

How Can the Loci Method Improve Memory?

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Howard Margolis, Ed.D.

Children with reading disabilities and other learning disabilities often struggle to remember what other children easily remember. This struggle often frustrates, stresses, and confuses them. As such, they often berate themselves mercilessly: “I never remember anything.... I don’t know how to remember.... I’m the stupidest jerk in the school.”

Fortunately, teachers and parents can do a great deal to help children with reading and other learning disabilities strengthen their memory, preventing or minimizing these destructive thoughts. By teaching these children how to remember, teachers and parents can help them transform their negative beliefs into positive ones, ones that say “I can remember.... I know how to.... I can succeed in school.” These positive beliefs can affect them in ways that go far beyond remembering a few facts. They can motivate them to persevere, to keep plugging away, to make the effort needed to succeed. This effort—based on the belief that they can succeed—is a key to helping them succeed in reading.

The Loci Method

For centuries, one method that has successfully helped people remember lists of items is the Loci or Journey Method. Like all good methods for helping children strengthen their memory, it’s simple, orderly, and easy to use. Nevertheless, children with reading disabilities usually need lots of practice using it. Practice, with feedback, should start with one or two concrete items to remember and gradually move to more abstract, lengthier lists of items. Feedback should be corrective, supportive, and encouraging. Practice should be fun.

To use The Loci Method successfully, children must attend to what they want to remember, think about it, create pictures in their mind, and associate it with familiar places. First I’ll give you an example. Then I’ll explain a little more about Loci.

An Example

I want to remember that children with reading disabilities increase their odds of remembering something if they **V**erbalize what it means, create **I**mages of what it looks like, and, if possible, **P**hysically examine it or engage in physical activity.

For improving memory, the acronym VIP does not mean Very Important Person; instead it means **V**erbalize, create **I**mages, and involve yourself **P**hysically.

To remember all this, I'll use the Loci Method. In my imagination, I'll visit three of the rooms in my house, associating each room with a VIP activity. Because I've lived in the house for more than 20 years, imagining the rooms is easy. So, I'll use my imagination. But for some children with reading disabilities, it's better to visit the real places, and there make the associations between the places and what they need to remember.

The Verbal Room. The first room my imagination visits is my office, at the top of the steps, on the left. It's full of books, books that I often discuss. Discussion means that I, my friends and colleagues, use lots of words. I can imagine one of the discussions now: My co-author and friend Gary Brannigan is discussing memory with me. We're exchanging lots of words—it's a verbal funfest about helping children use memory strategies. We're discussing the importance of verbalizing meaning, creating images, and involving yourself physically. The room is flooded with words.

Because of all the discussions I'm imagining in this room, because of all the verbal interaction, I'll call it the **V**erbal Room.

The Image Room. The second room my imagination visits is a bedroom for guests. I'm imagining it now: A group of children with reading disabilities are on the floor drawing pictures of *Gulliver's Travels*. Their pictures include Gulliver, the shipwreck, Lilliputians, the giant farmer and his daughter, Yahoos, and lots of horses. They're talking about the pictures and labeling them. One picture is labeled "Gulliver helps the Lilliputians." Another, "The Scary Giant." After finishing and discussing the drawing, the children cover the walls with them. Because the room is loaded with pictures, I'll call it the **I**mage Room.

The Physical Room. The third room I'm imagining is about 15 feet opposite the door to the Image room. It's the large all-purpose room in which I exercise. Here my imagination lets me see the children touching the kind of clothing Gulliver must have worn, stroking the kind of wood used to make ships in the 1700s, and comparing the size of Lilliputian figures to adults they know. I also imagine that after 40 minutes of work the children exercise lightly for ten minutes. This refreshes them and helps them to think more clearly.

Because of all the physical activity in this room, I'll call it the **P**hysical Room.

By labeling the rooms the Verbal, Image, and Physical rooms, and associating specific rooms with specific activities, I've strengthened my memory about the Loci Method children can use to strengthen their memory. Now for more of an explanation of the Loci Method.

An Explanation of the Loci Method

The method starts with places that children with reading disabilities know well. To remember a set of items, such as the first three Presidents of the United States, the children need to associate each President with a place that's familiar to them. Then they need to describe what each President is doing in his location and why they associate him with it. They might draw pictures, showing George Washington in one of the rooms, John Adams in another, and Thomas Jefferson in a third.

The place, however, can be any familiar place. Instead of rooms in a house, it might be a park the children know well. They might imagine George Washington writing a letter under the large tree at the entrance, John Adams speaking to an angry group of people near the water fountain, some 50 feet from the large tree at the entrance, and Thomas Jefferson sitting at a wooden table some 75 feet from the water fountain, using small sticks to solve a geometry problem. What's important is that each child pick a place *familiar* to him, so he can associate the information he's trying to remember with a place and locations he knows well.

To make the Loci Method effective for remembering the Presidents, the children should:

- Use a familiar place.
- Identify different locations in the place.
- Place each President at a different location.
- State who is where.
- Create an image of each President at his location.
- Imagine and describe what each President is doing at his location.
- Discuss what the location and activity suggest about the President.
- Label each scene.

The Problem

Despite the fact that teaching memory strategies to children, especially those with reading disabilities and other learning disabilities, often strengthens their ability to remember, schools rarely teach such strategies. As N. L. Gage and David C. Berliner justifiably complained, "They should."

If your child has memory problems, ask the school to systematically teach him how to remember. If he's in special education, ask that his IEP have goals (and in some states, objectives) for mastering memory strategies. Here's a sample goal and objective:

Memory Goal 1: Tim will explain and will demonstrate how to successfully apply three memory strategies (e.g., the Loci Method) to his content area subjects.

Memory Objective 1: Tim will explain and will demonstrate how to successfully apply the Loci Method to new social studies material that his

teacher gives him. He will do this on three successive occasions, with different materials, by the end of the first marking period.

If your child's school doesn't know how to teach memory strategies, you may have to teach him yourself, which we usually caution against (see page 106 in our book), or hire a tutor. The good news is that teaching memory strategies can easily be fun for the teacher, the tutor, and the child. To guide instruction, here are two older books that you can buy for few dollars; each has an excellent chapter on memory strategies:

- Gage, N. L., & Berliner, D. C. (1998). *Educational Psychology* (6th ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin, p. 267 (Chapter 7).
- Mastropieri, M. A., & Scruggs, T. E. (2004). *The Inclusive Classroom: Strategies for Effective Instruction* (2nd ed.). Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall (Chapter 10).

Howard Margolis, Ed.D., is Professor Emeritus of Reading and Special Education at Queens College of the City University of New York. He is former editor of the *Journal of Psychological and Educational Consultation* and for the last 19-years he has edited the *Reading & Writing Quarterly: Overcoming Learning Difficulties*. Howard and Dr. Gary G. Brannigan, Professor of Psychology and Chancellor's Scholar at the State University of New York-Plattsburgh, have recently published *Reading Disabilities: Beating the Odds*, a book for parents and teachers on reading and advocacy. This column was originally published by www.reading2008.com/blog.