

The UK Schools Memory Championships

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Young finalists try to take in their lists of words, numbers, invented dates and binary sequences

A few years ago, psychologists in Seattle, Washington, set up an experiment in which they asked people who had visited Disneyland as children to look at some old advertisements. They showed Bugs Bunny standing next to the theme park's Magic Castle. About one-third of the study's participants told researchers that they had shaken hands with Bugs Bunny at Disneyland – which was impossible. The character was a Warner Bros creation and would never have been spotted on its rival's territory. Using a simple trick, the researchers had managed to rewrite their subjects' memories.

Memory is fallible and fluid. Sigmund Freud compared it to a "Wunderblock", a wax tablet overlaid with cellophane on which children practise handwriting. After writing, you can lift the cellophane and erase the letters – but the wax underneath keeps traces of them all. It mixes layers of time and experience, creating a new reality in its own right.

On a rainy July Tuesday in Northampton, however, at the UK Schools Memory Championships, it isn't about the wax but the cellophane. How many words on a sheet of paper can you keep in your head and spit out 15 minutes later? How long a sequence of numbers can you memorise and recount? If you're given 50 invented dates to learn, will you be able to recall them all? It may sound mundane, but schoolchildren aren't unfamiliar with these sorts of tasks. We like to stuff facts and figures down their throats, like foie gras farmers fattening their geese.

At 10am, David Luck, a shy, red-haired 15-year-old from Irthlingborough, Northants, who listens to Queen and other 1970s and 1980s bands, is warming up for the contest. He was here last year, too, at the inaugural Schools Memory Championships. And he was surprised then by the number of words he was able to recall. "It was about a hundred. I don't remember it exactly anymore." Seventeen schools from the Midlands participated in that competition, and by the end of the day David was runner-up. "I guess I always had a natural talent for remembering things," he says. "I just wasn't aware of it."

This year, 65 schools are participating and some students have come from as far as Scotland and Wales. The 100 students in Northampton this morning are the cream of the crop: 1,700 pupils aged from 11 to 18 took part in the preliminary contest to be allowed to test their mettle at these finals.

The event takes place in the town's rugby stadium, a venue that sounds grander than it looks. The students compete in the Captain's Lounge, a long hall with light yellow walls, a bar and a view of a red brick wall.

Every student got a crash course in memorisation techniques before the contest, but, apart from that, David says he barely studied. "Last night, I practised five minutes," he says, "but you don't really want to train too much. You don't want to become nervous."

Although David is banking on his aptitude to carry him through, one of the championship's founders, Tony Buzan, argues that natural talent doesn't have anything to do with it. He has published more than 90 books about memory, regularly speaks on the subject and has developed memory-training software that is on sale in the Captain's Lounge. His view is that memory ability is not a question of IQ or grades or SAT scores – anyone can memorise huge lists of binary numbers or playing-card sequences if they have the right techniques.

For Buzan, memory is not a Wunderblock, but a machine whose performance you can finesse. His memorisation tools borrow – and, he says, perfect – *aides-mémoire* of the past. The Roman rhetoricians used imagination and association to help them remember facts and figures; so too do Buzan's students. "With these two tools, students will remember more words than they ever imagined they could," he says.

His books have sold by the million. He advises the governments of China, Mexico and Singapore, and practises karate and aikido. He has even worked with Michael Jackson – last year the British High Court heard that a Bahraini prince had paid Buzan £175,000 in the hope that he would be able to motivate the singer to produce two albums for which the sheikh had paid.

If you want to remember all the details of Buzan's successes, just paint a Mind Map, a mental diagram meant to organise disparate ideas. But, mind: Buzan holds the copyright on this phrase. He is the Bernie Ecclestone of memory championships – both control a vast, sprawling and lucrative empire.

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In the 1989 film *Dead Poets Society*, students at a New England School for boys read of a literary critic's foolproof way of estimating the greatness of a poem: drawing a graph. The X-axis represents the art of the poem and the Y-axis the importance of its topic. The further up both axes the poem climbs, the greater it is. (Robin Williams' inspirational teacher orders the boys to rip up the page.) Memory championships have a similar approach to intelligence – a quantifiable, mathematical way of understanding something more flexible, even, than wax. (Buzan, incidentally, writes poetry using Mind Maps.) If you're comfortable with this approach, the Schools Memory Championships can be fun – even if they do resemble exams. In the first test, the students sit in a long, narrow room under halogen lights. Competition staff hand out sheets listing 200 randomly chosen words. The students have 15 minutes to memorise as many as they can, then the sheets are taken away and they are given blank paper. The contestants have another 15 minutes to regurgitate what they have memorised.

