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# Overcome the Tip-of-the-Tongue Effect

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*Use what you can recall to help boot-strap your memory into remembering what you cannot.*

You are sitting with your friends, discussing the latest movie releases, when someone asks the name of the actress who starred in a recent film. Frustratingly, you can remember what she looks like, the fact that you saw her film from last year, and even that her name has three syllables and starts with an 'A', but the name just does not come to mind.

This experience, where a memory seems to be on the 'tip-of-the-tongue', is exasperating if you are trying to remember a particular fact, but intriguing if you are interested in how memory works.

One of the most fascinating things about the tip-of-the-tongue state, is that it demonstrates how sometimes we know that we know something, without actually being able to recall it. This is part of what psychologists call 'metacognition', which allows us to realise when we should keep trying, despite the fact our memories might be failing us at a particular moment. Much research has focused on metacognition and memory, because experiences like the tip-of-the-tongue state are relatively common in everyday life.

Studies have shown that tip-of-the-tongue states happen about once per week on average, and get more common as we age. Other research has focused on conditions which can effect the likelihood of successful recall in an attempt to work out what happens during the tip-of-the-tongue state, and furthermore, has suggested some good techniques for overcoming it when it occurs.

## In Action

When a tip-of-tongue state is encountered, it is common that people focus on the few relevant things that are easily remembered, in the hope that the elusive fact will pop into mind. A more successful technique is to try and recall as much information about the topic as possible, no matter how loosely it is related.

For example, in the situation described above, I might try and remember the plots and details of movies I know the actress has been in, as well as what I was doing when I saw the original version of the film, and who I was with. I could also try and remember what music was in the film, whether the actress has any brothers or sisters, or even which of my friends said she was a good actress last time we talked about her.

If I was in the situation where I could recall some aspect of the name (such as the number of syllables, or perhaps some of the sounds in the word), I could also try recalling words that sound similar, whether they are related in meaning or not to the thing you are trying to remember.

During this process, the fact you are hoping to remember will often be successfully recalled (in our example, the actress' name). If you have other people to bounce ideas off, all the better, as it increases the chances that someone will be able to remember the answer.

## How It Works

Memory is thought to rely heavily on a network of related mental concepts. The technique given here takes advantage of this network to make a difficult-to-recall fact more accessible to consciousness by activating as many related concepts in the network as possible.

One of the key concepts in psychology is priming, where experiencing or thinking about one concept makes related concepts more readily available. For example, if the word 'dinner' is shown to people in an experiment, they will react more quickly to words like 'spoon' and 'vegetable' than words like 'aeroplane' or 'paper', because words associated with food and dining are thought to be more closely and highly interconnected.

By thinking of as many related concepts as possible, you are increasing the activation in the area of memory that your fact is related to, therefore increasing the ease in which your mind can lift the fact into consciousness.

The psychologist Endel Tulving [1] proposed a related theory called the 'encoding specificity principle' that states that successful recall relies on the overlap between the thing you are trying to remember and how you first encountered it, and the cues or prompts that are available at the time you are trying to recall it. The technique given here allows you to manipulate the context in your own mind to increase the chances of recall.

Just remembering related facts is only part of the process. Research has shown that recently experiencing similar sounding words can also help overcome the 'tip-of-the-tongue' state [2]. Models of language and memory suggest that meaning and word structure are stored separately, leading to the experience of remembering facts, but not a name. In some cases, word structure is only partially remembered, so first letters or syllables are recalled but nothing else. Priming seems to work as well for sounds as it does for facts and concepts, so by remembering words that sound alike, the target word is more easily remembered.

## End Notes

1. Tulving, E. (1983) *Elements of Episodic Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
2. James, L.E. & Burke, D.M. (2000) Phonological priming effects on word retrieval and tip-of-the-tongue experiences in younger and older adults. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory and Language*, 26 (6), 1378-1391.

## See Also

- Priming tutorial from Harvey G. Shulman:
- <http://www.psy.ohio-state.edu/psy312/priming.html>
- Guide to tip-of-the-tongue experiences:
- <http://www.memory-key.com/EverydayMemory/TOT.htm>