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I'm a medical school professor, and on the first day of class I always ask students the same question



Dr. Sudip Bose.

- **Dr. Sudip Bose is a Clinical Professor in the Department of Family and Community Medicine at Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center.**
- **Whenever he faces a new group of students, he asks them the same question: How do you learn best?**
- **In med school, he says, the stakes are higher than ever - you're learning not just to pass a test, but to save lives. You can't forget the information.**

As a medical school professor, I ask the same question every time when I face a new group of students:

How do you learn best?

Usually, the students tell me about the techniques they used in undergraduate school where the vast majority finished at or near the top of their class. Most are confident that the same approaches will work in medical school.

I then make three points:

First, the amount of material students must master in medical school is exponentially higher than even the most demanding undergraduate curriculums. Day after day, you're presented with more information to digest. It's truly like drinking from a fire hose. Your old study habits may not suffice. Keep an open mind to better techniques.

Second, you're not studying to pass a test - you're studying to diagnose and treat patients and, ultimately, to save lives. It's not permissible to forget half the material a year later. You must find a way to permanently encode the material in your brain.

Third, you can never stop learning. Medicine advances at an unrelenting pace. By learning *how* to learn, you'll be able to stay current in your specialty and be the best doctor you can be for your entire career.

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I feel that I can speak with some authority to students on learning. In 2002, I achieved a near-perfect score on the medical-board exam, out-scoring 3,650 other test takers.

Here are some of the [techniques I used in medical school](#) and continue to use today:

Deliberately spaced repetition: Pulling an all-nighter may get you through tomorrow's exam, but you'll probably forget much of the information in a few weeks. The best way to permanently learn material is to review it while it's still fresh in your memory - and do that several times at ever-increasing intervals. Don't wait until you've forgotten the material to review. In essence, you'll be starting all over again.

Alternate materials to be learned: Let's say you have three chapters to learn. The logical approach - master one chapter and then move on to the next chapter - is not the most efficient way to learn. A better way is to intersperse the chapters, and that's especially the case if the topics build upon each other from chapter to chapter.

So rather than studying the three chapters in a strict order, like this: 111222333, it's better to go back and forth and sequence your studying like this: 123231213. You'll retain more, you'll connect the dots between chapters, and you'll be more engaged.

Read more: [I turned the 3-step process that saves lives in the ER into a system that helps me solve problems as a CEO](#)

Active learning and testing: When you read a chapter or re-read your class notes, you're learning in a passive manner. Sure, if you concentrate well, you'll retain some of the information - but in many cases the material blends into a murky mess in your mind.

The solution is to take a more active approach to learning. Try this:

- As you read, write down key pieces of information and then create questions based on the key material. Review the questions and answers periodically, making sure to mix up the order of the questions.
- Create acronyms to help you remember. For instance, the acronym SCALP can be used to remember the layers of the scalp: S is skin; C is connective tissue; A is aponeurotic layer, L is loose connective tissue; and P is pericranium.
- Make the material important in your mind. Think of a patient with a condition that necessitates understanding the information you're trying to memorize.

These techniques served me well in medical school and they serve me well today in keeping up with advances in emergency care, understanding business issues, and even everyday activities like remembering people's names.

Learning to learn is an incredibly valuable life skill. It's not only vital for students - it's the foundation for growth and achievement throughout one's life.

Dr. Bose was accepted into medical school directly out of high school through the Honors Program in Medical Education at Northwestern University, getting his MD at 25. At the age of 28, he was named an Assistant Clinical Professor of Emergency Medicine at Texas A&M, making Dr. Bose one of the youngest medical school professors in the country. Later, while serving on faculty as an Associate Clinical Professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Dr. Bose cofounded [several leading medical education companies](#).

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