

Mark My Words: How to Remember and Forget

The human memory is a strange repository of fact and fiction.

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

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Bich Tran / pexels

Без памяти: madly

Memory is a funny thing. What gets lodged in there forever and what gets ejected — or distorted — seems largely outside the control of the owner of the memory. And then what has been forgotten can sometimes reappear instantly and in full when you hear a sound or catch a scent on clothing or on a breeze.

Память (memory) is also a curious word. It is, on the one hand, the individual repository of lived and perceived experience. It can be specialized — you can have, for example, острая зрительная память (very sharp visual memory), or you might be lucky enough to have профессиональная память историка (the professional memory of a historian) or память к

языкам (a memory for languages). You might be unlucky to have дырявая память (a memory like a sieve, literally “filled with holes”). In schools they work on развитие слуховой и зрительной памяти (the development of auditory and visual memory).

If you’ve got a good memory in general, you can call it острая (sharp) or ясная (clear); if it’s bad, you can call it тупая (dull) or смутная (fuzzy).

There are lots of ways in Russian to describe how an experience gets lodged in or dislodged from your memory. You can use the same words you’d use to describe writing or erasing a text in a book or on a device. Подробности дискуссии давно уже стёрлись из моей памяти, но один из вопросов я запомнил навсегда (The details of the discussion were erased from my memory a long time ago, but I’ll remember one of the questions forever). Поэт почему-то запечатлелся в моей памяти (For some reason the poet stuck in my memory). Его голос врезался в память (His voice was etched in my memory). Вычеркнуть его имя из памяти не удаётся (I can’t erase his name from my memory).

Or you can simply lose your memory: Он потерял память (He lost his memory). Говорить о провале в памяти не захотела. (I didn’t want to speak of blank spots in his memory).

When you completely forget something, you say it got broken off: У меня память отшибло! (I don’t remember a thing!)

On the other hand, память is also a kind of free-floating, general repository of остатки прошлого (bits of the past) — a record of the past. Государство должно способствовать сохранению исторической памяти народа (The state must facilitate the preservation of the nation’s historical memory). You might want to honor the world’s memory of a person or event: Многие люди приезжают в Техас, чтобы почтить память Кеннеди (Many people go to Texas to pay their respects to the memory of Kennedy).

Afterwards you might want to buy something на память поездки (to remember the trip by).

Having a good memory — or at least some kind of functioning memory — is a sign of sanity and competence. So if you are writing a will in Russian, you will probably begin it: Находясь в здравом уме и твёрдой памяти... (Of sound mind and memory)... If you are madly in love with someone, you lose your memory along with your mind: Женщины любят его без памяти (Women are crazy about him).

If you have memorized music, lyrics, poems, or other works of literature, you produce them “by memory.” Василий Гроссман по памяти записал беседу с Михаилом Сусловым (Vasily Grossman wrote down from memory his conversation with Mikhail Suslov).

Sometimes in English another part of the body does the work of memorization: Лидия Корнеевна любила читать по памяти стихи (Lidia Korneyevna loved to recite poetry by heart). And if you get lost in the woods, you might разводите костёр по старой памяти (still remember how to make a fire, literally “to make a fire by memory”).

When you are speaking about remembering something, there are three main verbs you can use in Russian. Помнить is the simple act of remembering, or rather not forgetting something. Помнишь, что сегодня вечером я работаю? (Do you remember that I work tonight?) А надо помнить, что любой народ велик (You shouldn’t forget that every nation

is great in its own way).

Вспоминать/вспомнить is the verb pair of recollecting, mentally going back into the past, reminiscing. This is not for simply remembering a password or not forgetting to pick up the dry cleaning. This is when you direct your inner gaze into the past. Это приключение вы будете вспоминать всю жизнь (This is an adventure you will remember for the rest of your life). Нет нужды вспоминать прошлое (There is no need to reminisce about the past). Вспомните вашу первую любовь (Think back on your first love). Я мучительно старался вспомнить откуда я его знаю (I racked my brain to remember where I knew him from). А тут я вспомнил, где видел его раньше (It suddenly hit me where I saw him before).

Another verb pair, поминать/помянуть, is commonly used to describe any commemoration of the deceased, from raising a glass to drink to their memory to holding a memorial service, secular or religious. Надо помянуть покойника (We must commemorate the deceased). Господа, может, парня помянем минутой молчания? (Friends, how about we have a minute of silence for the young man). Дима сказал, что, пожалуй, выпьет коньяка, помянет Алёшу (Dima said he'd drink some cognac to Alyosha's memory). Note that in Russia за усопших выпивают не чокаясь (you drink to the deceased without clinking glasses).

In colloquial usage the command Помяни моё слово means “Mark my words!” — that is, “Remember I said this because what I'm saying will come true.”

Perhaps most importantly — especially in this year — it's a good idea to think about how we wish to be remembered. Я хочу оставить о себе добрую память (I want people to remember me kindly, literally “I want to leave a good memory of myself”).

And that's it for this week and this year. До встречи в будущем году!

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