Chunking:
A process for making and studying from notes that promotes better understanding, memorization, and recall of detailed information

An introduction to chunking via the Cornell notetaking method
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The “chunking” process involves translating many small, related units of information into fewer, more compact units. The compact units are written down (as notes, questions, concept maps, etc). This learning activity creates new “schema” – conceptual categories of memorized information. The chunks are later to practice recalling the details.

For the brain to “chunk” bits of info together, it thinks hard about how they relate to the core concept. This thinking process makes stronger memories.

The resulting “chunks” are then used to practice recalling and thinking about the smaller bits of information – information not completely present in the chunks.

Practicing using small chunks to remember lots of detailed information is like giving oneself a kind of quiz – its practice that strengthens your brain’s ability to do what a test demands.

See the next two slides for an example of how chunking works.
Malcolm X was effectively orphaned early in life. His father was killed when he was six and his mother was placed in a mental hospital when he was thirteen, after which he lived in a series of foster homes. In 1946, at age 20, he went to prison for larceny and breaking and entering.

While in prison, Malcolm X became a member of the Nation of Islam, and after his parole in 1952, quickly rose to become one of the organization's most influential leaders. He served as the public face of the controversial group for a dozen years. In his autobiography, Malcolm X wrote proudly of some of the social achievements the Nation made while he was a member, particularly its free drug rehabilitation program. The Nation promoted black supremacy, advocated the separation of black and white Americans, and rejected the civil rights movement for its emphasis on integration. (source: Wikipedia)
Using the Cornell note-taking method, the student did a **second round** of chunking. In this round, they created a new margin on the notebook page and used the space to chunk the units information into **even smaller chunks**. To write the chunks as questions, the student had to think about what the notes were about—a schema for each chunk. The result is a quiz, using questions that challenge the student to remember all the detailed information they have chunked. The student can now work backwards to answer questions, using notes as a first clue, and going back into the text as a second clue.
Chunking uses the note taking process to drive thinking processes that help create strong memories. It then using the notes generated from that process to provide practice in recalling the details and answering questions about what you are studying – just like the exam will do.

This approach is much more useful than trying to “memorize” notes by reading and re-reading. Reading-and-rereading makes things look familiar. But it doesn’t help you to understand better, and it definitely doesn’t help you to strengthen your ability to recall and think about what you are learning.

Unless you can independently recall what you have learned and think about what it means or does – not just recognize, you will struggle on exams. Those are key mental activities that every exam demands. You must practice them to improve them.

The good news is that the activities you do to strengthen those abilities are also the activities you do to actually understand what you are learning more deeply and remember it longer. Don’t be passive about your notes! Use them to push your ability to recall not only what they say, but what they don’t say as well!

Remember: Reading notes over and over is a very bad way to study. It promotes recognition, not recall. The key to making and using notes well is to use them as the springboard to independent thinking and remembering. Chunking is a method that is designed to do this.