There is little argument that everyone has a desire to have a much better memory. After all, we make comments to the effect of, “I sure do wish I could remember that person’s name!” or, “I wish I could remember when that English paper is due.” Yes, we all have times when our memory seems to go out the window, and most of us seem to spend a portion of our life explaining our dilemma by using the expression, “It’s right on the tip of my tongue!” How many times have we been forced to say that—and then admit, “But I just can’t remember it!”

Many people, however, have developed the ability to create meaningful memory skills. These skills are the subject of mnemonics—techniques which people deliberately use in order to help them recall information. Mnemonics comes from the Greek and literally means “of the mind.” It is the science of organizing new information and filing it in the mind by connecting it to something that is already known. It is very different from repetition and rote memorization. Because mnemonics is the art of remembering, it is a person’s intentional and thoughtful construction of a memory aide to recall information more efficiently.

Before giving a report about the methods people employ in order to help them remember things, a very vital question must first be answered. Why do we forget some things and remember others? The crux of an effective system lies in learning how we remember anything at all.

For example, my son, Ryan, knows the names, faces, and statistics of literally hundreds of baseball players, but he really struggles in his lessons at school. Being a concerned parent, I asked him how he managed to remember so much baseball information. “I’m interested in baseball, dad. Who cares about that other junk?” Yes, the biggest reason for remembering is interest. Interest begets
attention, and when one pays attention he concentrates, and concentra-
tion sends a mental impulse though the “mental switchboard
operator” who routes this impulse to the senses to file an impres-
sion that results in memory.

Since the biggest spark plug of memory recall is interest, it is always easier to remember things we are interested in rather than things we are not. The human mind has a tremendous ability to remember, and by doing the following exercise, you might well begin to appreciate how successful the memory can really be:

Recall as many details as possible about your high school graduation.
Recall as much as you can about a party or event you attended more than five years ago.
Make a list of three schoolmates you haven’t seen in five years, and describe some things you remember about them.
Write the names of ten people you remember from your childhood.
Make a list of ten important dates you remember.

After spending some time on these lists, try to analyze the reason why you succeeded in remembering some things better than others.1 If you are like most people, your mind went through a process of mental images in which you were forced to picture in a literal way the times, places, and events involved in making the lists. Perhaps there were even things you wanted to recall, but simply could not come up with a mental picture, and therefore, could not remember.

In other words, when a person attempts to recall information, he is forced to create images in his mind. These images, in turn, act somewhat as a file retrieval system, and by a process of association a person suddenly remembers things that have long been hidden in the mind!2

Efficient file retrieval systems, however, are created by direct effort, or by unusual and/or traumatic experiences. For example, if
you walked out of your home and a few drops of rain splattered on you, you would quickly forget it ever happened. If, however, buckets of water were suddenly splashed upon your head, you would remember the event and probably recount it in detail for years. If you stopped to rest in a picnic area, and a cow or two wandered by, you might enjoy the pleasant moment. But if a crazed bull came into sight and you had to run for your life, you would never forget it. This is the reason why people remember exactly where they were and what they were doing when they first heard the news of President John Kennedy’s assassination, an event that happened many years ago.³

When file retrieval systems are created by direct effort, we are entering the world of mnemonics. One popular mnemonic technique uses the association of rhyme and/or rhythm in order to retrieve information. Because it is used quite extensively, many fond memories may even begin to appear when you are reminded of these rhymes and rhythms. For example, I always remember, “I before e, except after c or when in the sound of a, as in neighbor or weigh” (remembering spelling rules). “Thirty days hath September, April, June, and November. All the rest have thirty-one, except February, which has twenty-eight in fine, ‘till leap year gives it twenty-nine” (remembering how many days each month has). “M, I, crooked letter, crooked letter, I, crooked letter, crooked letter, I, hump back, hump back, I” (remembering how to spell Mississippi). “In fourteen hundred and ninety two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue” (remembering history facts).

