

16 How to remember Names and Faces.

The ability to instantly recall names and faces is a superpower in both social and professional circles. It's a skill you can sharpen—and for listed events like conferences or workshops, it's entirely within your control with just a bit of effort.

This is a really common struggle—people forget faces and names all the time, and it can feel awkward in both social and business settings.

Let me start by admitting I'm terrible at remembering faces myself. I blame teenage vanity: I refused to wear my glasses, so until I got contact lenses in my mid-twenties, most people's faces were just a pink blur.

Names

That said, I do have some practical tips that help, and I'm much more confident about names than faces. Dale Carnegie put it perfectly: *'If you remember my name, you pay me a subtle compliment; you indicate that I have made an impression on you. Remember my name and you add to my feeling of importance.'* We all light up when someone recalls who we are.

The easiest scenario is when the group is limited—like a meeting, workshop, or conference. In those cases, I recommend pairing the alphabet with a simple numerical mnemonic.

In small groups, the Shape system will take you up to 10, and the Rhyming system up to 20 and if you have 30 people to remember, you could run the 2 systems together. Using the Major System it is possible to remember over 100 people and beyond. Begin by categorizing your list of attendees alphabetically and then numbering them. All you need to do then is attach the name to the number.

Now to remember the names:

This is a numbered, alphabetical list, and I used the rhyming system as it goes up to 20.

I took this list from the most popular first names in the UK from 1970 – 1993 and the most common surnames to date. If you think it is a bit out of date, I apologize, but without knowing the age of your own circle of acquaintances, I cannot be topical with the first names, and I think you will get the idea from my examples.

1. Brown Jessica
2. Clark Samantha
3. Davies Ashley
4. Evans Lisa
5. Green Amy
6. Hall Christopher
7. Jackson Matthew
8. Johnson Michael

9. Jones James
10. Roberts Jennifer
11. Robinson Jason
12. Smith Tyler
13. Taylor Emily
14. Thompson Amanda
15. Walker Michelle
16. White Sarah
17. Williams Andrew
18. Wilson Robert
19. Wood David
20. Wright Joshua

1. Brown Jessica – Sun, Bun, think of a Jessica you know or a famous Jessica – think of Angela Lansbury as Jessica Fletcher in ‘Murder, She Wrote’ eating buns and lying in the sun, turning brown or even the sexy Jessica Rabbit.
2. Clark Samantha – Shoe. Clark's are a famous shoe shop range. Think of someone you know called Samantha, or choose someone famous. I remember Samantha Eggar in ‘The Butterfly Collector’, the wonderful Elizabeth Montgomery in Bewitched, Samantha from Sex and the City or the character played by Grace Kelly in ‘High Society’ and immortalized in the song ‘Samantha’. If you know it – play it in your head alongside her image as she goes into the shop to choose a new pair of shoes.
3. Davies Ashley - Tree plus a famous Davies or one that you know. I immediately think of Alan Davies from QI. For Ashley, I would have the tree burning to ash or Alan tapping ash off a cigarette or Ashley from Gone with the Wind.
4. Evans Lisa – Chris Evans, Lee Evans or another famous Evans. Or think Heaven or Van, plus a famous Lisa, Lisa Minelli in a van going to heaven. Googling Evans for some more examples, I have discovered that there is a real Lisa Evans who is a Scottish footballer so, I will not go through the fictional list as I am sure you get the idea by now. Now compile your own list of people you want to make sure you will remember. As usual, use movement, sound, humour, and exaggeration.

I would always do this as an introduction to my workshops, so I can assure you that it is an easy exercise to learn and most impressive.

Recently, I had a problem remembering the name of a lady I had just met, although I remembered her husband's name was John as we had been talking about him. So the next time I saw her I - wait for it - asked her. It was Gillian. I thought of Jack (the Yorkshire name for John) and Jill going up the hill. At the time, she had difficulty walking so was using crutches, so I added that snippet of information to my mental picture, even though it was poor Jack who fell down in the nursery rhyme.

Asking for someone's name upfront is far better than hoping it slips out in conversation. When I ran a recruitment agency placing secretaries on construction sites, I drilled into them the importance of getting the caller's name before transferring to the boss. It was tough—callers were often curt and impatient—but far preferable to announcing 'a Mr Mumble-Mumble on the line.'

Once you have the name, some advise using it repeatedly to build rapport. I confess I find that a touch forced—dare I say, rather American—but if you can weave it in naturally, it works well. Otherwise, jot it down at the first opportunity: a quick trip to the loo, or immediately after the conversation.

After all, remember: this is a simple courtesy to those you meet, one that's deeply appreciated and often long remembered. A few years ago, I attended a service at a church I'd never visited before. As I left, the clergyman approached me and greeted me by name—something he'd clearly learned from the welcome host inside. I walked away with a warm glow, and years later, I still remember it vividly.

Faces

Even if you are not as short-sighted and vain as I am, faces are a little trickier as they can change, especially in the case of women. Women are more likely to change the length and colour of their hair. Of course, men may also grow a moustache or a beard - or shave one off. However, there are some things that do not change, and these are the questions to ask yourself.

- The shape of faces - is it square, long, round, heart-shaped, triangular?
- In profile, is it concave, straight, or convex? E.g. Reece Witherspoon is slightly concave and Alfred Hitchcock is convex.
- In profile, is the nose straight, hooked, turned up, big, small, Roman?
- Ears - large, small, close to the head or sticking out?
- Ear lobes – do they have them?
- Eyebrows - are they thin or bushy, straight, arched, winged?
- Eye colour?
- Eye shape - round, slit, almond, slanted, large, small, protruding, deep set, hollow?
- Mouth - small, large, straight, turned up, turned down?
- Lips - thin, fleshy, bow-shaped?
- Chin - square, round, pointed?
- Distinguishing marks - moles, dimples, scars?
- Complexion - pale, swarthy, olive, red?

As I said at the start, remembering names and faces is tough for a lot of people—it really does take effort. Here's a tip: make little notes about the people you meet. Jot down something memorable about them. We all love stories, and linking a name to a story helps lock it in your memory.

Personally, I love it when people share a quick story about themselves. It's like getting to live a dozen lives through them—and when you remember their story, it makes *them* feel seen. That makes conversations richer and your own life way more interesting.

Have fun with it! Practice by looking at faces in newspapers, on TV, or online. You'll see so many different features—round faces, sharp jaws, unique noses—and start noticing patterns. I do it all the time. It's like a game, and it sharpens your memory.