

Using Recency for Effective Learning

When you approach learning, apply the principle of Recency by doing the following:

- Review frequently.
- Summarize to help fix the material you learned in your mind.
- Restate, repeat, and reemphasize. (2)

The sequence of learning matters. We can maximize the retention of the information in a lesson by being aware and using the ideal times – the beginning and end of the lesson. “Use Primacy by doing research as soon as you discover an area where learning must take place. Then reinforce what you have learned by applying as soon as possible after the learning session.”(2)

1) Begin by diving directly into teaching important content.

2) After 20 minutes or so, take a brief break, stand up and stretch, and then review information or study the “why” behind what you have learned.

3) Finally, transition back into important content for the last part of your study session. (7)

We also need to understand retention as it is applicable to both the Primacy and Recency effects. Essentially, retention is the goal of a learning episode. We want to internalize the information so it can be used after the learning episode is complete. We need to maximize our retention of information by being aware of the ideal timing of new information presented during a learning episode or lesson. (9)

If we read a long list of words, we are more likely to remember words at the beginning and end of the list than those in the middle. Additionally, taking both the Primacy and Recency effect into consideration, we can predict the items most likely to be remembered in a learning session.

Given a list of items to remember, we will tend to remember the last few things more than those things in the middle (serial position effect). (3) We also tend to assume that items at the end of the list are of greater importance or significance.

Another thing to consider when discussing Recency is that the further removed you are from the learning session, the more difficult it is to remember what was learned. The sooner you use what is learned, the more likely you are to use it successfully. It is important to make application of what you have learned as quickly as possible. If this is not feasible, share what you have learned with someone else to add retention of new information.

Tips to get the most from recency and primacy:

- Teach and/or learn new material first.
- New information and closure are best presented during the prime-time periods.
- Practice (labs/activity) is appropriate for the down-time segment
- Lessons divided into 20 minute segments are more productive than one continuous lesson (6)
- Do not dwell on what you do not know, but dwell instead on what you have learned.
- Make sure you begin and end your study session with the most important information

Summary

The Primacy/Recency Effect is the observation that information presented at the beginning (Primacy) and end (Recency) of a learning episode tends to be retained better than information presented in the middle.

“The phenomenon is said to be due to the fact that the short term memory at the beginning of whatever sequence of events is being presented, is far less ‘crowded’ and that since there are far fewer items being processed in the brain at the time when presented than later, there is more time for rehearsal of the stimuli which can cause them to be ‘transferred’ to the long term memory for longer storage.” (3)

It is interesting that the information we remember least is what is in the middle. Many times, when we approach a subject, the first part of our learning is relatively short, as is the end. The major portion of our learning is scheduled for the middle of a session – the part where we remember the least.

For learning to be effective, we must plan our learning so that the majority of information is chunked. Broken into smaller pieces at the beginning and end of the learning session. Taking advantage of both the Primacy and the Recency Effects. The middle should be used for reviewing and restating.

Understanding the Primacy and Recency effects help us not only in learning, but in understanding why we respond to certain situations as we do. Some interesting applications of the Recency theory are:

- Advertisers use Recency to make sure the first and last portions of their promotions create a desire to purchase
- Lawyers will call their strongest witnesses either first or last. (3)
- Speakers at conferences are scheduled with the strongest first and last.
- Teachers use Recency to determine the sequence of lectures within a course of instruction. (2)

“If you want something to stand out in a person’s mind, use it at the end of a conversation, a written list, etc. Don’t let it get lost in the middle. Repeat the message after a while, still with the key items at the end.” (10)

Bibliography for Recency Effects

1. “Laws of Learning,” The Drill Pad, Instruction Resource Library, http://www.drillpad.net/DP_IRL_Laws.htm
2. “Principles of learning,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Principles_of_learning
3. “Primacy effect,” Psychology Wiki, http://psychology.wikia.com/wiki/Primacy_effect
4. Sousa, David A. “Primacy/Recency Effect” How the Brain Learns
<https://brainbasedee.wordpress.com/2012/10/12/the-Primacy-Recency-effect/>
5. <http://sciencegnus.com/Primacy%20Recency%20Effect.pdf>
6. Berrizbeitia, Inés, Student Engagement Tip: Sequence Matters, Center for Teaching & Learning, UVM Blog
<http://blog.uvm.edu/ctl/tag/Recency/>
7. Kowalczyk, Devin, Recency Effect in Psychology: Definition, Example & Quiz, <http://education-portal.com/academy/lesson/Recency-effect-in-psychology-definition-example-quiz.html>
8. Lauber, Stephen, “Differentiation Strategies: Teaching Grade-Level Content to ALL Students, posted 10/21/14,
<http://dataworks-ed.com/author/stephen/>
9. Recency Effect, Changing Minds http://changingminds.org/explanations/theories/Recency_effect.htm
10. Hamm, Trent, The Primacy and Recency Effect and Your Next Purchase, The Simple Dollar,
<http://www.thesimpledollar.com/the-Primacy-and-Recency-effect-and-your-next-purchase/>
11. Ferguson, Dave, Dave’s White Board, Primacy/recency, or, first (and last) things last
<http://www.daveswhiteboard.com/archives/2589>