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You Are Studying, but Not Learning: The Problem w

Aprendizaje y formación · 05/11/2026 · Por Camilo Calderón

Do you study for hours and then forget what you read? Learn why familiarity is not the same as learning, and how active recall and spaced practice can help you remember and use information.

You Are Studying, but Not Learning: The Problem with Rereading and Highlighting Everything

You can spend two hours reading a chapter, fill pages with notes, and feel that you know the subject. But when you close the book and try to explain it, you may discover that you remember much less than you expected. This happens because we often confuse familiarity with knowledge. Recognizing information when it is in front of us does not mean we can recall, explain, or apply it later.

1. The trap of recognizing what you read

Recognition happens when information appears in front of you and seems familiar. Retrieval means bringing that information back from memory without looking at it. Rereading makes concepts feel familiar, but answering a question with your notes closed requires retrieval. That effort reveals what you actually know and strengthens later access to the information.

2. Why rereading and highlighting can fall short

Highlighting and rereading are not inherently useless. They can help you locate important ideas and become familiar with a text. The problem is relying on them as your main strategy. A major review by Dunlosky and colleagues evaluated ten common learning techniques. Practice testing and distributed practice received high ratings of usefulness; highlighting and rereading received low ratings as general techniques because their benefits were less consistent. Seeing a route on a map repeatedly does not guarantee that you can travel it without the map. Test whether you can retrieve the idea.

3. Active recall: make your memory do the work

Active recall means trying to remember information before checking the answer. Read a short section, put the material away, and write or say what you remember. Ask yourself questions such as: What is the main idea? How would I explain it to someone else? What example illustrates it? Which points am I unsure about? Then compare your answer with the source, correct errors, and try again later. Flashcards can help when they prompt a real answer rather than simple recognition.

4. Spaced practice: return to the material over time

Instead of repeating the same material in one long session, revisit it across several days. Spacing gives you a chance to forget some details and then retrieve them again, which makes practice more useful than massed repetition for long-term retention. The ideal interval depends

on how difficult the material is and how long you need to remember it. A simple plan is to review after one day, a few days, and about a week, adjusting when recall is still difficult.

5. A practical seven-day plan

Day 1: Read a manageable section and identify its key questions. Close the material and write what you can recall.

Day 2: Answer the same questions without looking. Check your work and repair gaps.

Day 3: Mix questions from earlier sections with new material.

Day 4: Explain the ideas aloud in your own words and create an example.

Day 5: Take a short practice quiz. Review incorrect or uncertain answers.

Day 6: Revisit only the difficult points, then test yourself again.

Day 7: Complete a mixed review from memory and note what still needs work.

Keep sessions realistic. Short, focused rounds with breaks are easier to sustain than marathon sessions. The schedule is a starting point, not a rule that fits every subject or learner.

6. How to know whether you are learning

Do not judge learning only by how smooth or familiar a page feels. Check whether you can explain the main idea without notes, distinguish it from a related concept, solve a new problem, and identify the limits of your understanding. Mistakes during practice are useful information: correct them and schedule another retrieval attempt. If you cannot explain a point, return to the source rather than hiding the gap under more highlighting.

7. Use tools, including AI, as study support

You can ask a study tool to generate questions, but attempt the answers before reading its suggestions. Verify explanations against reliable course materials; automated systems can make mistakes. Keep your own retrieval effort at the center of the process. The aim is not to produce beautiful notes but to build knowledge you can recall and use.

Rereading can support learning, but it should not be the only evidence that learning has happened. Combine focused reading with active recall and spaced practice, and use your answers to decide what to study next. You do not need an expensive system or eight hours a day to begin: start with a small section, close the book, and see what you can explain.