

8 Memory Techniques for Actors

Remembering lines can be one of the most challenging things for any actor. While every actor learns differently and needs to find his/her own method, the following techniques can be very helpful in learning your acting lines in no time.



1. Engage your whole brain

It's important to understand that memory is best if you use both sides of your brain:

Left side - logic, words, lists, numbers, sequences, analysis

Right side - rhythm, imagination, daydreaming, color, size, spatial awareness

2. Concentration and Imagination

A. Always focus on the STORY. You must understand the story first!

B. You must “see” the character’s world (imaginary circumstance) and understand the character before you can be the character.

C. Absorb the character and connect it to the STORY

D. Constantly practice and develop your Imagination, Creativity and Concentration (Focus).

3. Chunking and Linking

A. Break up material to be learned into smaller parts.

B. Go over the new material until it is learned and then connect it to the next piece.

C. Link together items or ideas to be remembered.

4. Ciceronian Visualization

A. Cicero recited hours of speeches from memory by visualizing his speech in/as a building and then walking through each room and picking up objects to make his supporting points.

B. Form a picture in your mind's eye of the things you want to remember.

C. Bizarre or unusual images are easier to remember.

D. “Five-Sensing a passage”. You might want to think not only in terms of visual sensation but also of your other senses. For example, what might the character smell at this point? Or, what sensations of heat or cold do you get from individual words and sounds? Touch your fingers together at key points or feel the hem of your clothing for a tactile reminder of a problem passage.

5. Recite and Listen

A. Read out-loud: Read a passage over and over again OUT LOUD until you have subconsciously memorized the SOUND of the words. Silently reading lines from a script is not a very effective way to learn and remember lines - it doesn't do enough to stimulate the senses that allow us to learn efficiently.

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B. Record Yourself: Say your lines into a microphone and record them. Then listen to yourself in character while you jog, ride the bus, or do chores. Take your character and your lines with you wherever you go. Even if you cannot recite your lines out loud, you can still listen to them to strengthen neural pathways.

C. Recite lines in ODD PLACES: In the car, walking the dog, in the shower, or wherever you go, take some time to recite some of your lines. Changing scenery, locations and stress levels present great opportunities with which to activate your memory and dissociate lines with a specific location.

6. Add Movement

A. Repeat your blocking as you memorize: "Blocking" is the movement assigned to your character by your director or worked out with other actors in your scene. Memory in your brain occupies a physical space. When you move you cause physical spaces in your brain to activate. This allows you to use more than one portion of your brain to recall and associate information.

C. Punctuated Movement: Moving in a line and shifting directions when you come to a punctuation mark in a line can help you find the rhythm of a line as well as associate movement and voice with memory. Although appropriate for memorization "punctuated movement" usually will not be retained in performance.

D. Use your fingers: If you touch your thumb to your fingers in sequence as you recite a list in a line then you will store that memory along with a physical motion. When you go to retrieve the list, touching your fingers can help access that memory.

7. Work with an acting partner

A. Reciting lines with a partner helps you to remember cues and beats better and remember how your character fits into the overall scene. Saying lines with an acting partner allows you to remember a lifelike, three-dimensional scene, instead of a group of static lines.

B. Find a partner who can provide an atmosphere in which you can do your best. They should be supportive and maintain high expectations. Oftentimes this is NOT a good friend.

C. Give your script to your partner, who becomes your "prompter". Say what you can remember of a speech or line. When you forget, say "Line!" in a tone of voice appropriate to the forgotten word. Your partner will then prompt you by giving you only the word that you need unless you indicate otherwise.

D. Explain to your partner which of the above techniques you are attempting and ask your partner to help you.

8. Spaced Review

Spread out studying and review over a period of days rather than trying to learn the material all at once. Sometimes you will not have that luxury. If you have worked with each of the memorization techniques, however, when you are pressed for time you will know which one will be most effective for you in a certain situation. Always remember the STORY is key.