

TED Talk By Joshua Foer

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Discussion

Joshua Foer's TED Talk, "Feats of Memory Anyone Can Do," begins by asking the audience to close their eyes and imagine a deliberately strange scene. The request is not only theatrical. It demonstrates the principle that will guide the rest of his talk: people remember unusual visual images more readily than information they hear without active engagement. Foer, a journalist, became interested in memory after attending the United States Memory Championship to report on competitors who could memorize long lists of numbers, cards, names, and poems. He initially assumed that these people possessed extraordinary natural brains. When he asked how they performed such feats, competitors explained that they relied on old mnemonic techniques associated with Greek and Roman orators and with scholars who lived before printed books made external storage widely available. (Foer, 2011, 2012; Maguire et al., 2003)

The original discussion correctly preserves Foer's surprising conclusion: memory champions are not necessarily born with a unique photographic memory. They train themselves to encode ordinary information in memorable forms. Foer began practicing the same techniques, returned to later competitions, and eventually entered the championship himself. After sustained training, he won. His story gives the talk a strong narrative structure because he moves from skeptical observer to participant. Rather than simply telling the audience that memory can improve, he demonstrates the claim through his own transformation.

The Opening Visualization Exercise

The imagined scene at the beginning of the talk prepares the audience to experience a memory technique before receiving an explanation. Foer fills the scene with objects and actions that are exaggerated, sensory, and sometimes absurd. When listeners later recall those elements, they recognize that imagery has created stronger cues than a plain verbal list would have produced. The exercise also makes the audience active. Instead of listening passively to a lecture about cognition, each person constructs a private mental environment.

The original response compares this opening scene with a later ordinary story and argues that listeners remember the visualized material more effectively because they imagined it. The comparison is valuable, although attention, organization, and prior knowledge also affect recall. Visualization is not magic, and a meaningful verbal narrative may be remembered well. Foer's main point is that abstract or unrelated material becomes easier to retrieve when it is translated into concrete, distinctive images and placed in a familiar structure.

The Method of Loci

The technique at the center of Foer's talk is often called the method of loci or memory palace. A learner imagines a familiar place, such as a home, route, school building, or neighborhood. Specific locations along that space become stable storage points. To remember a list, the learner converts each item into a vivid image and places the images at successive locations. During recall, the person mentally walks through the space and observes what was placed there.

The method works because spatial memory is highly developed and because distinctive images provide retrieval cues. A list of abstract nouns has little internal organization, whereas a route through a familiar building supplies order. If the images interact with the locations in exaggerated ways, interference is reduced. A carton of milk merely sitting on a table may be forgettable, but a flood of milk pouring through the front door is more distinctive. The learner is not increasing raw storage capacity in a simple mechanical sense; the learner is changing the form in which information is encoded.

Ancient Orators and the Role of Memory

Foer refers to techniques used by Greek and Roman speakers, including traditions associated with Cicero. Before speakers could rely on projected slides, recordings, or printed notes, memory was an essential part of rhetoric. An orator could associate sections of a speech with imagined places and move through them mentally while speaking. Medieval scholars also used elaborate visual structures to organize religious, philosophical, and legal knowledge.

These practices remind the audience that memory training is not a modern trick invented for competitions. It was once a central intellectual discipline. Contemporary life has transferred many memory tasks to phones, search engines, calendars, and databases. External tools are useful, but dependence on them can make people overlook the role memory plays in understanding. A person cannot think deeply about information that is never sufficiently internalized to form connections with other knowledge.

Foer's Journey From Journalist to Champion

The original essay summarizes Foer's progression accurately. He went to a memory competition as a journalist, asked competitors how they performed, began experimenting with their methods, and eventually entered the championship. What makes the story persuasive is the amount of ordinary practice behind the unusual result. Foer did not discover that everyone can memorize instantly. He worked with a coach, practiced regularly, and learned event-specific strategies.

