

Outsmart Your Brain

Why Learning is hard and how you can make it easy

Daniel T Willingham

Dan Willingham is a PhD from Harvard University. He spent a decade researching how the brain changes as a consequence of learning. He is now a Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia.

When people speak they don't say a lot of what they actually mean.

Lectures in school and college are organized hierarchically, hence most people don't remember them.

People remember conversations

Learning by listening takes work, so come to each class with expectations

Take your own notes even if you know you will get notes later.

Questions of clarification are the ones that don't annoy the speaker or class.

Many people ask questions to show off.

Questions provide feedback to the instructor,
it's a skill you need to master.

Taking good notes requires making wise compromises.

Understanding demands more attention, think about what you hope to learn.

Never write anything you don't understand.

Understand what the speaker is saying, then write what you are thinking, not what the speaker said.

Evaluate your notes at the end of every lecture.

The particular way we think about things is a key contributor to what we remember

Memory is the residue of thought

Select your project based on what you want to learn, not what you want to accomplish. (this is so true for MBA students)

In doing your project, pull your thoughts together and reflect.

3 to 6 people is a good project group size

In reading a book, readers need to connect what they are reading now to something they read a few pages ago.

Set a concrete task to be completed as you read.

Think about your goal for reading before you start reading a book.

Its much easier to remember meaningful content than meaningless content

There is no scientific evidence for any learning styles theory.

Cramming works as long as you don't care if you forget the information after the exam. Distributed studying protects against this rapid forgetting.

Knowing doesn't mean being able to understand an explanation, it means being able to explain it to others.

Rereading misleads you into thinking “ I know this”

Rereading is desirable for the purpose of comprehension

Try reducing your consumption of caffeinated drinks on important test / work days.

Memories tend to be organized in themes

People remember a little more each time they try to remember

When a question makes a certain piece of information pop into your mind, you must evaluate whether it actually answers the question.

You will often add assumptions to the questions you are asked or read things that are not there.

Don't clutter your memos with a bunch of irrelevant stuff.

Give yourself credit for what you accomplish at work.

Refine your sense of what you need to work on.

Learning more information makes you more intelligent

You can get smarter in any subject you want.

People consistently underestimate how long it takes to get things done.

Loss of sleep makes it harder to think and
harder to pay attention

Plan your learning by time, not task.

You will never regret being ahead on your work. This is the insurance policy against the planning fallacy

People tend to underestimate how much their emotions can cloud their calculations

We procrastinate to make ourselves feel better

Shame is a key reason why accountability works

Find a place of work that's closest to being distraction free.

Anytime you multi task, you are distracting yourself.

Rest breaks make you less susceptible to distractions and mind wandering.

Your self confidence affects your aspirations.

Learning is effective because of what you do,
not who you are.

A third of anxiety can be ascribed to genes

A person's interpretation of events is crucial in anxiety

Feeling anxious is uncomfortable but not dangerous