How the Brain Learns and The Study Cycle

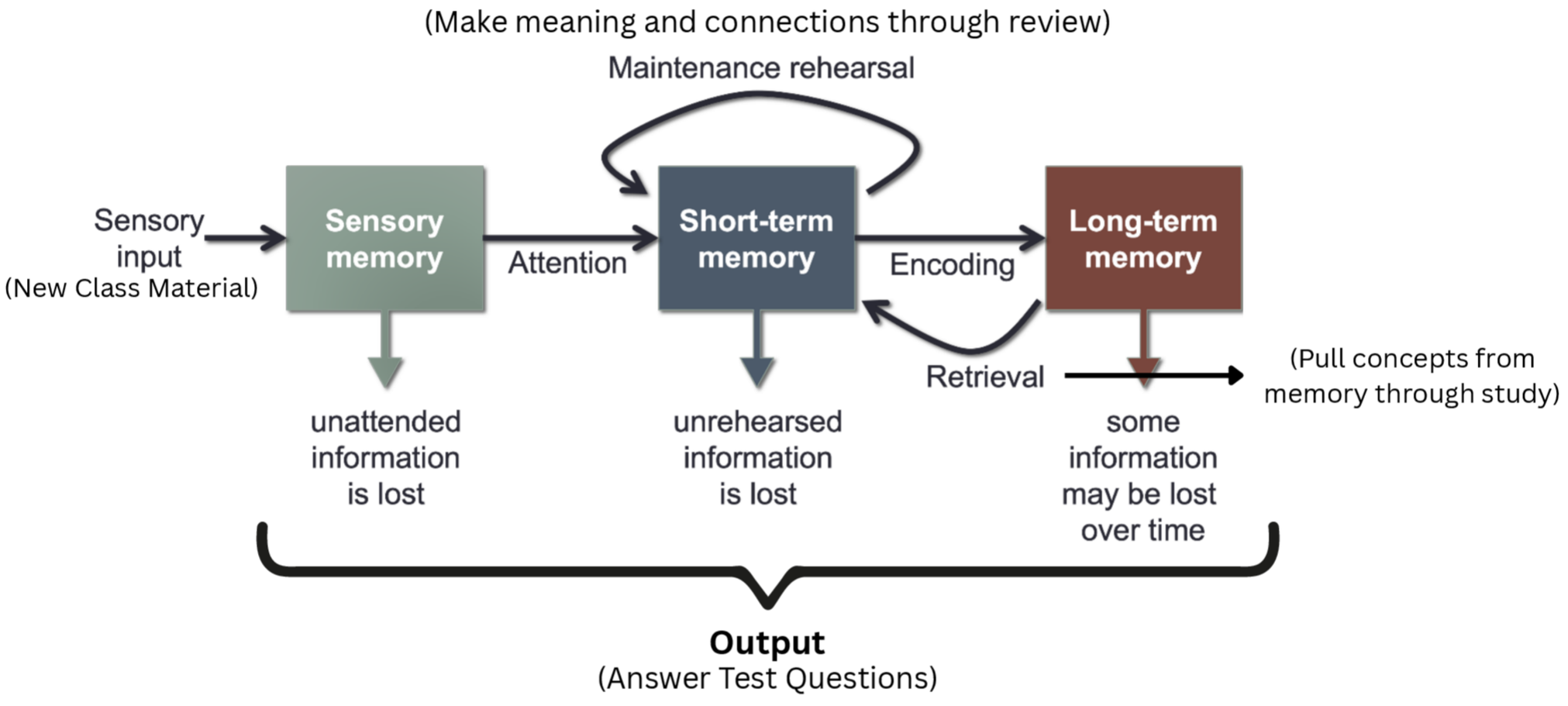
How Our Brains Learn

Your brain learns by forming and strengthening connections between neurons. This happens through repeated exposure, active engagement, and rest. Simply reading or listening isn't enough. Real learning requires you to do something with the information, like practicing or explaining it.

Imagine your brain as a forest. The first time you learn something, it's like walking through tall grass—slow and unclear. Each time you review or practice, you walk the same path again, and it becomes clearer and easier. The more you revisit the material, the more automatic and lasting the learning becomes.

The Study Cycle

The Study Cycle is a method that helps you walk that learning path over and over. It includes **five steps: preview, attend, review, study, and check your understanding**. This spaced, active approach works with your brain's natural learning process and helps move information into long-term memory.



Make Learning Stick

In your own words, why is it important to review and practice material more than once when trying to learn something new?

Building Brain Pathways

How does the "forest path" analogy help you understand the learning process in your brain? Can you think of a time when repeated practice helped you learn something?