One of my wife’s friends told me that when she was in school, she had a hard time recalling adverbs. Because she wanted so badly to remember when a word was an adverb and what it actually did, she composed a song that used the same tune and rhythm as “When the Saints Go Marching In”:

Who, what, where, to what extent and why,
Who, what, where, to what extent and why,
Who, what, where, to what extent and why, Adverbs go marching on.4

Another mnemonic device used by some people involves “linking,” the process of visual association and image forming. That is, it is the active process of taking a mental picture, and then associating the picture to something you wish to remember. Actually, visualization is so basic and obvious to our memory that we sometimes “Can’t see the forest because of the trees.” For example, think of a zebra. Don’t you see a black and white striped horselike animal in your mind? Of course you do! In fact, if someone came up to you and said, “Don’t you dare think about a large pink elephant,” you could not help but picture the image in you mind! Therefore, if something can be visualized, it can be easily remembered.5

The process of linking is commonly taught by memory experts, but I found that very few folks actually employ such a mnemonic device. People frequently have a need to bring to mind lists of information, like notes for a test, a grocery shopping list, or a list of chores that need to be done. While most people make use of pen and paper for most of these types of records, it is not always convenient to write them down, nor is it advisable to depend upon such a written list for an exam. Therefore, the application of linking can solve this dilemma. For example, suppose someone gave you an inventory of fifteen items, and you were asked to repeat the inventory back in a few minutes without the use of notes. The list is as follows:

Car, spider, tree, cloud, goldfish, fireman, windmill, book, toothbrush, television, snow, rabbit, house, cigar, Frenchfries.

Most people would panic at the thought of having to repeat the items by memory only, but creating unusual pictures in the mind will provide instant and lasting recall. The process might go something like this: (Remember to make a deliberate effort to form vivid mental pictures as you read this story.)
The first word is car, so picture in your mind an old Model T car. A spider is driving the car, and the car runs into a tree, causing a cloud of smoke. Out of the cloud falls a goldfish, and out of the goldfish pops a fireman. The fireman spots a windmill on fire and runs to put it out. He can’t get in because it is full of books. Suddenly, a toothbrush picks up all the books and walks off to his home. The toothbrush lives in a television set which is filled with snow. Out of the snow pops a rabbit, who builds a house made of cigars. The cigars smell just like Frenchfries.

The key to remembering lists is simply to create a bizarre and unusual mental picture, linking it to the item, and connecting the pictures in a story. Because the story is funny and silly, the items are easily recalled. In fact, the more bizarre the story, the easier it is to remember.6

Of all of the mnemonic devices that are available, perhaps “mental hooking” is the most commonly used by folk groups. Mental hooking establishes association by simply creating a clever sentence, saying, or trick in order to help recall. Knowing that there are so many exceptions to spelling rules in English, sometimes it’s just good common sense to build mental hooks to abstract spellings. I was especially lucky to have a fourth grade elementary teacher who understood this mnemonic concept. Here are some examples of her wisdom:

At one time, I was experiencing great difficulty in spelling the word motorcycle. No matter how hard I tried, it always ended up motercycle on a test. My teacher asked me to picture two wheels with spokes, and these two wheels would represent the two “o’s” in the word motorcycle.

The two words capitol and capital were often mixed up in my mind. My teacher suggested that the “o” in capitol would represent the big domed building in Austin. Then, she explained that since “a” is the first letter of the alphabet, I should remember capital when thinking of capital letters.
Since my elementary years, I have continued to use this method to help with spelling skills.

One of my own favorite mental hooks involves how to remember *asphalt*. In my mind I imagine a little worm, called an asp. The asp is crawling on the road and comes up to a stop sign. The stop sign is yelling out, “Halt!” Then, by putting *asp* and *halt* together, I remember how to spell *asphalt*. Other people make use of similar methods in spelling clues, but instead look for internal word clues that may trigger the memory: In trying to remember how to spell *separate*, it’s a good thing to remember that there is “a rat” in *separate*. When thinking of the word, *believe*, think of the sentence, “Never beLIEve a LIE.” When wanting to know how to spell *piece*, think of slicing a “PIEce of PIE.”

