

# What is Active Recall?

[Active Recall](#) is the grandiose name that academics give to a relatively simple concept that all of us understand but most of us don't know its name. It is probably the most valuable educational tool for every student preparing for tests and exams.

Perhaps the best way of explaining it is with an example. You are introduced to someone for the first time, you're told their name but then you don't see them again for a year. It's almost certain that you won't remember their name when you next meet.

Contrast that with someone you are introduced to and then speak to a few times during the next year. It's almost certain you WILL remember their name. Each time you speak to the person, your brain is forced to use Active Recall to retrieve their name. The more often you retrieve their name the more firmly it becomes embedded in your long-term memory.

Active Recall is a way of compelling the brain to do something instead of just requesting that it absorb something. Playing a quiz is a prime example of Active Recall.

In the world of education, Active Recall is probably the most valuable of all techniques for embedding knowledge in long-term memory ready for instant retrieval in the exam room. With increasing emphasis being put on examination success (in place of long-term course work) this is an important consideration in the lives of students.

## What is Passive Review?

Passive Review is the opposite of Active Recall. Passive Review involves reading, watching and listening in hopes that our brain will remember things.

The problem with Passive Review is that it's a one-sided affair which invariably permits the student's brain to go to sleep. You know from your own experience that reading a book, listening to a teacher or watching an educational video gives your mind freedom to wander wherever it chooses. All too often, an active mind chooses to think about something more exciting like what's for dinner, Manchester United's home game or your next Facebook post.

How often have you had to re-read a page or rewind the video because you were not paying attention? How often have you found yourself unable to answer a question because you were not listening to the speaker?

## Still Confused?

The Wikipedia article on Active Recall gives this insightful example: 'Reading a text about George Washington, with no further action, is a passive review. Answering the question "Who was the first US President?" is active recall'.

## Beware the Enemy Within

The words 'cramming' and 'swotting' have become inextricably ingrained in the vocabulary of students. So much so that many students mistakenly believe that the more they swot and cram,

the better will be their exam results. All too often this leads to a false sense of security because students think they have put the hours in and therefore good results are a given. Sadly, this is not the case.

Make no mistake, the quality of revision is far more important than the duration. One hour of thoughtfully doing something is more valuable than two hours of passively reading or listening.

## **Teaching Methods**

It is widely acknowledged in the teaching profession that Active Recall has much to commend it but it's not easy for a teacher to get 30 students in front of him/her actively engaged in doing something in order to stimulate their minds. And it's almost impossible for a book or a video to get students actually doing something. For these reasons Passive Review is the fallback position for most teaching systems.

Undoubtedly reading, listening and watching are valuable tools in a student's revision armoury but Active Recall (especially playing quizzes) is the surest route to examination success.

## **A Personal Note**

The whole concept of Education Quizzes was developed during the time I was studying a university course in computing. The systems analysis element of the course involved learning terminology and definitions that I struggled to get my head around and as a result I was constantly confusing one thing with another.

With the help of the books provided by the university, I wrote pages for myself consisting of a series of short, sharp questions with answers underneath each one. By employing a blank piece of paper, I could uncover one question at a time and then try to recall the answer. I worked on this in revision sessions before the exam. Unknowingly I was employing Active Recall.

To the astonishment of my classmates and the complete disbelief of my tutor I came top of the class! Ever since, I have been on a mission to convince the world of the value of quizzes!

## **Further Reading**

"The mere presence of a question forces our minds to pay attention and focus on the topic" – Christopher Pappas in *6 Ways To Enhance Active Recall in eLearning*.

"If you just read something or even rewrite your notes, your brain doesn't have to actively interpret and synthesize anything new, it's already there in front of you." – Joe the Tutor in *Use Active Recall if You Don't Want to Blank on Exams*.

"Results demonstrate the critical role of retrieval practice in consolidating learning and show that even university students seem unaware of this fact" – Jeffrey D. Karpicke and Henry L. Roediger in *The Critical Importance of Retrieval for Learning*.

"Multiple retrievals in multiple contexts are superior for long-term retention (think frequent, low-stakes quizzes which are cumulative)" – Chelan Huddleston in *Memory and Recall*.