

Magical Memory Tour

The Unending Quest for a Study Formula That Works

by PATRICIA WESTFALL

Thought, not memorization, is the soul of learning. Every professor says this. What teacher would claim *not* to be teaching students to think?

But just try and pass a test by thinking. Every student who has forgotten the year Thomas Aquinas died knows that thinking ability is not what gets tested. Memorization—dictaphone style—is the ability in question. Thinking won't derive the seven phyla or reveal the eighth wonder of the world. Only memorization counts in the crunch, and students who wish to survive had better master the skill. But how?

"Perhaps the most basic thing that can be said about human memory, after a century of research, is that unless detail is placed in a structural pattern it is rapidly forgotten," said Jerome Bruner in *Process of Education* in 1960. Bruner's concept, the importance of structure, lies in one form or another at the root of all how-to-study methods.

In the Beginning . . . Was SQ3R

The first and most famous of the foolproof, try-it-you-can't-fail study formulas was Frank Robinson's SQ3R method published in 1946. The acronym stands for "Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review." The method, still taught today in a great many college how-to-study courses, works this way. First, **survey** the structure of the chapter, reading paragraph headings and summaries; this helps your mind get a firm grasp of the whole assignment before you read.



Next, turn those paragraph headings into **questions** which must be answered by the text. Then **read** (the first R) to find those answers. Robinson stresses that reading must be an active process; you should be searching for answers, not just passing your eyes over the type.

Every so often (every other page, in fact) you should stop, close the book and try to **recite** what you have just read. This is the step that is supposed to fix the information in your memory. Finally, after you have read and recited the complete assignment, take

a few minutes to **review** what you've just learned before calling it a night.

The Confession

Robinson's sure-fire thoroughly-tested formula was preached passionately by academic counselors until the student population boom of the 1960's. That's when new how-to-study formulas began to pop into print at a rate second only to sex manuals—and volumes ahead of diet books. Most of these were variations on SQ3R.