When trying to remember how to spell *island*, just know that an island “is land” out in the middle of a body of water. In trying to remember the difference between *principal* and *principle*, just recall that the school principal is your PAL, and that a principle is a rule.

One of my neighbors just got back from Germany, and shared an interesting hook device used to remember how many days there are in each month:

Children are told to place their left hand in front of them, clench their fist, with the knuckles turned upward. In that way the knuckles of the little finger on the hand is January (raised and
therefore a long month—thirty-one days), the valley beside it is February (lowered and therefore a short month). They continue across the knuckles in the same fashion, and then start over after the last knuckle is counted (July). July and August are the only months that have an equal number of days consecutively. The children are told that all the “hills” have thirty-one days, while all of the “valleys” have thirty days, except February.10

An interesting variation to this mnemonic device is found in Spain, where the children use both hands in the counting process instead of only one. The counting process starts either from the right or from the left fist.11

My wife’s father recently visited Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, where the tour guide offered an interesting trick so that the tourists could remember the difference between stalagmites and stalactites: The middle letter in *stalagmite* is “g” which represents the ground. They are the ones that start on the ground and grow upward. The middle letter in *stalactite* is “c” which represents the ceiling. They are the ones that hang from the ceiling and grow downward. I remember a similar memory trick shared by a tour guide years ago while visiting Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico: The middle letter in *stalagmite* is “g” which means they want to “grow up.” The middle letter in *stalactite* is “c” which means they want to “come down.”

Another traditional mnemonic device that is extremely widespread and popular is the application of acronyms, words that are made by taking the first letter from each word that a person wants to remember, and making a new word from all of those letters. The thing about acronyms is that some are so common that most folks do not think of them as mnemonic memory aides, and yet they offer tremendous recall efficiency. For example, what do you think of when you see IRS, MADD, SOP, NRA, or PMA? Most folks readily recognize these acronyms as representing the Internal Revenue Service, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, Standard Operating Procedure, National Rifle Association, and Positive Mental Attitude.
Since this method is usually a fairly simple process for mental file retrieval, it seems to have a special, enduring, and “high-brow” appeal for many folks. Students especially make use of acronyms prior to exams, because they seem to provide high success rates for memory recall. Infinite numbers of examples could be listed, but a few that have proven to be successful in folk cultures are as follows: HOMES is a good way to remember the five great lakes—Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, Superior.

ROY G. BIV helps one to recall the colors of the rainbow (light spectrum). The colors are Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo, and Violet. ASK is used to help remember the order of sentences that compose a certain Bible verse. “Ask, and you shall receive; Speak, and you shall find; Knock, and the door shall be opened unto you.”

ACTS is used by one pastor of a church in order to help him remember certain elements of a prayer—Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. STAB is a good memory aide used by music majors in order to remember the four voices in a choir—Soprano, Tenor, Alto, and Bass. SCALP helps one anatomy student to remember the actual layers of the scalp itself—Skin, Close connective tissue, Aponeurosis, Loose connective tissue, and Pericranium. O-RAGE is an acronym that I developed when wanting to remember the five major folk groups—Occupational, Regional, Age, Gender, and Ethnic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>#1</th>
<th>#2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>Oral (the Old)</td>
<td>(Old)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>Traditional (Testament)</td>
<td>(Toys)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>Variable (Verifies)</td>
<td>(Vaporize)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Anonymous (Adam’s)</td>
<td>(After)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Formulaic (Fall)</td>
<td>(February)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is the mnemonic device the editor learned to remember the defining elements of folklore (column #1), and the updated version he uses when speaking to elementary age audiences (column #2).
With a little bit of imagination, one can really create some interesting acronyms that will serve as invaluable memory aides, but perhaps the most inventive of all mnemonic tricks rests within the world of “acrostics.” Since an acrostic is a sentence that is made by taking the first letter from each word or symbol that you want to remember and inserting another word beginning with that same letter, people invent some very interesting and humorous sentences—as evidenced in the following examples: “King Phillip Came Over For Green Stamps” is used by many biology students in order to remember the classification system of living things—Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, Species. Other variations include “King Philip Came Over For Good Spaghetti” and “Kick Prince Charles Out For molesting Girl Scouts.”