His championship victory should therefore be interpreted carefully. It supports the claim that trained

technique can produce dramatic improvement, but it does not prove that every person will achieve identical competitive results. Motivation, time, attention, health, and prior experience differ. The valuable lesson is not that everyone must become a memory athlete. It is that performance often reflects strategy and deliberate practice rather than a fixed judgment about intelligence.

Are All Brains the Same?

The original response states that “all the brains are similar but different in use” and rejects the idea of a God-given extraordinary memory. Foer uses a similar rhetorical contrast, but the scientific position is more nuanced. Human brains share basic memory systems, and ordinary people can learn mnemonic techniques. At the same time, individuals differ in attention, working memory, sensory ability, neurological condition, development, education, and experience. Some rare individuals also display unusual autobiographical or perceptual memory.

Foer’s practical argument does not require denying every biological difference. He challenges the fatalistic belief that current memory performance represents an unchangeable limit. Memory champions often show that deliberate encoding can compensate for tasks that otherwise exceed ordinary recall. Technique does not make brains identical; it gives more people access to effective use of capacities they already possess.

Attention as the Beginning of Memory

The original opinion emphasizes attention and willingness. This is an important insight because information that is not attended to cannot be encoded effectively. People often blame memory when the actual problem occurred earlier. A person may place keys down while thinking about a conversation and later say the location was forgotten, even though it was never registered with sufficient attention.

Mnemonic imagery forces attention by making the learner manipulate the material. Constructing an image requires choosing features, relationships, and location. The process therefore creates both concentration and elaboration. This is one reason active learning generally produces stronger retention than passive exposure. Willingness alone is insufficient, but willingness to focus and practice creates the conditions in which strategy can work.

Practice and Deliberate Improvement

The phrase “practice makes a man perfect” in the original essay captures Foer’s encouraging tone, though practice should be described more precisely. Repeating an ineffective method may produce little improvement. Deliberate practice sets a goal, uses feedback, identifies weakness, and increases difficulty gradually. A memory competitor tracks errors, adjusts images, improves speed, and learns

how to recover when one item is missed.

For students, practice should include retrieving information without looking at the source. Rereading can create familiarity, but recall practice reveals whether knowledge is accessible. Spacing practice over multiple days and mixing related topics improves long-term retention. The memory palace is especially useful for ordered or arbitrary material, while conceptual learning also requires explanation, comparison, and application.

The Difference Between Memorization and Understanding

Foer's talk celebrates memorization, but he also acknowledges that memory is valuable because it supports thought. A student can memorize definitions without understanding them, just as a person can understand an idea temporarily and then forget the details needed to use it. Education requires both. Foundational facts give the mind material with which to reason, while understanding organizes those facts into meaningful relationships.

The memory palace may help a medical student remember a sequence of anatomical structures, but clinical judgment requires knowledge of function and variation. A historian may memorize dates, yet interpretation requires causes, sources, and context. Mnemonics should therefore support learning rather than replace analysis. The strongest study method combines vivid cues with conceptual explanation.

Memory and Identity

Foer expands the discussion beyond competition by connecting memory with personal identity. People understand themselves through remembered experiences, relationships, places, and stories. Memory is imperfect and reconstructive, but without continuity across time, a stable sense of self becomes difficult. Cultural groups also preserve identity through shared narratives, rituals, archives, and commemorations.

This larger argument explains why outsourcing every fact has a cost. Search engines can retrieve information, but they do not create a personally organized understanding unless the user interprets and retains what is found. Knowledge stored only outside the mind cannot participate as readily in spontaneous thought. Foer does not argue that people should memorize entire databases. He asks them to recognize that internal memory remains part of meaningful intellectual life.

Limits of Memory Techniques

Mnemonic techniques can create impressive performance, but they have limits. Constructing images takes time, and one memory palace can become crowded if reused carelessly. The method is better suited to some material than to others. People may remember the image yet forget what it represents. Competition events also measure specialized abilities under artificial conditions and should not be treated as complete measures of intelligence.

