TIPS for Improving your Working Memory

What is 'working memory'?

Working memory is a type of memory system for temporarily storing and managing the information that we are trying to work with at the moment. When you hold information and manipulate it in your mind/memory for a length of time, you're engaging in what cognitive neuroscientists call Working Memory. It where deliberate and intentional thinking takes place. It’s as referred to as “remembering so as to do”. Our working memory becomes like a blackboard in your brain where you keep relevant information while you’re using it. The problem is that working memory can only hold a limited amount of information at one time. And it's constantly being bombarded by new thoughts and sensory experiences trying to take the place of your focused thoughts.

Some common examples are trying to remember a phone number between the time of hearing it and dialing, trying to add double digit numbers (e.g., 45+67) mentally without paper, or remembering driving instructions while you look for specific landmarks (“take the first right then go straight until you see the big yellow sign and then it’s the third building on the left ...”). So, in these situations you need to hold information in memory (e.g., phone number, numbers you’ve added, directions while trying to find where you are) while manipulating the information stored briefly in memory. With working memory, the information that you are holding briefly in memory either gets stored, information processed or the information gets lost.

CHUNKING Sometimes there is a lot of information to remember and it can be overwhelming. We can help our memory system by simplifying the task by organizing multiple pieces of information into a few “Chunks” of information. For example, if you have to go to the grocery store and have to remember what you need to buy, you could organize your list around types of food (e.g., fruits, vegetables, snacks, drinks). By organizing the information into smaller chunks, you would be able to better remember the information. And, you create a way to organize the information in order to better remember it.

○ Practice by challenging yourself to remember lists of things, vocabulary words, dates etc.
○ Look for connections. As you create groupings, look for ways to relate small units of information to each other in meaningful ways
○ Associate. Linking groups of items to things from your memory can also help. Think of things from our experiences to help link information.
○ Use mnemonic devices. If you need to remember the diet that your doctor recommended when you were sick: ananas, rice, applesauce, and toast, make it a smaller chunk - BRAT diet - and it will be easier to recall
○ Break down long sections of reading into more manageable parts.
○ Read-reflect-recite it to yourself.

REHEARSAL Using rehearsal to keep information in memory. Repeat information to yourself that you have to remember until it sticks. Try to visualize the information if it's imageable.
Try to retrieve the information without the information in front of you. Put a paragraph that you just read into your own words. This can be very powerful.

**MEANINGFULNESS** Try to make the information meaningful by trying to associate it with other information that you have stored in memory or from life experiences.

**MAKE IT VISUAL.** Use graphic organizers, mind maps, concepts maps- all of which create a visual representation of what you are trying to remember. It will help you by making you organize the information and then helping you to store the information for later retrieval. It also provides a visual picture of what you are trying to remember. Your organizer may use words or pictures. Use a pre made organizer or make your own. See example below.