One of the techniques is to create stories out of the words in question. The first ones today are actress, bee, wrist and grass. David Luck's story goes like this: "An actress finds a bee on her wrist and puts it in the grass." And so on and so forth for another 93 words.

Or, how about: "An actress in a bee costume hurts her wrist and falls into the grass." That's the story Amandeep Chumber created. He remembered about 140 words in total. Amandeep is a lanky 13-year-old from the Black Country whose father works in a gas pipe factory. His mother, Kamla, is proud of her son: "He is such a talented boy."

During the tests, no relatives or friends are allowed into the room. Instead, the organisers have prepared an entertainment programme for them, which begins with a speech by Tony Buzan. "Daydreaming is allowed," he says. Amandeep's cousin, a law student from India visiting the UK for two weeks, falls asleep.

In the prelims, Amandeep was third in his school, the Sandwell Academy, in West Bromwich. His mother says he only practised now and again. But Amandeep remembers things differently – he says that, as soon as he got the invitation in May, he practised every day. In fact, he adds, his mother made him sit down at 7pm every night for an hour. When I ask about the divergent stories, he cries, "Mum, we practised together!" Now Mum remembers: "Ah, this is what you mean!" She then tells me that she and her husband sometimes practised with her son.

That's another side of memory – it sometimes plays tricks. There are people, though, who remember every single moment of their lives. But it's not a joyful state, and, really, memory is usually not just about remembering things, but also about forgetting.

Emese Naughton, a 15-year-old from Coundon Court School and Community College in Coventry, explains that she memorised the periodic table using Buzan's techniques, creating a story out of the elements. At the next break in the competition, I ask her how the story goes; Emese hesitates. Luckily, her mother, Judit, has just heard a talk by Dominic O'Brien, eight-times winner of the World Memory Championships and one of the founders of the Schools Memory Championships. O'Brien had explained how to memorise the periodic table. "You imagine a word that's similar to the element, and then you can create a story out of it," Emese's mother explains. "For fluorine, you remember floor, and, for boron, you remember boar."

For many years, the British government wasn't interested in Buzan's learning techniques. In the past, Buzan complained that countries such as Singapore recognised the value of his work, introducing it into school curriculums, while his birth country didn't. Now, Aimhigher Northamptonshire, part of a state programme that encourages children to go into higher education, sponsors the Schools Memory Championships. Buzan expects the contest's popularity to grow: 5,000 students will take part next year, he says, compared with 2,000 this year. It's his way into the system by the back door.

Buzan argues that the contest is a great way to boost students' confidence. It can also be a great way to dash it. After two rounds, David Luck is only in 18th place. "You don't want to dwell on it. It's about participating, not about winning, really," he says. Emese Naughton, in 56th place after two rounds, is not as good at hiding her frustration.

Besides words, the students must also memorise numbers, invented dates and binaries – lines of zeros and ones. The last round involves playing cards. Each student receives a deck of randomly shuffled cards and has to remember them in that order. Amandeep's technique is to transform the cards into images and create stories out of them. The four of diamonds is a door of diamonds. The two of hearts is a shoe with a heart on it. "Remember whether the cards face upwards or downwards," says his mother, tugging the collar of his shirt. Amandeep nods nervously as he kneads his hands and bounces on the spot like a boxer.

After the last round of tests, Emese Naughton's cheeks are red.

"How did it go?" I ask.

"Not well," she says. She doesn't want to tell me how many cards she got through correctly.

Emese's teacher, Kate Beale, comes over. "But you've done really well," she assures her. "You have good results in school. That's more important, anyway."

Emese doesn't look wholly convinced.

Amandeep and David have fared better. The championships at an end, the loudspeakers blast out music. "I always thought it was the words where I'm best," David says over the din. "But apparently I was wrong." He finishes ninth overall, having moved up nine places after the first two rounds. His parents go over to congratulate him. Meanwhile, Amandeep is holding a blue glass statue. His mother rings her husband at work to tell him the good news: their son is the runner-up, 115 points behind the winner, Eva Ball from Bablake School in Coventry. "I'm a little disappointed though," Amandeep says. "I should have been better at the numbers."

Even in memory championships, there are a only few winners – and the rest try to forget.

Serge Debrebant is a regular contributor to FT Weekend Magazine

The annual UK Memory Championships take place this weekend. Visit www.worldmemorysportsCouncil.com for more details on all events.

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