

## **Memorization Made Easy – Leave That Page Behind!**

*The key to taking the struggle out of memorizing is “feeding” the brain the way it wants to be “fed”.*

### **Myths about memorizing**

1. Memorizing – you’re either born with the ability or not.  
I was definitely not born with that particular talent, nor did 15+ years of music training teach me. Using the right thinking strategies made the difference and allows me to ENJOY learning and memorizing tunes.
2. You need to learn a piece before you memorize it.  
I now memorize music as a part of learning the piece. In fact, I leave the sheet music as quickly as I can and I learn tunes faster than ever – and I retain them.
3. If you play a tune enough times, you will automatically remember it.  
I never did, though it may work for some people. I liken playing with sheet music to always being the passenger in a car. Until you have to drive, we tend to stay somewhat unconscious about the route.
4. Memorizing is hard work – and why bother, because it’s soon forgotten.  
Trying to force-feed the brain is very hard work, with little payoff. But when you use the right strategies, it becomes easier and easier, with long-term payoff.
5. You can play better and more easily with music because you don’t have to think about the notes, and you can always find your place.  
No matter how well you know a tune, as long as you rely on the sheet music, there is part of you that is outside the music you are playing. Using sheet music is no guarantee that you won’t lose your place and have to fumble.
6. It’s scary. If you forget, there’s nothing to fall back on.  
There is actually huge freedom when you discover you are not tied to the music and you can rely on yourself and an understanding of the patterns in the music.

### **How our brains work**

1. The brain likes to know where it’s going rather than just jumping into a new task with no reference points.  
Noticing things about the tune, reading it through, and doing some analysis are all activities that help the brain orient to the new task.
2. The brain likes information “chunked”.  
You know the saying, “You can eat an elephant – one bite at a time.” For most of us, the brain likes 3-5 pieces of information at one time. Think of phone numbers. Is it easier to read 18002405825 or 1-800-240-5825?

In music, there are many ways to chunk a piece: left and right hands, phrases, beginnings, ends and transitions, chords, intervals, rhythm, melody line, etc. The brain wants small sections of a tune at one time.

3. Our natural memory remembers beginnings and ends and tends to lose what’s in the middle.

When we keep playing a tune from beginning to end, we have only one beginning and one end. When we sit down and do a marathon practice session with no breaks, we provide only one beginning and one end to the session. To take advantage of the natural tendency of the brain, provide it with lots of beginnings and endings by playing in phrases or 2-5 measure chunks, by taking breaks and by practicing in short sessions.

4. The brain remembers related information and it wants to relate new information to already known information.

The pattern of a C chord or a 1-5-8 chord is the same pattern no matter what piece it is played in. You only need to memorize the pattern, not each note, and then you can use the pattern for chords starting on different notes.

5. The brain learns fastest when multiple senses are used (feeling, hearing and seeing).

See and feel your fingers and strings, see the sheet music for reference, see and feel chords, sing the melody, listen to a recording, etc. Notice and learn a tune from several perspectives. Try practicing in the dark or with your eyes closed to reinforce muscle memory.

6. Your eyes do internal visual, auditory and kinesthetic processing in different places – up for visual, ear to ear for auditory and down for kinesthetic. Most of us access visual memory up to the left, so one way to support your visual memory is to simply raise your music stand. When you want to feel your hands, you can look down.

7. Consistent and CORRECT repetition helps the brain establish new neuro pathways – that’s what you want.

When you are learning/memorizing music, you are establishing and reinforcing neuro pathways. Don’t confuse your brain by changing what you do each time. Using the same fingering and playing at a tempo that allows you to play correctly EVERY time will decrease the overall time to memorize and learn a piece.

Think of walking through a field of grass. If you take a different path every time, the grass keeps growing back and you have to break trail each time. If you take the same path every time, soon the grass is gone and you have no resistance.

When you practice, take the same path every time and make it the right path. If you practice too fast and stumble at the same place every time, guess what path you are creating! You can just as easily create a super highway to the wrong result as you can to the right one.

