

# The Simplest Scientific Strategies for Remembering People's Names

Being good with names is an underrated social power



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I'm a bit particular about my name — which is unfortunate for me, considering how often it's mishandled. People mispronounce it, misspell it, ignore it in favor of a nickname they've decided to give me, or forget it altogether. Sometimes I get “Julie,” other times, a blank stare. Most shrug off their clumsiness, saying they're simply “bad with names.”

But remembering names is a critical skill when it comes to building relationships. Dale Carnegie, the late author of *How to Win Friends & Influence People*, wrote, “A person's name is to him or her the sweetest and most important sound in any language.” When you address someone by name — at a party, a company event, or a family reunion — you're dropping a bit of social shorthand that lets them know: This person cares about me. This person thinks I'm interesting. This person wants to learn more about me.

That means if you can be the rare person who's good with names, you automatically have a level of power that others don't. Remembering names isn't easy (research shows that it's actually quite hard), but with dedication, practice, and a bit of tricking your brain, it's possible to master the skill.

## Acknowledge the difficulty

One reason it's so hard to remember names correctly: They're arbitrary. That is, they bear no relationship to what they describe. If I tell you I'm snacking on an orange, you can form a mental image of the thing on my plate, because the label has a mutually understood meaning. But if I tell you I got the orange from Ashley, you have hardly any clues about who Ashley is.

Matching the right arbitrary label to the right person, then, is no small mental feat. Charan Ranganath, director of the Memory and Plasticity Program at the University of California, Davis, explained in *Time* that we often underestimate the amount of work it takes to perform the seemingly simple task of remembering someone's name. “You're not only remembering the name, but you're remembering the name in relation to a face,” Ranganath said. “Even if you get the information in, which we call encoding, you might not be able to find the information because there's so much competition between other names and other faces in your memory.”

That's on top of everything else that's competing for your attention. When you're meeting new people, you have so many other distractions and anxieties (“Do I have kale

in my teeth?” or “Why didn’t anyone laugh when I made that hilarious joke about the fruit bowl?”). Remembering whether that guy you just shook hands with is Stanley or Stewart isn’t naturally your first priority.

Therefore, to become better at remembering names, an obvious but important first step is to acknowledge that it will take some focused effort. Before entering your next conference or block party, make a quiet commitment to the task.

## **Use mnemonic devices**

In one 2016 study, researchers found that people trying to learn the names of plant species — which can seem similarly arbitrary — had the most success when they used mnemonic devices. Specifically, by somehow tying the physical appearance of the plant to the name of it, they were able to remember more of them. For example, to remember a plant named “Lords and Ladies,” one person said its leaves are “pointed like the arrows that lords fire to impress the ladies.”

Mnemonic devices do the hard work of converting information that is tricky to remember, like a person’s name, by matching it up with information that’s easier to remember, like something they’re wearing or an interesting thing they said. When meeting someone new, you’ll need to find a “trigger” for that person. For example, you might notice that your new coworker Philip is gushing about his cat. You could try an alliteration mnemonic, such as Philip the Feline-lover. Or you could try to associate an image with Philip — you might think of him “filling up” his cat’s food bowl, for instance. It sounds a little cheesy, but it works.

## **Test yourself throughout the conversation**

Research suggests that actively testing yourself on new material is the best way to wrap your brain around new facts. This is called the “testing effect.” By forcing your brain to retrieve a memory, you develop a stronger neural pathway to that memory, making it easier for you to access it at a later date. In one study, trying to retrieve a name even once doubled the chances that subjects remembered that name during a later test.

Throughout a conversation with a person, test yourself by using their name three times. First, when they introduce themselves, try to create a mnemonic device in your head as soon as you can (“Oliver has blue dots all over his tie”), and then say the name aloud.

“Nice to meet you, Oliver. I’m Zulie.” Then, drop it in again partway through the discussion. Finally, use it when you leave them. (Just don’t pepper your conversation with the person’s name too many times, or it becomes a little weird.) Make an extra effort with unconventional names — those that are hard to pronounce. It’s not rude to ask them if you’re saying it correctly rather, it shows that you care, so long as you actually retain what they tell you.

It takes work to be good with names, but the effort is well worth it. Remembering someone’s name tells them they’re worthy of your respect. Forgetting makes them think: *“Hmm, maybe I’m not.”*

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