

How to Memorize a Script/Score

May 13, 2019 [Gabriel Wyner](#)

Is there a better way to memorize your texts?

Part 1—Memory aides

We have *way* too many texts to learn. From the endless recitatives of next season’s Mozart opera to the stack of new audition arias we should probably learn, there are few professions that can even *approach* the memorization needs of a classical singer.

Oddly enough, while a formal vocal education includes classes in music theory, diction, acting and interpretation, we almost never take classes that teach us how to memorize. Instead, we cobble together tips from colleagues and teachers and pray that the music will somehow help us remember — and it frequently does. When we finally stand in front of an audience and the music begins to play, we usually *do* remember, if only a split second before we open our mouths.

But the memorization process can be made a lot less stressful. There are simple, reliable ways to memorize texts, and this article will show you several.

Before we dive in, let me give you a little background about myself. **I’m kind of a memory nut**, and I came to be that way through language learning. Back in 2004, I enrolled in Middlebury College’s fabulous [German for Singers](#) immersion program. I learned a *lot* of German that

summer — much more than I had learned in years of traditional classes — and I became obsessed with the answers to two questions:

- How can I learn languages more quickly?
- Are there ways to better remember what I’ve learned?

That obsession led to a lot of things: moving to Austria, reaching fluency in German, Italian, French and Russian, and last year, a book contract (and along with it, nearly a year of full-time research on learning and memory). But most importantly, it led to two realizations: in the end, it’s *all* about memory, and memory isn’t nearly as complex and mysterious as it may seem.

Since this is an article, and not a book, I won’t be able to delve into the science of memory as much as I’d like, though I will be able to link you to some resources for further reading. Instead, we’ll take a quick tour through the theory and then jump into some practical applications that will help you memorize your texts more quickly and more reliably.

THE THEORY OF MEMORY: The short-short version

Memories are, in a very literal sense, associations. They are *connections* between neurons in your brain. This is the reason why you can read a word — *cookie* — concentrate on it, and recall the smell of warm, sugary dough, its chewy texture, and its delicious, buttery taste. Your memory of “cookie” is a parade of senses, all

connected together, and you can gain access to that parade through any of the band members: through the word “cookie,” by seeing a cookie, by getting a faint whiff of cookie, etc.

Cookies are memorable in a way that random lines of overly poetic Italian are not. Where the word “cookie” is familiar in spelling and sound, a pair of lines like “*Essa legge, studia, impara... on vi ha cosa ad essa ignota...*” is, depending upon your Italian skills, full of *unfamiliar* words and sounds and awkward, archaic grammar.

There’s not much of a parade going on here, unless you’ve already sung these lines (they’re from Nemorino’s first aria in *Elixir of Love*) and can still remember your staging. As a result, while you can still remember all sorts of things about chocolate chip cookies, you probably can’t remember more than a couple of words from Nemorino’s aria. That’s not your fault; those lines just aren’t particularly memorable...yet.

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To make a text memorable, you need to build a *parade of associations*.

As a singer, you already do this to some extent: songs are easier to remember than poems, because songs are texts associated with music. That added association gives you twice as many ways to remember.

Staging becomes another kind of association; if you remember what

to *do* or how to *feel* during a particular line, you’ll have an easier time remembering it. You may have noticed that staged operas are easier to remember than recital programs, even if the operas are considerably longer. This is because **operas are, almost literally, sensory parades**: there are props and sets, gestures and emotions, colleagues and music and text. All of these pieces connect together to form a particularly potent, memorable combination. In my own experience, I’ve never *completely* drawn a blank on an opera stage, though I definitely *have* during a recital.

But even if you have the rare luxury of working exclusively in staged opera productions, you still need to memorize your texts long before you begin to play with props, sets, stagings, orchestras and co-workers. Many coaches even suggest memorizing your texts before learning the *music*.

Unfortunately, that means you’ve just lost *all* of your associations, and once again, you’re stuck with those already-forgotten lines from Nemorino’s aria: “I think there’s a ‘leggo’ in there somewhere?”

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Part 2: How to remember your texts

To make texts more memorable, first collect several useful associations onto a piece of paper, helping them stick them in your head.

Step 1: Write out your text.

By writing out your texts by hand, you automatically add visual and tactile associations to every word. Later, you'll be able to picture your words on the page. Leave about 3-4 lines of blank space between each line. You'll use this space in the next few steps.

Do you *have to*? Can't you just skip this step and use your sheet music instead? Sure — you can make decisions about which tools to use, and we'll talk about skipping steps at the end of this article. For now, let's assume that you have a text you simply *must* learn extremely well.

Step 2: Learn pronunciation as well as you can.

To the extent that you can, make sure you know how to pronounce every word of your text. It's harder to memorize words when you're not sure how to pronounce them. If you don't know whether to sing "*Caro nome*" or "*Carro nome*" now, you're going to have a much harder time remembering the right words when you're busy singing and acting and juggling props in the air.