Adapted from: Stewart, A.J. (2018).

The Study Cycle

The Study Cycle is a simple but powerful way to learn more effectively by working with how your brain naturally remembers information. This worksheet will help you practice each of the five steps (preview, attend, review, study, and self-check) so you can build stronger habits, improve your understanding, and feel more confident in class.

PREVIEW: Before classtime, look through the materials for the course that is to be covered in class.

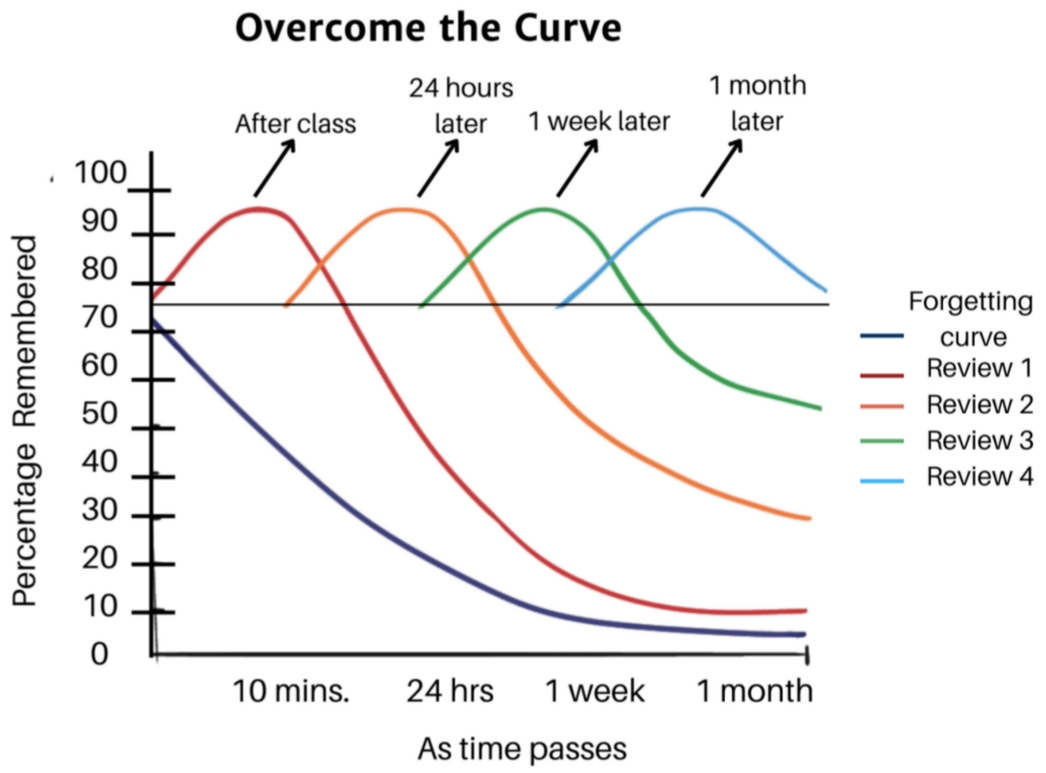
- Skim the textbook or slides before class to get a general idea of the topic.
- Look for key terms, headings, or questions that show what's important.
- Write down one or two question you hope to answer during the lecture.

ATTEND: Go to class! Just go... even in the morning... even on Fridays... even in the Winter... GO!

- Go to class and stay engaged by taking notes and minimizing distractions like phones
- Ask the questions you brought or if something is unclear or confusing during class
- Listen actively for main ideas, examples, and anything your professor emphasizes.

REVIEW: Review the class material (15-20 mins) within 24 Hours of class.

- Summarize key points in your own words to deepen understanding.
- Fill in missing details or clarify anything you didn't understand during class.
- Ask any remaining questions during office hours or tutoring at the Learning Center.



STUDY: Actively engage with the material through focused, short sessions to move information into long-term memory.

- Use focused, spaced-out, and short sessions (25–30 minutes) instead of long cramming sessions.
- Try active methods like self-quizzing, flashcards, teaching, or practice problems.
- Set goals for studying that are specific and focus on and practice retrieval instead of re-reading

CHECK: Measure what you truly understand by testing yourself and identifying areas that need more review.

- Ask yourself if your study strategy is working and if you actually understand the content without looking at your notes..
- Use practice quizzes, problem sets, or concept maps to test your knowledge.
- Discuss concepts with others and try to explain the big ideas in your own words.

Using the Study Cycle helps you work with your brain—not against it—to learn more effectively and remember information longer. Try using this process regularly to build strong study habits and boost your confidence in every class.

Adapted from: Stewart, A.J. (2018).

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY
Office of Student Success Coaching