Memory is reconstructive, meaning that recall can be influenced by expectation, later information, and suggestion. High confidence does not guarantee accuracy. Foer's talk focuses on intentional memorization rather than eyewitness memory or trauma, so its optimistic message should not be generalized to every memory problem. Illness, sleep deprivation, medication, anxiety, depression, and neurological conditions can affect memory and may require professional assessment rather than mnemonic training alone.

Application to Education

Students can apply Foer's ideas selectively. Vocabulary, ordered processes, speech points, classifications, and unfamiliar names can be converted into imagery. A familiar campus route might hold the stages of a biological process, while rooms in a house could organize sections of a presentation. The learner should then practice retrieving the material and explain it in ordinary language to confirm understanding.

Teachers can use imagery without turning every lesson into entertainment. A striking analogy, diagram, demonstration, or story can create a durable cue. Students should also be taught why the device works and encouraged to invent their own associations. Personal generation usually produces stronger memory than copying a teacher's complete mnemonic system.

Technology and External Memory

Phones and digital systems have transformed prospective memory. Calendars remember appointments, contacts store phone numbers, and search engines make facts available quickly. These tools reduce cognitive burden and support people with different needs. Foer's talk should not be interpreted as a demand to abandon them. The more useful question is what should be stored externally and what should be internalized.

External tools are ideal for exact details that change frequently, while internal memory is essential for comprehension, conversation, judgment, and creativity. A professional who knows core principles can evaluate new information more effectively than someone who searches without a knowledge base. Digital reminders and trained memory can therefore complement one another.

My Evaluation of Foer's Argument

In my opinion, Foer supports his argument effectively because he combines demonstration, history, scientific explanation, and personal experience. The opening imagery allows the audience to feel the difference between passive listening and active visualization. His movement from reporter to champion provides concrete evidence that technique and practice can transform performance. The talk is also motivating because it challenges the belief that strong memory belongs only to exceptional people.

The argument should not be simplified into the claim that anyone can remember anything immediately. Foer's achievement required sustained work, and mnemonic skill does not replace intelligence, understanding, or medical care for genuine impairment. Nevertheless, the central claim remains convincing: many apparent limits in memory are partly limits in attention and encoding strategy. People can improve when they learn how to make information meaningful and retrievable.

Replies to Fellow Students

Reply 1

I agree with the observation that memory improvement is partly within our control. Foer's example shows that people can practice attention, imagery, and spatial organization rather than assuming that rapid memorization is an inborn gift. I would only add that individuals do differ and that training conditions are not equal. The encouraging point is not that every person starts with the same ability, but that current performance can often improve through a better method. Memory competitors use familiar human capacities in a disciplined way, and their success demonstrates the importance of strategy.

Reply 2

The video is constructive because it creates the feeling that "we can do it too," as the original response states. Foer makes the method visible rather than presenting champions as mysterious geniuses. Imagining a scene, placing items in a memory palace, and practicing retrieval can make difficult material easier to access. At the same time, images must be linked clearly to meaning. A student should not remember an entertaining picture while forgetting the concept it represents. Visualization is most effective when it becomes part of a larger learning process involving understanding, repetition, and feedback.

Conclusion

Joshua Foer's TED Talk explains how ordinary human memory can produce extraordinary-looking results when information is encoded through vivid images and organized spatially. His opening exercise, discussion of ancient techniques, experience at memory championships, and eventual victory all support the idea that strategy and practice matter. The method of loci transforms disconnected material into a route that can be mentally revisited.

The original essay's emphasis on attention, visualization, willingness, and practice remains sound. These qualities should be understood realistically: memory techniques require effort, do not eliminate individual differences, and do not replace comprehension. Foer's deeper contribution is to restore respect for memory in a culture that increasingly stores information outside the mind. Memory is not merely a competitive trick. It supports learning, identity, conversation, and the ability to connect ideas. People may not all become champions, but they can become more deliberate about how they pay attention and how they remember.

References

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