So either spend a minute to go through your text with a coach, get a [Nico Castel libretto book](#), get a free recording made at [Rhinospike.com](#), or browse through recordings of nearly every word in existence at [Forvo.com](#). Write out pronunciation notes or IPA on top of each line of text. Do whatever you need to do; it will save you time in the long run. You'll memorize your texts faster, and you won't need to spend hours with a coach, struggling to learn your music while unlearning bad pronunciation habits.

Step 3: Learn the meaning of your text – add translation notes.

It's *much* easier to memorize a sentence than a random assortment of words. Even if your pronunciation is perfect, you're going to have a much easier time remembering a meaningful sentence – *Remember me, but ah! Forget my fate* – than a meaningless collection of words – *Me, my, ah! Fate, but forget remember!*

Your text probably isn't a meaningless collection of words, but if you don't know the language well, it might as well be. Go through your text with a translation (you can get one with the aforementioned Castel librettos or use [Aria Database](#)), and make sure you *actually* know what each word means. Write in translations as needed.

Step 4: Add Emotions

Now that you know what your text means, it's not much of a stretch to figure out what your character is *feeling* during that text. Get a broad sense of the emotional landscape. How does your character feel in the beginning? Does it change? If so, when?

By writing out a few quick notes about your emotions, you gain quite a bit: you'll be a better performer, you'll have an easier time connecting your text to the music, and your text will become much more meaningful to you...and therefore, much easier to remember.

Step 5: Add Pictures

There's a phenomenon that cognitive psychologists label the [Pictorial Superiority Effect](#). Basically, **while you may not have realized it, you possess a photographic memory**. Every picture you see is stored somewhere in your brain in a way that words simply aren't.

Suppose, for example, I were to show you 600 images in a row. Later, I show you two images – one old, one new – and ask you which one you had seen before. You would be able to correctly identify the old pictures with *ninety-eight percent* accuracy. Your memory for pictures blows words and sentences out of the water.

If that was the end of the story, it would be fairly depressing for us. Alas, we *have* to memorize words and sentences, and no one is showing us pairs of images and asking us to choose the ones we've seen.

But there's a trick: **pictures combined with words are even more memorable than pictures alone.** If you need to remember "*Essa legge, studia, impara*" (*she reads, studies and learns*), you're going to have a *much* easier time remembering it if it's accompanied by a simple picture:

Go through your text, and for every line, choose a single picture that captures the emotional content (*anger*: a fire), the meaning of the words (*essa legge, studia, impara*: a student) or even the pronunciation of a key word (*Caro nome che il mio cor*: a car). Sketch these images next to each line of text. It's fine if they look terrible; you're the only one who will see them, anyways.

Step 6: Put these associations into your memory...backwards

When memorizing a long text, you're trying to do two things: you want to associate each word with sound, emotion, meaning and imagery, and you also want to associate each word with the *next* word, so that you know where to go next and don't suddenly get lost in the middle of an aria.

The trick to building all of these associations is to go backwards.

Cover up the last word/phrase

Start at the last word or phrase of your aria. Read it out loud, and then cover it up with a couple of sheets of paper, like this:

Can you still remember what's beneath your sheets of paper? Can you remember your little drawing? What about the word or phrase – can you remember what it means, and how to say it? What are you supposed to be feeling? As you ask yourself (and answer) these questions, you're building these associations into your memory.

Now cover up a bit more

Now cover up a bit more. Can you get all the way to the end of your text? If not, peek and try again. If you *can* remember, cover up some more and try again. Keep going until you reach the beginning of your text.

By testing yourself in this way, you'll find that you can memorize a long text pretty damn well in 30-60 minutes. Because you're going backwards, you're getting progressively better at reaching the *end* of your aria, so you always know where you're going and you don't get lost on the way. In addition, the fact that you're *testing* yourself makes you much more efficient.

As it turns out, **self-testing builds and maintains memories *five times more effectively* than simply reading through and reviewing a text.**

If you run into a tricky passage, then just go through it more slowly. Instead of trying to remember a phrase at a time, try to remember a single word, or if you're having trouble with a single word, you can even go through phoneme by phoneme (this can be particularly useful for Russian nightmares like *vzdrognu* (*flinch*): Just say *nu*, *gnu*, *ognu*, *rognu*, *drognu*, *zdrognu*, and finally, *vzdrognu*).

Once you've done this, you'll have an easy time adding music to your text. Since you've already memorized your text, you'll be able to focus on vocal technique and style, and all of those fancy associations you've built will simply get stronger. By the time you start rehearsing or staging, that text is going to become an unforgettable part of you, and you can focus on your *real* job: using that text to create art.

Final note: Skipping steps

Do you need to go through *all* of these steps for every text you learn? Not necessarily. Personally, I'm not a fan of writing out my texts by hand, because I have fairly crappy handwriting and I get bored too easily. I tend to skip it, and either print out a text from [Aria Database](#) or just use my sheet music, unless it's a text I *really* want to learn well. **Do try out all six steps and see how they work for you.** These are powerful tools, and you may be surprised at how quickly you can memorize even the longest of texts, once you know how to build those memories effectively.

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