## **Feeding the brain the way it wants to be fed – strategies to apply to learning a tune**

### **Get the “lay of the land”**

1. Note the title, the key, the origin of the piece and I read any of the arranger’s notes as to mood, tempo or story. (You say, of course! But I used to read, learn and memorize music without really paying attention to these details. All well and good until I wanted to “get it out of the filing cabinet”. I didn’t have any reference point. Silly, but true).

2. Sight read the piece 1-2 times to get a sense of it. (In school, we used to read the overview/chapter summary before diving into the detail. This is the same thing – it tells your brain where you’re taking it.)
3. Hum or sing the melody to yourself – it is a natural guide through the tune. Sing it in the shower and when you’re driving. Let it become an “ear worm”.

### **Identify patterns and repeats**

1. Analyze the piece – this will shorten the time to learn it and memorize it. This does not require music theory, although being able to apply some concepts from theory can be helpful. It’s more about noticing what’s happening in the piece from many different perspectives and making notations on the sheet music that will support you in recognizing patterns, using consistent fingering, etc. Make a photocopy so you can freely mark it up without worrying about ruining it – and use color.
  - a) Look at each phrase and notice what is repeated. Very often, what needs to be learned and memorized is only a fraction of the total piece because of all the repeats – a wonderful surprise.
  - b) Determine your A, B and C parts and repeats
  - c) Notice what patterns are used in the bass. Often the bass looks more complicated than it is. For example, in the A section Laurie Riley’s arrangement of *The Shearin’s No For You*, the left hand plays almost all descending, open 1-5-8 chords, with a few 1-5-8-1-2 on G and C. You only need to remember the starting and ending points of the descent and which chord follow it, C or G.
  - d) Notice chord and interval patterns and the directions of movement in each hand individually.
  - e) Mark fingerings in both hands as needed to ensure that you use the same fingering EVERY time you play it. If you find you’re stumbling at the same spot consistently, check your fingering to see if it needs to be adjusted.

### **Chunk it! Play it correctly EVERY time!**

1. Practice right and left hands separately and SLOWLY. Then put your hands together – all a few measures at a time. Play it correctly EVERY time. Speed will naturally come.
4. Practice 3-5 measures at a time and repeat them, making an exercise of any rough spot. You can pull out phrases in any order, working backwards from the end of the piece to the beginning – it actually helps to ensure you’ll be able to start and stop anywhere in the tune.
5. Practice using a review-new-review-new-review cycle. Review what you last practiced and re-work it as necessary. Move to a new section and work it. Then review the first section again.
6. Practice in short intervals, take a break and resume. Remember, the brain naturally remembers beginnings and endings – give it lots of them.
7. Practice the transition between the phrases and sections of the piece by playing the two measures prior and 2 measures after until it’s smooth.

### **Try out your wings**

1. Mentally practice in the shower, in the bath, or while you walk. Think of the fingering, the patterns, follow the tune in your head or sing it out loud. Do this mental rehearsal only as fast as you can do it smoothly. The places you stumble or hesitate mentally are the places you want to review and practice next time you play.
2. Try playing the portions of the tune you've worked on – without using the notation. You'll probably need to slow back down a bit. You do not need to get the whole piece under your fingers before you leave the music.

### **Now what – how do I remember it?**

Laurie Riley taught me a method that has worked well. Make a chart with the following columns: “Own it”, “Working on it” and “Tunes I want to learn”.

1. **Own it:** These are pieces that you have at performance level. Every time you practice, you take a tune from the “Own it” category and review it – it's a small slice of your practice time. You rotate through the list so tunes stay fresh.
2. **Working on it:** Laurie suggested limiting what you're working to 3 pieces at a time. You may be able to work on more depending on complexity, but the concept is another part of chunking what you're doing. If you're practicing for 2 hours and working on 10 things all in the same session, you're doing yourself a disservice. Spend focused time on a tune.
3. **Tunes I want to learn:** Can be unlimited and you can add and take off tunes.

**So where to begin? Start with what grabs you, stay conscious, notice what works and HAVE FUN!**

### **Recommended reading:**

[A Soprano on Her Head](#) by Eloise Ristad

[Not Pulling Strings](#) by Joseph O'Connor