

12 LEARNING WORD FOR WORD

"To know a poem by heart is to own a great work of art forever", said Michael Gove when he was Secretary of State for Education, and I have always loved being able to recall favourite poems and pieces of text throughout my life. This was the original reason I had for developing a technique of learning word-for-word, rather than the old way of just repeating the piece until it was familiar. Even then I found that over time I had forgotten much that I had previously painstakingly committed to memory.

Now I know that it was because I had not retained in my memory any specific clues, so yes, along with most of the population, I knew 'To be or not to be, that is the question?' just as most of us know The Battle of Hastings 1066', but after that, very little.

Once I had started to learn about mnemonics I was able to solve the latter problem and learn and remember much more about the Battle of Hastings, when artists were born and died, the periodic table and anything else that took my fancy, but nothing out there could tell me about how to learn word for word which was necessary for poetry, and famous speeches. So I developed my own technique, which I then went on to teach actors. I called this the Scaffolding Technique, and it is for actors and others to memorize texts for performance or pleasure.

What is the Scaffolding Technique?

The scaffolding technique is a structured mnemonic approach to memorizing the core framework of a text, such as a poem or speech, before adding finer details. It acts like a mental framework (or "scaffold") that supports the retention of key elements, making it easier to recall the text accurately and in sequence. Unlike rote repetition, which often leads to forgetting over time, this method uses deliberate memory cues to anchor the main ideas or words, ensuring long-term retention.

How the Scaffolding Technique Works

Identify Key Elements (The Scaffold):

- Break the text into its most essential components, such as main ideas, key phrases, or pivotal words. These form the "bones" of the text.
- For a poem or speech, this might mean selecting the first word of each line, key thematic words, or structural markers (e.g., the start of each stanza or paragraph).
- The core words carry the meaning.

This is a speech by Titania from 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' by William Shakespeare.

I chose it because so many people think of Shakespeare as 'hard', but it demonstrates how beautifully he constructs his text, and you will see how you can build the skeleton or scaffolding of a speech using numbering with no effort at all. It is like a jigsaw puzzle; once you have the corners and the sides done and you have sorted out the main colours, it is so much easier to concentrate on the remaining difficult bits.

In a speech, number the thoughts of the character, not the lines, because just as in a book, these are the points that are being made, one after the other, hence the value of consecutive numbering. However unsure you may be of the individual words you will not lose your way - you will always know roughly what comes next. Also, use this numerical progression as focal points in your chosen journey.

Titania, under the spell of a magic potion applied to her eyes, will fall in love with the first being she sees upon waking. Tragically, that being is Bottom, a weaver transformed with a donkey's head by Puck's mischief. His companions, terrified, have fled, leaving him alone. Bottom remains indifferent to Titania's sudden, intense love for him and wishes to escape the forest, but she is resolute in keeping him by her side.

Titania. Thou art as wise as thou art beautiful.

Bottom. Not so, neither: but if I had wit enough to get out of
this wood, I have enough to serve mine own turn.

This is the sample speech that is used to demonstrate the Scaffold Technique

Titania. *Out of this wood do not desire to go:
Thou shalt remain here, whether thou wilt or no. I
am a spirit of no common rate;
The summer still doth tend upon my state;
And I do love thee: therefore, go with me;
I'll give thee fairies to attend on thee,
And they shall fetch thee jewels from the deep,
And sing while thou on pressed flowers dost sleep;
And I will purge thy mortal grossness so
That thou shalt like an airy spirit go.
Pease blossom! Cobweb! Moth! and Mustard seed!*

Search for the KEY words, and when you are learning a speech, never, never substitute a word of your own. Looking for the author's keyword helps you dissect how he put the speech together in the first place.

Core words: wood, spirit, love, fairies, purge, pc m&m

Secondary words: these words are not core words carrying the meaning of the speech, but words that could help with the memorization of it.

*Out of this wood do not desire to go:
Thou shalt remain here, whether thou wilt or no.*

1 WOOD secondary – Out – it is often useful to remember the first word of a stanza

Her first thought is that he is not to leave the wood; the remainder of the sentence is just elaborating on that fact, he is not leaving the wood, whether he wants to or not.

Visualise a wood and (if you are using the rhyming numerical technique) a sun or bun, then you could have Titania hang buns on the trees of a wood.

I am a spirit of no common rate;

The summer still doth tend upon my state.

Her second thought is to describe who she is, a spirit, and how important she is, again elaborating on the fact that she is a spirit.

2 SPIRIT

Visualise a shoe for 2 and have Titania pour spirit (vodka, brandy, or whisky) into it for them both to drink. The reason for using the drink as a spirit is that your brain may want to substitute 'fairy', and this forces you to get the exact word.

Her third thought is the most important for her, and where Shakespeare strengthens the most important part of the plot.

And I do love thee:

3 LOVE - secondary - therefore, go

She loves him. I have always found it difficult to fix on a strong image for love and have finally settled a nice, solid picture of a heart-shaped box of chocolates.

Visualise a big box of chocolates in the shape of a heart hanging on a tree, and have Titania give it to Bottom.

*therefore, go with me;
I'll give thee fairies to attend on thee,
And they shall fetch thee jewels from the deep,
And sing while thou on pressed flowers dost sleep;*

The most complicated part of the speech, but when you dissect it, it is just about the fairies and then describes what they can do for him.

