that ancient Greeks had gods for just about everything, but I was surprised that they had one for the memory. I was not able to find a picture of her, but I bet she was beautiful.

The earliest use of mnemonics dates to 500 BCE. Greek and Roman orators used it to remember long speeches. What they did is amazing. They would visualize a familiar place (usually parts or rooms of a building) and mentally place their speech fragments in many different areas in this building. As they made their speeches, they would visualize this place in their mind, going from one room or place to another, picking up their speech fragments as they went along. This is how they remembered their oration. It seems to me the Aztecs used a similar mnemonic device. Since they did not have a written language, they used runners to communicate from one village to another. Chewing coca leaves for energy, men would run from settlement to settlement. They carried a rope with many knots in it. Each knot stood for a memorized message to be delivered. If the message was not delivered correctly, the next message delivered could be “you have permission to tear my heart out and feed it to the people.”

Today, mnemonics consists of many different techniques. Probably the simplest and most common method is the “first letter association.” An example would be remembering the four great eras of time by using the phrase, “Can Men Pick Peppers.”

C – Cenozoic  
M – Mesozoic  
P – Paleozoic  
P- Pre-Cambrian

Simple, but effective. But did I learn anything by memorizing “can men pick peppers?” Let’s try another one. Imagine a new boat owner who cannot think of a name for his boat. Finally, he comes up with, “Pan Ca Iv.” The words are meaningless, but if a person remembers the story, one should be able to come up with the eight parts of speech.

P – Pronoun  
A – Adjective  
N – Noun  
C – Conjunction  
A – Adverb  
P – Preposition  
I – Interjection  
V – Verb

Okay. Enough with the lists. They take up plenty of page space, and I don’t have space to waste. Did I learn anything by learning these funny sounding phrases? Will any of these help me with my upcoming exam? It never astounds me to hear students recite strange sounding utterances before an exam, trying to relate a word they don’t understand to a word they do. Take Duncan’s example on the “Fovea Capitis”—he knew he didn’t know the meaning of the term, but the words he invented within the word had a message. How hard could that be to remember? I asked the smart one if he could remember anything else about the Fovea Capitis.

“Oh yes,” he replied. “It’s the little hole on the ball joint of the femur.”

“How could you have known that?”

“Well, let’s just say remembering the word helped me remember the place; however, it doesn’t work all the time.”

I discovered that there are many types of mnemonic devices, from simple rhymes to complicated link and peg systems. In the link system a person relates one item to be remembered to the next by making up a story in his or her mind's eye, with visualization as the key in recalling the items to be remembered.

Some people (and some psychology textbooks) have dismissed mnemonics with the idea that it is effective for certain kinds of rote memory tasks, and that many learning tasks involve understanding more than memorized facts. The implication is that mnemonics is not worth learning because it does not help with understanding.

So what? Mnemonics is not intended for such tasks as reasoning, understanding, and problem solving. It was intended to aid learning and memory. Should we discard something if it does not do what it was not intended to do as effectively as it does what it *is* intended to do? I know that I will use mnemonics when a need for it arises. If it can help me remember a term such as Fovea Capitis instantly, rather than through much repetition and time, then that's okay with me.

Oh, just one thing. I showed up for the exam knowing my little fovea. Guess what! It was not even on the test!

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