

Remember This...

The other day I re-introduced the idea of coordinates to my AS group. How to remember that $(2, 3)$ means two across, three up, rather than the other way around? I reached into my own mathematical childhood and recalled the phrase which echoes across the years still – “You go IN the house, then UP the stairs.” Daniel immediately stuck his hand up with a glint in his eye – “What if you are a burglar?”

He made me reflect that one's person's aide-memoire could be another person's mental stumbling block. When I consulted my better half, an English teacher, over this, she too challenged the idea of remembering A via remembering B.

‘Why do we have to tell our students that *Necessary is ‘coffee with two sugars’?* Why not cut out the middle-man - just remember how to spell ‘necessary’!’ she said.

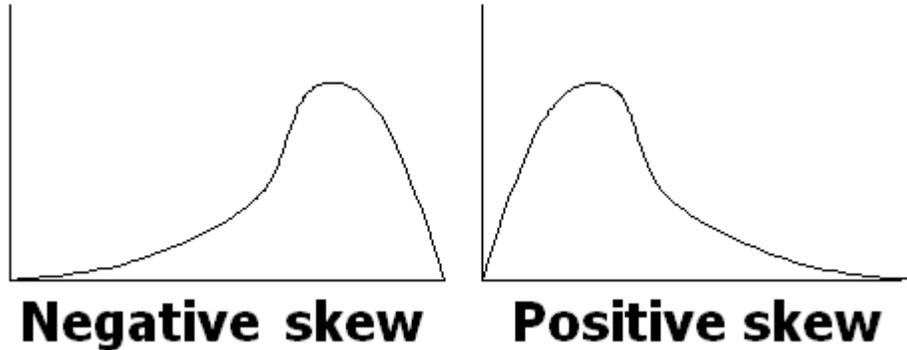
But are there not times when all of us need a friendly crutch for useful facts? As educators we would prefer memory based on understanding, but where that's tough to achieve, might a harmless piece of mental jogging be allowed to come to our rescue?

It is Mnemosyne, the Greek goddess of memory, who gives us the word ‘mnemonic’, and I remember one of my first. Aged eleven, I recalled that ‘ $<$ ’ stood for “less than” by telling myself that ‘ $<$ ’ looked quite like a squashed ‘L’. Some years later, I twigged that ‘ $<$ ’ had a small left hand end, and a big right hand end, so the notion the symbol was trying to convey was actually embedded into the mark itself. Really this meant that no jog to the memory was necessary; the symbol was its own mnemonic, and it thus became in my eyes an inspired choice.

As we go on in our mathematical career, certain things become second nature (in fact, it is hard but important to remember that nothing was always second nature to us.) My way of remembering ‘ $<$ ’ evolved as I used it more and more in increasingly sophisticated situations, yet even now at times of panic and stress, I can catch myself regressing to my childhood idea of a squashed ‘L’.

Inventing mnemonics can be fun. I run a mini-competition each year;

In statistics, what does 'negative skew' mean? It means that the hump of the distribution is to the right, and the tail is to the left. Positive skew means that the hump is to the left and the tail is to the right. Come up with a mnemonic for this please!



Claire suggested 'positive' and 'port' (= left) shared the same two starting letters. Angus offered that the second letter of 'plus' is 'l' for 'left'. But then, if you misremember these as "a positively-skewed distribution has a TAIL to the left," you are in trouble. James offered this improvement – imagine a p on its side, bubble up, and a g on its side, bubble up. Yes!

Ω pos neg Ω

Word count - 499

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