

## Flashcards: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

“The true art of memory is the art of attention.” --Samuel Johnson

Sometimes, we just need to memorize things—verb endings, definitions, the muscles in the hand, the steps in clinical procedure. It’s no news flash that quizzing ourselves promotes this sort of learning. Students often use flash cards for self-quizzing, but misused, they can do harm as well as good. As we near exam season, it might be helpful to point out three aspects of using flashcards well.

- **Use flashcards for actual quizzing**

Read the item to be learned, formulate an answer, and only then check the answer.

Just reading through terms and definitions can give the illusion of learning instead of the real thing.

Reading and re-reading without self-quizzing makes material look familiar, but that’s not the same thing as being able to retrieve it when it’s needed. Just rereading material—whether in the text, in notes or on flashcards—can prompt us to think we know more than we do.

- **Overlearn each item**

Typically we sort cards into the “known” and “unknown” as we work with them, but repeated and successful retrieval is essential for long-term learning. Don’t be too quick to decide something is known.

Put a card in the “known” pile only after identifying it at least five times in a row—and still revisit it once in a while.

- **Plan to deal with the problem of forgetting**

Human beings forget things—it’s an unavoidable part of how we learn. Material we haven’t used recently usually becomes difficult to retrieve.

Even after mastering information, periodically review old cards, but each time old material is reviewed, it comes back more quickly.

**Paper or electronic cards?** For some students, the physical act of writing out cards promotes learning. On the other hand, many people find free apps like *Quizlet* more fun. Users post their card sets on the site, so be selective about the ones you use, or just create your own sets.

One parting idea: this kind of memory work doesn’t replace understanding new ideas. Flashcards can be great for memorizing facts, but only if we understand the underlying concepts.

### Want to learn more?

<https://Quizlet.com> Create an account and cards sets, or study existing sets posted by other users.

<https://www.retrievalpractice.org/> Find lots of tips, including flashcards, for using retrieval practice to improve academic performance.