4 FAIRIES – secondary - give, attend

Visualise a door (4) and a load of fairies hammering to get in - always exaggerate.

*And I will purge thy mortal grossness so That
thou shalt like an airy spirit go.*

Just like a woman - she immediately wants to change him, and this is a very funny couplet with the idea of Bottom as an airy spirit. Purge is the core word because it describes what she will do to him for him to become an 'airy spirit'. Purge means the removal of something undesirable and is used in medicine to cause a copious evacuation of the bowels. It could be a difficult word to remember as it is a verb and so use a noun that sounds like it such as a large purse which sounds like purge. 5 is HIVE, so fill the purse with honey.

5 PURGE – secondary – mortal, airy spirit

6 Peaseblossom! Cobweb! Moth! and Mustardseed!

Use acronyms: a **PC** (personal computer) and chocolate **M&Ms**. Have the fairies

beating the PC with a stick. If you know the play then you will probably remember the names, if not, just cover the PC with peas, blossom and cobwebs, and have a moth feeding on a mountain of M&Ms with generous dollops of mustard.

6 PC, M&M

I think you will have no trouble in remembering the construction of this speech with no sense of having 'learned' it. Look for your image for 1, and you will see a wood festooned with buns. Then Titania pours spirit into a shoe (2) and hands a heart-shaped (love) box of chocolates to Bottom, which she has taken down from a tree (3). Four is door which is being hammered at by fairies who then fill a purse (purge) with honey (hive). Finally, the fairies (who are being called) beat a PC with a stick before covering it with frozen peas and blossom and cobwebs while a moth alights on a mountain of M&Ms liberally covered with mustard.

So our scaffolding or framework of the speech is

1. WOOD
2. SPIRIT
3. LOVE
4. FAIRIES
5. PURGE
6. PC M&M

Now as before, close your eyes and go through the numbers 1 to 6 with the attached images.

Recap the technique

1. Identify Key Elements (The Scaffold):

- Break the text into its main ideas, key phrases, or pivotal words. These form the "bones" of the text.
- For a poem or speech, this might mean selecting the first word of each line, key thematic words, or structural markers (e.g., the start of each stanza or paragraph).
- Example: the scaffold is "wood, spirit, love, fairies, purge, pc m&m"

2. Create Mnemonic Cues:

- Assign vivid, memorable images or associations to each key element. This leverages the brain's preference for visual and emotional memory.
- Example: These images are easier to recall than abstract words.

3. Link the Cues in Sequence:

- Organize the images numerically, and/or as a mental journey. This preserves the order of the text.

- Example: Imagine the whole scene taking place in a wood.
- You might visually mind map these cues.

4. **Anchor the Scaffold in Memory:**

- Rehearse the sequence of images or cues, not the full text, to solidify the framework. This makes recall faster and more reliable than rote memorization.
- The scaffold acts as a mental checklist, ensuring you don't skip or forget major parts of the text.

5. **Prepare for Filling in Details:**

- The scaffolding stage is distinct from adding "extra words" (likely connectors, modifiers, or less critical terms).
- Example: Once you recall "wood, spirit, love, fairies, purge". Add in the secondary cues, and later add smaller connectors with further images if you need them.

Why It Works

- **Reduces Cognitive Load:** By focusing only on key elements, you avoid overwhelming your memory with every word at once.
- **Leverages Visualization:** Vivid images are easier to recall than abstract words.
- **Ensures Structure:** The scaffold preserves the text's sequence and hierarchy, preventing the common issue of forgetting what comes next (e.g., knowing "To be or not to be" but not the rest of Hamlet's soliloquy).
- **Long-Term Retention:** Unlike rote repetition, which leads to forgetting, the scaffold uses meaningful associations that stick over time.

How It Differs from Rote Memorization

Rote repetition leads to forgetting because it lacks "specific clues." The scaffolding technique solves this by:

- **Focusing on Meaningful Chunks:** Instead of memorizing every word, you prioritize key elements, making the process more efficient.
- **Using Active Recall:** Visual cues and stories engage the brain more than passive repetition.
- **Building a Flexible Framework:** The scaffold allows you to reconstruct the text even if minor words slip, unlike rote methods where forgetting one part can derail everything.

Teaching to Actors and Others

The scaffolding technique is ideal for:

- **Actors:** It ensures they grasp the structure of a monologue or script, allowing confident delivery without missing key lines.
- **Poetry Enthusiasts:** It makes memorizing poems enjoyable by turning words into vivid stories "owning" art.
- **Speeches:** It helps speakers recall key points in order, critical for impactful delivery.

Notes and Suggestions

- **Mind Map Integration:**
- **Next Stage:** the scaffold serves as a foundation for layering smaller words (e.g., prepositions, articles). Use additional mnemonics, like rhymes or secondary images and link these to the scaffold.
- **Glossary:** I have created a glossary of about 2,000 words with suggested images. These are images for words that do not have solid nouns to imagine and cover connectors such as of, on, and, the, in etc. As an example, I always have a golf course for 'for' – think someone shouting 'fore' or a pub for 'in'.
- **Adaptability:** The technique can apply to any text, from Shakespeare to modern speeches. For example, for "To be or not to be, that is the question," the scaffold might be: **Be, question, whether, nobler, mind, suffer, slings, arrows.**