“Every Good Boy Does Fine” is a common acrostic used to distinguish the musical notes that are on the lines of a musical staff—E, G, B, D, and F. I learned that, “All Cows Eat Grass” distinguishes the space notes on the Bass Clef—A, C, E, and G.

“Mary’s Violet Eyes Make John Sit Up Noticing Purple” is a good way to list the planets of the solar system, from the one nearest to the sun to the one farthest away—Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto. Another variation includes “My Very Educated Mother Just Served Us Nine Pizzas.”

“Oh Be A Fine Girl, Kiss Me” (or “Old, Big, And Fat Girls Kiss Maggots,” as I learned it) are acrostics invented by physics students to help them remember the spectral temperature classifications of stars, ranging from the hottest to the coolest—O, B, A, F, G, K, and M.

There is no doubt that all of the mnemonic devices discussed so far require a person to make a certain amount of deliberate invention—a certain level of creativity. Some memory clues and tricks are taught, but the vast majority are invented by common folk for common occasions. Perhaps the most demanding of all mnemonic invention centers around a person’s need to remember names.

The reason why most names are hard to remember is because most modern names seldom lend themselves to obvious mental
imaging. Originally, most names were descriptive—either of the person or of his occupation or particular skill. Names of American Indians were descriptive of the person or of the person’s deeds. Names like Sitting Bull, Running Deer, and Growing Flower are easy to remember because of the associations that are naturally created in our minds. Even the names of Butler, Wolfe, Carpenter, Forrest, Brooks, Rivers, and so forth establish mental images for most people without even thinking about it.

When obvious mental associations are not available in a name we hear, a person must link some visual characteristic or something about the person’s name to some mental picture. Sometimes, this is a very difficult task, but some association must be created. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Assimilation</th>
<th>Mental Picture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bill Goff</td>
<td>Pay Bills, Play Golf</td>
<td>Picture Mr. Goff paying his bills at the golf course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerry Crouser</td>
<td>Bald Head, Bearded, Wearing</td>
<td>Picture Mr. Crouser as Jerry (rhymes with hairy) Crouser (rhymes with trouser)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By use of this method, remembering names can be as simple as 1, 2, 3. After hearing a name, simply form a substitute word, phrase, or thought that will remind you of the name. Then, find an outstanding feature about the person, whether it be a feature of his face or something he has said about himself. And finally, simply associate the two things into a visual image.12

In conclusion, memory is neither like a static storehouse where data is kept, nor is it like a library where knowledge is stored in random fashion. Rather, it is an organized system whereby accessible knowledge is consciously stored with a deliberate effort for
future recall, using the basic skills of mental picture association. As Plato once said, “All knowledge is but remembrance.”

We have seen that there is already extensive use of mnemonic devices by many folk people from many backgrounds. We owe it to ourselves to become as familiar with memory development techniques as we can. As we build upon our own skills, we will be able to accomplish so much more. What good is an education if nothing is ever learned, and what good is learning if nothing is ever remembered?

ENDNOTES

3. Ibid. 17.
4. Robinson, Beth. Student at Angelo State University.
5. Lorayne. 7.
7. Wade, Wes. Manager of West Texas Bearing Co., raised in San Angelo, Texas.
11. Lorenzano, Jenny. Housewife, raised in New Mexico.
12. Lorayne. 47.